Micro Communities of Practice and EU's Foreign Policy Rome, Brussels, and Paris

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Although the practice approach and the community of practice have generally been studied, the relationship between communities of practice has mostly escaped the attention of EU foreign policy scholars. This empirical investigation contributes to this relatively less explored area. Its central question constitutes whether and how the practice approach makes sense of the actions of micro communities of practice focused on European foreign policy, when practices involve actions at the local, national and European/supranational levels. It motivates an interest in the practice mechanism, since this perspective allows the identification of otherwise unexplored experiences that are critical to the functioning of European foreign policy. In fact, it argues that a practice approach helps us to distinguish different understandings of the EU that might be crucial for the performance of European foreign policy. It applies the practice approach to three micro communities of practice which constitute the case study: in Rome, Brussels and Paris, all of them focused on 'European foreign policy and/on China's Belt and Road initiative'. Methodologically, it combines a discourse analysis with content analysis, and shows that the use of these and of the practice perspective demonstrates acceptance of the EU, resistance to it, and suggestions about improving the EU's foreign policy. The analysis of the results concentrates on theory and policy. Regarding the theory, the findings demonstrate that the practice approach makes sense of actions of communities of practice operating at a local, national, and European/supranational level. Regarding policy, the findings provide evidence that the practices examined here contribute suggestions regarding new substance for European foreign policy. The investigation employs sources derived from the author's conversation at the citizens' level in Rome in the context of China and the EU; it draws on the European institutions' official

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documents to explore policy making in Brussels regarding China; and uses a diplomatic strategy to investigate a Europe that speaks with one voice, in Paris.

I. INTRODUCTION

The European Union affects people's lives. It influences our way of thinking, creates constrictions and is embedded in people's emotions. While these experiences may seem far away from the substance of European policy, they are critical to making the EU what it is. Approaches within EU studies frequently overlook 'routines and habits that are central to making the EU'. Insiders within the European Commission have offered inspiring glimpses of the importance of everyday practices (Adler-Nissen, 2016, 87). Practices are best explained as 'different people's activities' (Schatzki, 2001, 13). Dealing with practices challenges the prevalent dichotomy between interest- and norm-based actions, that frequently frames enquiries in EU studies (Bremberg, 2016, 426). The practice perspective offers a focus on the critique of the EU's outputs (Adler-Nissen, 2016, 88, 99). It sees large-scale social phenomena, such as a lack of European popular support, emerge through the transaction between people in micro-social situations. There exists considerable agreement that, in EU studies, the practice approach helps to uncover uncharted experiences that might be crucial to the performance of European policy (Adler-Nissen, 2016, 87-88). This intrigues us and motivated our decision to apply the practice approach because it promises to disclose situations that are critical to the working of European foreign policy.

In examining how EU researchers employed the practice methodology, scholars have placed emphasis on communities of practice. These are clusters constituted of like-minded people who are linked together informally by a shared interest and the fact that they work together on the same issue (see Wenger, 1998; Adler, 2008; Graeger, 2016, 479). As will be explained in the following section, this investigation covers hitherto unexplored territory in the area of practice approaches within EU studies by examining the relations between micro communities of practice. It makes a further contribution by exploring the research question about whether and how the practice approach makes sense of the actions of micro communities of practice, focused on European foreign policy when practices involve actions at the local, national and European/supranational levels. This is an empirical investigation that is structured according to three micro communities of practice: in Rome, Brussels and Paris, all of them engaged in considerations concerning European foreign policy on/and China's

Belt and Road (BRI) initiative.[1] Methodologically, this investigation employs a discourse analysis and content analysis, and explores how these communities express dissension or agreement regarding European foreign policy or suggest positions. It argues that a practice approach makes it possible to identify images and understandings of the EU that might be vital to the functioning of European foreign policy. It performs this by enquiring into the community in Rome, scrutinising the actions of that in Brussels, and exploring the activities of that in Paris. The investigation rests on a variety of sources resulting from the author's conversation at the citizens' level in Rome in the context of China and the EU; the European institutions' official documents, to explore the policy making in Brussels regarding China; and the diplomatic strategy, to investigate a Europe that speaks with one voice, in Paris. The investigation is organised as follows: it first reviews the relevant literature concerning practice approaches in EU studies and states the research question, then presents the analytical methodology and the case to be investigated. Subsequently, the three micro communities of practice are examined by explaining each context followed by their respective analysis. Different parts contribute to the assessment of the findings: the methodology, the relationship between the micro communities of practice, and the results regarding policy and the outcomes concerning theory. The conclusion ensues.

II. THE PRACTICE APPROACH LEADING TO THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Debating what might be obtained by employing the perspective of practice within EU studies, it is suggested that it is through scrutinising how behaviour concerning Europe has been translated into practice that the degree of change can be perceived (see Bicchi and Bremberg, 2016, 392). Recalling that our appeal to the practice approach is ascribed to its attention to different under-

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[1] China's Belt and Road (BRI) initiative is not a theme of analysis here. The BRI initiative is a 'strategy initiated by the People's Republic of China that seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth'. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, at: https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html.

standings of European foreign policy including voices imagining it differently from how the EU positions itself, communities of practice may lead to undisclosed meanings of the EU. Communities of practice have been widely explored (Adler, 2009; Bicchi, 2011; Bremberg, 2014; Goff, 2015; Davies, 2016; Zwolski, 2016; Lave and Wenger 1991). Wenger (1998) recognised three elements in the community of practice: an on-going joint engagement (the practice), a feeling of common enterprise (the community), and a mutual repertoire (the resources).

Recent research in EU studies that debated practice approaches investigated European foreign policy through a focus on the micro community of practice, claiming that this methodology helped to clarify how Europe was shaped and by what forces; this result was pursued by examining a community of European practitioners in the Jerusalem area, which provided evidence that their practices contributed new substance to the European stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Bicchi, 2016, 473).

European foreign policy in the security field was examined with the aim of understanding the factors that motivate the national contributions to the crises management operations (Mérand and Rayroux, 2016). Interpreting burden- sharing as an anchoring practice shed light on the social rationale rather than on the logic derived by material interests. The analytical framework, this time, included national practices and the practices generated by the Political and Security Committee (442, 446), which are an inspiring case, showing how this approach helps to clarify policies at the national and committee level within the EU.

The kind of agency that was manifested by the EU in the international arena of practices was another core question that has been researched (Bueger, 2016). The argument debated that, if we are interested in how Europe performed and achieved as an international agency, then we must ask how it acts in specific international fields of practices. This questioning was explored through counter-piracy, where the practice approach emerged as a powerful methodological mechanism for enquiring into agency in a different way (408, 419).

Playing with the macro community of practice of NATO and the EU, their staff at all levels, and various sites, at the headquarters in Brussels and in field operations, other research showed how shared repertoires of practices may evolve into loose communities

(Graeger, 2016). Diplomats and civilian and military staff, engaged in informal practices across organisational, professional, and civilian-military boundaries, were discussed as constituting a specific type of configuration of social relations in European security diplomacy. Shifting the focus away from decision-makers and agendas in Brussels and the capitals, EU-NATO cooperation was explored as a case of a community of practice in the making (478, 579).

Other investigations contended that, by playing with practice approaches, the grasp of what the EU can and cannot do regarding its partner countries produces a kind of power politics of practical dispositions (Bremberg, 2016). The analysis demonstrated how practice conveys change. It showed that, even though the EU's response was inspired by an established range of practices, endorsing it in a new context offered fresh possibilities for action (423).

From this literature it emerges that the practice methodology was investigated by debating the micro and macro dimensions of the community of practice. Framing our investigation within the current literature, further areas remain to be explored, and an avenue for further research consists of the relations between the communities of practice (Bicchi, 2016, 473). Hence, we shall contribute to this less-explored area and question the relations between the micro communities of practice. Moreover, what seems to us a lack of accounts dealing with 'communities of practice set at different levels (local, national, European) all contributing to the same macro-practices of EU foreign policy' encourages us to consider these insights. Therefore, this investigation also contributes to this other area, and we explore whether and how the practice approach makes sense of the actions of micro communities of practice focused on European foreign policy and/on the BRI, when these practices involve actions at the local, national, and European/supranational levels. Actions include all activities, from negotiations (e.g., in the Council of Ministers) (Adler-Nissen, 2016, 92) to consultations and mediation, spreading information, creating awareness, constructing knowledge, and also testing people's feelings.

III. THE ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGY AND THE CASE TO BE INVESTIGATED

A practice approach relies strongly on empirical work, and involves sayings and doings. Despite its robust empirical connotations, 'practice is not outside of discourse, but "weaves together the discursive and material worlds" (Adler and Pouliot, 2011, 8), engaging in interplay (Neuman, 2002, 651)' (Graeger, 2016, 481). Stories and narratives socially construct reality and can be measured empirically (Shanahan et al., 2017). Methodologically, this empirical investigation combines a discourse analysis with a content analysis (Larsen, 2018). It explores the doings of community of practice so that different understandings and interpretations of the EU may be identified (see Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000). The content of the statements is closely examined. We observe what the discourse reveals, which expressions were used to describe the images of the EU, and what community of practice employed them.

This investigation applies the practice approach to three micro communities of practice: in Rome, Brussels and Paris, all of them engaged in considerations concerning 'European foreign policy on/and China's Belt and Road initiative'. This choice is motivated by our interest in the political debate within the area of EU studies and European foreign policy, that resulted from the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China in March 2019, with which a EU member state[2] apparently made a connection with China's Belt and Road initiative. That debate was coloured by the symbolism that that EU state represented to both the European and international community: a founding member of the EU, a member of NATO, the third largest economy in the Eurozone, and a G7 member. Beyond that incident, what draws our attention is the fact that the interaction raised the idea that the EU states were breaking rank from the attempted united front regarding European foreign policy on China (euronews, 26, March 2019b) and that the interaction gained some external resonance.

That particular instance is recalled here because it helps to clarify the 'dynamics' linked to breaking rank from a united front of a European foreign policy on China/BRI, seen from the viewpoint of the practice approach that recognises the importance of people's moods and opinions about EU policies. Hence, our case study is framed by the discourses and activities performed within the

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[2] Italy.

three micro communities of practice that constitute this investigation's analytical landscape. The discourses and practices are examined in order to grasp the ideas and perceptions of European policy towards China and the BRI from the people within these communities and from the statements that they offer. The investigation evolves and builds through the analysis of these communities, each of them offering their contribution to the enquiry, and each telling their own story. From the practice approach, taking into consideration people's experiences regarding the European Union may offer insights that are relevant to the performance and functioning of European foreign policy. It is possible that: the image of the EU addressing China as a competitor and rival was contested in the micro community of practice; that beginning to consider China as a partner with whom to cooperate was believed to lead to a balanced European foreign policy towards China; and that the idea that the EU could plan phases through which to encourage Beijing to open up its economy and stand for free trade so that the Silk Road Policy would work in both directions emerged as a strong perception and statement. Therefore, this being the contours of our case study, we explore the discourse within the micro communities of practice and the picture of European foreign policy that emerges there from.

IV. EXAMINING THE VOICES REGARDING THE EU

What follows is organised as *context* and *analysis* concerning the three micro communities of practice under investigation. Context 1 refers to the community in Rome, context 2 to that in Brussels and context 3 to that in Paris. The context explains the location and setting of the community, what it does and what we expect from it by applying the practice approach. The discourse analysis together with the content analysis explore the conversation and activities therein to unveil what rhetoric was used to describe the EU scenarios. We will find contrasting images and representations of the EU: the Europhile viewpoint, Resistance to the EU, New advances, Boldness, Questioning compromise, Community spirit, a discourse on National foreign policy making, and, lastly, the EU's policy concerning Beijing.

1. Context 1

The dynamics that are under investigation, and that serve empirically to clarify this research's central question, involve the assessment of a micro community of practice in Rome, operating at a quarter, rather than at a higher level, which is taken as representing a (very limited though acceptable) share of citizens of a EU state, expressing their views concerning interactions with Beijing and European policy on China and the BRI. This community is taken as representing a local micro community of practice. As for the practice approach, we learnt that, thinking in 'situationist terms', large-scale social phenomena, such as Euroscepticism or Europhilism, materialise via the everyday connections between people (such as the exchange of ideas) in micro-social situations (that is, in groups of individuals) (Adler-Nissen, 2016, 99). The practical situationist position leads to groups, and action therein, as an 'imagined community' to which all of those interested in conversing about a shared interest belong. Communities of practice offer a range of resources that help to address decisions (see Wenger, 1998, 52-57; Bicchi, 2016, 465). In the instance examined here, resources sprang up by practising political conversations and political assessments in the context of China interacting more closely and its implications *vis-à-vis* European foreign policy. Bringing in one's own experience, informing, sensitising and being sensitised, alerting to risks, explaining possible gains, defending market liberalisation, supporting commercial transnational alliances, advising on the fusion of foreign entrepreneurships, and criticising the EU's resistance to fusion as well as denouncing its slowness to act were the kind of resources that the partakers in the local/micro community of practice developed, and with which they attentively engaged. The partakers of this community were private citizens: some had some kind of relation with China, members of the public involved in business, people with an interest in the development of an infrastructure, others absorbed by the daily problem of creating new jobs, persons who had previously held a diplomatic position in Beijing, individuals with a role in international organisations, Eurosceptics as well as Europhiles, persons interested in foreign policy, and a mixture of young and older people. This micro community was unrelated to political parties or ethical or religious groups; access was free, with no need to disclose one's identity, nor to participate in any future meetings, should any occur.

This community was questioned by this investigation's author in autumn 2018 and is important in terms of what the voices regarding the EU's foreign policy on China/the BRI of the people therein represent and claim.

Analysis

The Europhile Viewpoint

A discourse revealing a Europhile vision led to the discussion of whether the BRI's connection could be pursued by a EU state while simultaneously maintaining adherence to the EU. To assess this, a question was directed towards the issue of whether countries were influenced by other countries' open position on Beijing, which hypothetically opened up a debate that may have resonated as a favourable acceptance of China. In such a circumstance, there might have been some degree of encouragement. The result would have been that like-minded countries created the knowledge that certain practices were possible and could be conducted even while remaining loyal to the EU (see Aggestam and Bicchi, 2019).

Resistance to the EU

On the other hand, several arguments were advanced to build up resistance to the EU. The slowness of the EU in deciding how to cooperate with the BRI was the prime reaction, explained as obstructing member states' initiatives that could easily have been put into practice. The EU was accused of employing vetoes, as exemplified by Brussels negating the fusion between member states and Chinese enterprises when these mergers were considered to give rise to large, powerful bodies. This function of Brussels was criticised as inconsistent with the open market economy, for which the EU was aiming. A further complaint was that the issue of 'human rights, civil liberties and freedom, constitutional and unalienable rights', which impeded EU's action on China, was to be solved by market transactions and commercial trade, that fell into the space of economic relations. The need to 'stay away from Brussels and its obstructionism of the BRI' was voiced. From the practice approach outlook, the examination of this debate revealed the limited extent of the community of practice's 'own vision' of European foreign policy, due to resisting the EU.

New Advances

Some openness towards the EU started to materialise when partakers in the community of practice questioned the EU's most likely judgements on EU states experimenting with closer cooperation with China. This time, in contrast to the previous argument, they perceived a negative reaction from Brussels. Their argument held that the EU forged a European foreign policy that still offered no clearance to the BRI. Accordingly, any nation implementing that choice would break 'the line of proceeding together with a European foreign policy'. The EU was felt to be continuing to display resistance to the BRI. This perception encouraged the belief that the EU should abandon this confrontation. By contrast with this landscape of practices embedded in a dimension of conflict and non-conflict, a different consideration entered the discussion, as a sort of compromise. Recapturing a previous indication suggested in the community, this input proposed that efforts should be made to identify and explain what was needed in order to integrate China into the wider, world economy. The message was clear: the EU needed to engage in order to weaken its opposition. The invitation to the EU to consider the Chinese style of market economy with more pragmatism and concreteness resonated within the community of practice. This logic leads to an insight into the EU's political relationships with Beijing in order to understand what these were.

2. Context 2

The dynamics under investigation include a focus on the state of the art of European policy on China and the BRI in March 2019, which helps to identify what was missing from the EU's attitude towards China, which might have been claimed in Rome and could be argued here. This focus is referred to as the enquiry into the existing community of practice in Brussels engaged in outlining such a policy. This community represents the EU's stance towards China and the BRI. It is a micro community because it includes a limited number of individuals, among EU diplomats and members of the Commission. As for the practice approach, the 'mutual engagement' of the participants in a community describes the very character that defines the community of practice (Graeger, 2016, 490). Despite partakers develop interactions between one another via mutual engagement, there is no fusion of identities (Wenger, 1998, 76). Such engagement may lead to homogeneity as well as heterogeneity

(Graeger, 2016, 490). We imagine that chaos ensued in Brussels when the agenda was extended to China and the BRI. As a group of people who share a practice of doing something that they see as politically meaningful, the people involved in the European Union External Action, EU diplomats, and members of the Commission were busy communicating information to each other about the possible policy positions on the BRI. As for the practice approach, agreeing that these people engaged in the above task with community spirit , they are accepted as having provided inputs to the ensuing political developments, by feeding them with their own resources of knowledge and political assessment of Beijing interacting with Europe and *vice versa*.

Analysis

Boldness

The EU seemed to have no answer to Beijing's Silk Road project as the partakers in the community of practice in Rome indicated, but what was observed on the ground was a relatively determined, bold initiative. Self-protective mechanisms were employed by the community of practice engaged in writing reports that were discussed in order to shape the official declarations, ready to become policy. The 'Joint Communication by the Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy EU-China: A Strategic Outlook' adopted by the European Council (12 March, 2019) embraced an undoubtedly bold declaration by calling China 'a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' (EC/HRVP p. 1). A screening framework was also adopted by the EU's member states (apart from Italy) to safeguard their economies from foreign direct investment with a clear reference to Beijing, when such operations were judged unfavourable to their economy. Endorsed by the Council of the EU, the decision was anchored to security and public order (EP/C 21 March, 2019). For the first time, the EU officially addressed Beijing as a competing challenger by encouraging approaches to governance that differed from those of the European Union. The same strategic outlook declared that the EU needed to make a 'further policy shift' towards adopting a more realistic and assertive approach concerning its engagement with China (EC/HRVP p. 1). These positions showed the need for encouraging balanced relations with

Beijing, as seemed to have been demanded in the community of practice in Rome.

Questioning Compromise

The people involved in writing the strategic outlook could be perceived as being embedded in the conflict between the practices of recognition of the benefices provided by the BRI and the practices of rejection, which, combined, revealed the multifaceted aspects surrounding Beijing's policy. In fact, the strategic outlook indicated that 'Chinese investments have contributed to the growth of many receiving economies' (EC/HRVP p. 4). The BRI, while not mentioned in the EU-China strategic outlook, was indirectly kept in mind. In Brussels, it was suggested that the EU needed to maintain unity. For this last reason the strategic outlook emphasised that, in cooperating with Beijing, all member states had 'a responsibility to ensure consistency with EU law, rules and policies' (EC/HRVP p. 2). The respect for differences and ability to negotiate among the member states were the skills that would allow the EU to maximise its efforts to display a united front with regard to its external policies. Against this background of calls for coherence, cohesion, and attention to differences, the compromised view that emerged in the community of practice in Rome could have found space within European foreign policy. From the practice approach, the demand of how to bridge the gap through practices by the EU to welcome China more widely went unanswered.

3. Context 3

Further dynamics are investigated to grasp the perceptions of European policy towards China and the BRI, linked to the discussion of this research's central question. They are, this time, influenced by the 'external' responses – as conveyed by European media (euronews 25, March 2019; euronews 26, March 2019a; France 24, March 2019) – to the initiative of signing a Memorandum of Understanding with China taken by a EU state (as explained above). Recalling that the practice approach's belief that like-minded participants in a group, also comprising a few individuals linked contextually by a shared interest, give shape to a community of practice, the gathering in Paris of several EU leaders constituted a micro community of practice. Formed by French

President Macron, German Chancellor Merkel and European Commission's President Juncker meeting China's President Xi Jinping, this micro community symbolises a meeting at the EU level involved in discussions on the EU's relations with China (Élisée 25, March 2019; ISPI 8, April 2019). From the viewpoint of the practice approach and for the sake of discussing our central question, together with showing the image of the EU that emerged from this community, we will also show the effects on the national arena of the practices which were conducted at the European level, and hence how the community in Paris was influential at both levels.

Analysis

Community spirit

The statement that French President Macron issued that 'the face of a Europe that speaks with one voice on the international scene [was] emerging' (Élisée 25, March 2019), was a move that sought to create an impression of an impact on Europe. That impression was emphasised by Macron labouring to bring German Chancellor Merkel alongside, in Paris, to convene with President Xi. There, as a convinced supporter of European integration, Merkel welcomed Beijing by declaring that the EU wished 'to play a role in the One Belt One Road Initiative' (ISPI 8, April 2019). The idea of an impact on Europe was reinforced by Macron's invitation to European Commission's President Juncker on the third day of Xi's visit to France. These relationships appear to have been designed to increase the growth of a 'community spirit' among the EU states. They suggest that Macron wished to offer these encounters a more adequate frame, as the building blocks for a common relationship within the European sphere.

National foreign policy making

At the same time, Macron's invitation of Xi to Paris contributed to the establishment of a number of remarkable trade arrangements between Paris and Beijing.[3] Similarly, in Paris, Chancellor Merkel grasped the opportunity to increase Germany's investment

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[3] Several commercial, trade and electronic contracts have been agreed with France, and deals covering the area of energy, transport and food industry and the sale of 300 Air-bus planes (ISPI 8, April 2019).

in China by enhancing Berlin's interactions with Beijing.⁴ By promoting their countries' agreements with China, both Macron and Merkel generated national foreign policy (Xinhuanet, 2020; ISPI 8, April 2019). The practice approach indicates that, if the partakers in the community of practice hold several memberships, their affiliations widen their political reach and vindicate the plurality of their practices (see Kubiak et al., 2015). From holding a position in the EU and within their nation, it ensued that the activity of these individuals produced consequences in the (European/supranational field and) national arena.

EU's policy on Beijing

The assertions by Macron, Merkel and Junker in Paris may appear merely statements, far from generating European foreign policy. However, the EU leaders assembled in the community in Paris argued that the EU should propose phases to China so that Beijing would be expected to liberalise its economy and stand for free trade (euronews 26, March 2019b; Élisée 25, March 2019; France, 24). By so doing, these leaders gave shape to a more convincing, substantial definition of the EU's policy on Beijing (euronews 26, March 2019a).

V. ASSESSMENT OF THE FINDINGS

1. The Methodology

The discourse and content analyses, combined with the practice approach to the three micro communities of practice, served to unveil the rhetoric used therein concerning the EU and policy on China. The methodology employed has been useful in leading to the images of, and attitudes towards, the EU that were perceived or fostered in the communities. A combination of forms was found, from, on the one hand, patterns that demonstrated resistance to the EU, displayed boldness, and questioned compromise, to, on the other, Europhile speechmaking, that specified new advances, crafted community spirit, and also encouraged EU's policymaking

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⁴ Germany was going to see 62.7 per cent investment increase in China in the first seven months of 2019. As Berlin confirmed, the Chinese market served as a magnet for Ger-man companies of all sizes and from a range of industries (Xinhuanet, 2020).

on Beijing. Why were the discourse and content analyses useful to these different understandings of the EU? Their analytical insights led to the uncovering of the metaphors of the EU that this investigation into the practice approach has argued might be crucial for the functioning of European foreign policy. In fact, uncovering the understanding of the EU, that claimed the new direction of cooperating with Beijing rather than challenging it, has proved crucial. It is necessary to grasp the images and representations because the EU affects our way of living and so it must bear in mind people's requests and feelings concerning its policies. People's experiences may appear distant from the matters dealt with by the EU, but the events occurring in the micro communities have demonstrated the contrary. The policies and positions supported or contested by the EU interacting with China clearly attracted the attention of the communities explored here. They unquestionably raised the communities' interest. Hence without the discourse and content analyses, it would have been difficult to visualise the different perceptions of the EU as identified here.

2. Relationship between the Micro Communities of Practice

This investigation's findings responded to the aim of exploring the relationship between the communities of practice, and the events in Paris offered a link between the micro communities analysed here, in Rome and Brussels. We have found that the relationship is built on the people therein, for what they represent. The local micro community in Rome, operating at a narrow rather than higher level, taken as a very limited share of citizens of a EU state, represent their claim; the officials in Brussels (taken as those outlining European policy on China) represent what was on offer from the EU; and the gathering in Paris (taken as a symbol of a meeting at the European Union level) represents the follow-up. How does this relationship evolve? The argument which arose in the community in Rome, based on the belief that it was possible to contribute ideas to the formation of the EU's foreign policy, was an anchoring point that surfaced. The proposal, still in Rome, of addressing the 'missing link', i.e., that efforts should be made to 'identify' and 'explain' what was needed in order to integrate China into the wider, world economy, was a sensible contribution that the approach elicited. Moreover, the suggestion, again in Rome, that a balanced European foreign policy towards China/BRI was

attainable by starting to consider China as a partner with whom to cooperate was a relevant remark. On their part, the community of practice in Brussels showed the paucity of European foreign policy, i.e., the extent to which the EU's policy adhered to the attitude of imagining China as a competitor and rival. This investigation's findings highlighted that the EU leaders in the community in Paris provided the connection to the other communities. They proposed new substance to European foreign policy, addressed the claim asserted in Rome, and answered the desire expressed there of contributing ideas, the request to make efforts to integrate China into the world economy, and also the necessity for the EU to accept China as a partner with whom to deepen cooperation. They also demonstrated a willingness to address the limitation concerning the EU's policy which was revealed by the community in Brussels. On the whole, the relationship between the micro communities of practice was shaped by the EU leaders assembled in the community in Paris.

3. Concerning Policy

The assessment of the findings on policy leads to the work of the EU leaders in the community in Paris and to their encouragement of the EU to add new substance to European foreign policy. Such encouragement conveyed that a sensible policy towards China and the BRI was pursuable by overcoming the obstinate perception of China as a rival; it became stronger when more precise indications to the EU were delivered. A notable sign was the ultimate suggestion that the EU should plan phases through which Beijing would be encouraged to open up its economy and stand for free trade, so that the Silk Road policy would work in both directions.

4. Concerning Theory

The assessment of the findings for theory is linked to the community of practice in Paris and the EU leaders therein, where the action of France's President Macron and Germany's Chancellor Merkel holding positions in both the national and European supranational arenas, affected all of these spheres. The practice approach, in fact, clarifies that individuals that hold multiple memberships broaden the social landscape of their practice and explain the plurality of their actions. In addition, having provided

answers to the demands made by the local micro community of practice in Rome, active at the local, quarter level, Macron and Merkel's actions had consequences also at that very level. Hence, in response to the investigation's central question, we infer that the practice approach makes sense of the activities of micro communities of practice addressing European foreign policy when these practices develop at the local, national and European/supranational levels.

VI. CONCLUSION

This empirical investigation was intrigued by the suggestion that practice approaches help to uncover otherwise unexplored experiences concerning the EU which might be vital to the performance of European foreign policy. We were supported in this by the conviction that the EU creates constriction and then influences our life and, consequently, needs to pay attention to people's moods and opinions about its policies. The review of the relevant literature on practice perspectives within the area of EU studies opened up an area for new research, and this investigation sought to explore the relationships between the micro communities of practice. In addition to examining these relations, the investigation also explored the research question, and made use of a case study built upon three micro communities of practice, all of which were concerned with giving opinions on EU's policy on China's Belt and Road Initiative. It applied the practice approach and employed an analytical methodology, based on discourse and content analyses, to grasp images of the EU and its policy from the language used in the communities of practice and the political statements made therein. In all of this, the sources (the information resulting from this author's conversation at the citizens' level in Rome, the European institutions' official documents, and the diplomatic exchanges in Paris) have been useful to address the aim and the question of this enquiry. This investigation argued that a practice approach helps us to distinguish different understandings of the EU that might be crucial to the functioning of European foreign policy. In fact, the outlining of the EU's image of supporting cooperation with China and opposing any challenges to it was a useful finding, vital to a balanced EU policy.

The analytical methodology produced results in terms of policy and theory. Regarding the former, we have found practices that proposed new directions to support EU's policy: namely, the indication that the EU should adopt phases to encourage Beijing to free up its economy, abandon protection and liberalise trade. Concerning the theory, we proved that the practice approach makes sense of the actions of micro communities of practice focused on European foreign policy also when these practices involve actions at the local, national and European/supranational levels. Having shown the latter and dealt with the leading question, and having demonstrated the relationship between the communities of practice, this enquiry contributes to the literature on the adoption of the practice approaches in EU studies. Ultimately, we hope that this investigation will motivate other researchers to employ discourse and content analyses and explore practice approaches further, such as the relationship between the macro (NATO, UN) and micro levels of analysis of the community of practice, and either confirm the virtues of this approach in revealing how the perception of European foreign policy is imagined or built, or disprove the results discussed in the present enquiry.

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