

Practices Within the European Union's Governance

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The European Union's (EU) governance's practices are infused with power dynamics. When the power dynamics confront the social dialectic, complex effects are generated that often point in opposite directions. For example, such effects may call for integration and also fragmentation. This empirical paper explores whether or how the practice approach allows a focus on the EU's governance's practices, imbued with power, leading in opposite directions when confronted by social interactions. It deals with this question by means of three illustrative short cases representing broad-spectrum practices within contemporary European politics: power politics and Covid-19; the EU in Afghanistan after August 2021; and the Micro Communities of Practice and the EU's foreign policy regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative. By directing attention towards the power dynamics of one process and its opposite while facing the social context, we show the contribution of the practice approach to the unpacking of the informal practices that are inherent within the EU's governance.

Key words: European Union's governance, practices, Covid-19, Afghanistan, China

I. INTRODUCTION

The European Union's (EU) governance (whether global, regional, or local) may be conceived as being built on practices which give meaning to action and make strategic interaction possible. Its politics largely remain defined by the institutional architecture; yet when official norms lack specificity, policy makers are left with experimenting actions, and a myriad of practices hang together to facilitate political activity. Retrieving practices may help to illuminate what lies behind the scenes of the EU's governance's activities. This paper perceives the EU's governance, its external action and negotiations, through the lens of practices. Its objective is to show the working of the practice perspective by emphasizing the structuring effects of the less formal side of policy-making. It performs this via empirical cases, and, yet, the objective is neither to test hypotheses, nor to offer data. The objective is concerned with the practices in the making of the politics of the EU's governance, that imbued with power generate dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (cfr Pouliot and Therien 2018). This is an unexplored issue of research; hence shedding light on the informal processes of the EU's governance that are often obscured to sight is important.

The play of inclusion and exclusion configures the space where politics and power enter the analytical frame. We explain the EU's governance as being shaped by a body of guidelines, procedures and practices that describe how power is exercised within the European Union. The EU's governance's social infrastructure embraces practices which are socially meaningful and organised patterns of action that tend to reappear over time. Compared to multilateral treaties and resolutions, practices are less official and more difficult to reach, and yet, represent a key constituent of the governance's architecture. As practices are actioned, they occasionally oppose the 'established processes', and create a baseline for discussion, negotiation and decisions regarding the policies. A practice inducing new forms of governance may at the same time create processes of domination. The practice perspective may offer an insight into the competing forces that are generated within the EU's governance (cfr Pouliot and Therien 2018, 164-5).

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This is an empirical paper that enquires a research question derived from secondary research. It explores whether or how the practice approach helps to focus on the EU's governance's practices, permeated with power, that may point in opposite directions when facing the social context. For example, practices may include simultaneously cooperation and fragmentation, adherence to treaties and experimentation, traditionalism and progressivism, and so on. We pay attention to practices and their resulting political implications by undertaking three illustrative short cases based on earlier analyses by this author that explored the capability of the practice approach with regard to explaining how the processes of the EU's governance unfold (Marchi 2021, 2022a, 2022b). These exemplifying cases serve to generalise the argument, and reproduce the practices developing within the sphere of current affairs and various issues-areas, all connected to the EU's governance: 'Power politics and Covid-19', 'The EU in Afghanistan after August 2021', and 'The Micro Communities of Practice and the EU's foreign policy on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)'. We will show how practices within the EU's governance produce opposing effects when interacting with the social context: divisive power politics contrasting with shared communal strategies (Covid-19); submission to the EU's Treaties versus exploring the social space (Afghanistan); and exclusionary trends as opposed to inclusionary tendencies (China-BRI). By pointing at the power dynamics of one process and its opposite while confronting the social interactions, we will demonstrate the contribution of the practice approach to the unpacking of the informal practices connected to the EU's governance.

Methodologically, this investigation is a documentary analysis that employs a discourse and content analysis. Concerning the sources, the discussion regarding power politics and Covid-19 is informed by official documents from the European Council and the European Parliament and secondary sources. The debate regarding Afghanistan is based on primary sources that include the European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Council, together with speeches by the High Representative/Vice President of the European Union. Among the secondary sources, studies by scholars who operated in Afghanistan, and others that studied human conflicts contributed to contextualising the Taliban. The discussion dealing with the micro communities of practice (MCP) concerns two MCPs, one in Rome and the other in Brussels. The analysis of the first is based on sources resulting from the author's conversation, in 2018, at the citizens' level in Rome (as a system of indirectly interviewing), taken as an example of EU member state. The conversation focused on China, the BRI and the EU. Regarding the MCP in Brussels (exemplifying the community of practice engaged in outlining the EU's policy towards China (cfr. Bicchi 2016)), the author's interviews with officials from the European institutions, and official documents from the European Commission and the European Parliament contribute to the analysis.

The investigation is organised with six sections. In the following section we present the analytical approach, the literature on practices, and the value of the practice method to the EU's governance. Then, three sections follow dealing with the illustrative cases to exemplify the argument discussed here. Each of these is divided into four sub-sections: the first introduces the context regarding the EU's external action's practices concerning a specific political instance, circumstance or issue; the second sub-section displays how the EU's policy, permeated with power, offers an

understanding of the issue under consideration, when facing the social context; the third sub-section is similar to the second but displays a different, contrasting understanding; the fourth sub-section is purposely argumentative in nature, attempting to offer an answer to the investigation's central query by highlighting the extent to which the images resulting from the above analyses are discordant. The sixth section concludes the investigation, and develops a main point related to the EU's external governance's practices, 'the power dynamics confronting the social dialectic'. It lastly comments on the contribution of the practice methodology to uncover practices that might be based in unknown areas of the EU's policy's activities.

II. PRACTICES, THE LITERATURE, THE INFORMATION GAP AND THE VALUE OF THE PRACTICE METHOD TO THE EU'S GOVERNANCE

The issue that arises following the above introduction concerns the question of why the EU's governance's practices are imbued with power, and how the literature on practices contributes an explanation. Avant et al (2010) explain that, if we are keen to understand who governs globally, then we have to account for how actors approach socialising. The same applies to the EU's governance in which influential actors strive to maintain domination. Important actors perform their power by preventing access to decision-making, while secondary and minor players desire to open up the political game. This type of confrontation helps to understand why international practices generate conflicting political effects. Modes of governance not only structure world politics, but are also issues of struggle, in, and of themselves (Pouliot and Therien 2018, 165). Koppell (2010) contends that, typically, powerful actors frame their interests in terms of efficiency, and peripheral and subordinate players in terms of democratisation. However, the opposite does also occur. These premises shed some light on why the practice methodology brings in the innovative 'wager' that practices are not simply outcomes to be explained but also '*explanans*', that is, active (social) forces in making and remaking the world (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot and Therien 2018, 165).

At the theoretical level, practices give form to the social configuration of governance. They originate new social links and diversify the range of actors, but also strengthen existing structures and allow the formation of power relations. Modes of governing arrange and rearrange the patterns of interactions, promoting formulae of cooperation that are accessible to some, but not to others. The expansion of participation is normally complemented with new club procedures. Also, the configuration of dissimilar interests and values leads to be counterbalanced by other selective practices, rooted on normative consistency. Practices that intensify accountability have the tendency to produce self-protective responses from those in power, as forms of ratification of procedures open up chances of arbitrariness in their application and implementation (cfr. Pouliot and Therien 2018, 165).

Scholars classify practices following composite definitions: practices are a performance and a process of doing (Goffman 1959). They have no life other than in their revealing (Jackson and Nexon 1999). They demand engaging with agency and the social and natural environments that mutually interact (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 2). They are the synthesis of physical acts and mental intuition (background knowledge), and represent dynamic material and ideational processes. They fulfil an important role

in explaining political processes and changes, such as modifications to the natural environment as well as to the opinions concerning the world that people embrace, individually and collectively (p. 7). Reckwitz (2002) describes practice as a routinized kind of conduct that includes several, interconnected components: forms of bodily activities, and of mental engagement, ‘things’ and their use, knowledge, emotional states and motivations (Reckwitz 2002, 249; Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 23). Adler and Pouliot distinguish practices as ‘socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world’ (p. 4). By practices, we mean socially organised activities that relate to world politics, broadly construed (Adler and Pouliot 2011).

Dialoguing on practices implies knowing how to identify technological threats (Huysmans 2006; Berling 2012), face the question of which actors (or states) have influence within governance (Avant et al 2010), and address the different types of governance (Porter 2012). These emphases, together with a focus on ‘deeds’ (Onuf 1989), ‘practical thinking’ (Kratochwil 1989) and attention to Bourdieu’s social theories (Bigo 2011; Neumann 2002; Hopf 2010) have contributed towards establishing ‘practices’ as tools for analysis (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 6). These issues apply to the EU and its governance, and have been explored by scholars of EU studies (Bicchi 2011, 2016; Goff 2015; Merand and Rayroux 2016; Bueger 2016; Graeger 2016; Bremberg 2016; Adler-Nissen 2016; Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Zwolski 2016).

Conversations on practice methodology involve asking what one means when speaking about practices within the EU’s governance. We describe the EU’s governance as being guided by a set of agreed rules, procedures and practices which portray how power is employed in the European Union. The EU’s governance’s purpose consists of reinforcing diplomacy at the Union level and bringing the citizens closer to its institutions. It is based on several principles, including the transparency of the EU’s institutions, the involvement of civil society in the decision-making, framing and implementing well-managed policies, and offering a regulatory framework to support growth and jobs. It respects the proportionality and subsidiarity principles, and ensures that each EU institution and its member states explain and take responsibility for its actions within the EU. Coherently with its commitment to improving the operations of the international institutions, the EU contributes to the debate on global governance (EUR-Lex).

Enquiring the value of the practice methodology to the observation of the EU’s governance means identifying practices that enrich the scrutiny of the EU. It means providing answers such as understanding diplomacy (Neumann 2002; 2005; 2012; Pouliot 2008; 2010), studying the bilateral and multilateral political processes and culture (Pouliot and Cornut 2015; Sending et al 2015), addressing security and the making of insecurity, and giving substance to the indication that security is not fixed, but socially constructed, and intrinsically political and contingent (Balzaq et al 2010; Bueger 2016) (Bueger and Gadinger 2014, 5).

These considerations drawn from the conversation on practices and methodology are important, however, important is also what is less known or investigated because it offers unexplored room for this research. This particularly concerns the unpacking of

the informal processes that might dwell in concealed layers of the EU's governance, leading to the complex effects of the dynamics that 'point in opposite directions' when interacting with the social dialectic, and calls for engaging with this investigation. Owing to our focus on the impact of the social dynamics on the practices of governance, it might be asked how we deal with the social context analytically, in the event of absence of hard evidence obtained via direct inspection in the field. For the Covid-19 exemplifying case, the unanimity of the European Parliament in advancing 'social Europe' in support of burden sharing emerges as a social dynamic that we interpret as a social process. Also for the Afghanistan exemplifying case, the social interactions are represented by the European Parliament and the parliamentarians prompting 'social Europe' to lead the EU's governance, during that institution's focus on Afghanistan. We see the European Parliamentarians inhabiting an area, within the EP, bridging institutional relations and social interactions. They make the social connection between the practices imbued with power of the EU's governance and the practices, imbued with the violence that emerges from the Afghan context of a society controlled by the Taliban. In the micro communities of practice case, the people making up the MCPs provide the social interactions, with their practices being observed through interviews. Taking practices into consideration leads us empirically to scrutinise the processes whereby certain performances produce effects of a political nature. While we dig into what lies behind the scenes of the EU's activities, we will also see the fluctuations of burden sharing, the complexity of adopting novel approaches to politics, and how integrating policies is difficult. These are the informal processes that will emerge from the following short, illustrative cases.

III. POWER POLITICS AND COVID-19

III.1 'Power politics and Covid-19' builds on the practice approach's belief that micro-level diplomatic dynamics are crucial for explaining how power surges, evolves, and falls during negotiations. Power is viewed as a process that interacts with social relations (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 892), that we investigate by focusing on the early 2020 negotiations in the EU arena on burden-sharing, linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Questions concerning what makes one actor (or country) more influential than another during the negotiations, why certain actors (or states) appear powerless while others punch above their weight, and how the strings of European diplomacy are actually pulled are themes that the practice approach can help to answer. Similarly, this approach clarifies how power emerges, is distributed, and becomes consistent, or succumbs to compromises. To analyse power in practice, we must access the social context in which the practices occur, change and progress. Resources are responsible for the generation of power. Feeding these resources is competence, an ability that is locally generated, performed, and disputed, ultimately to impact on politics. When resources take the form of socially-recognised competence (that is, competence that is acknowledged and accepted by others seeking to produce influence), they generate power. The function of these practices can be described as asserting competence; battling for competence; and generating an influence over the outcomes. These processes are cyclical in nature, mutually reinforcing and overlapping (Adler-Nissen and Pouliot 2014, 891, 894). In this evidence, the practice approach allows the observation of the competing effects engendered by the power dynamics of the EU's governance: the divisive power politics on the one hand, and the unifying strategies aimed at mutually supporting the

weight of the pandemic, on the other. Both are simultaneously generated during the governance attempted by the EU, via interacting with the social context, to provide assistance to the member states at a time of crisis.

III.2. Discursive power politics

Throughout the negotiations among the member states at the EU level, several issues led to escalated attempts by the players to extract the greatest benefit from the consultations (European Commission 2020). Some of the actors, and specifically the Dutch Finance Minister, argued strongly that certain member states were aiming to ameliorate the high levels of public debt (Politico 2020). The developing power dynamics was evinced by the skill at convincing other finance ministers and their countries, Denmark, Sweden and Austria, that the proposal at stake, borrowing, was a realistic proposition opposing grants (BBC 2020). Seeking control of the negotiating arena, the minister contested the competence played out by other intervening actors in the consultations, and, above all, contested the European Commission (The Economist 2020). This dispute reflected a ‘competitive cooperation’ that the minister embraced, based on commitments that were unaffordable for the majority of the member states.¹

III.3. Communal strategies of burden-sharing

Not everything was divisive in encouraging the EU’s governance to steer towards decisions, and the European Parliament in particular was determinant (European Parliament, March 2020). The insistence of the EP and European Council on delegating the European Commission to intervene with substantial proposals was central in guiding the discourse towards more constructive practices (European Council March 2020). The Parliament requested (Guetta 2020, Member of the European Parliament) that von der Leyen, the Commission’s head, should follow the example of the imaginative politics of former European Commission’s President Delors. It explained that, as a solution to the crisis of the mid-1980s, Delors had acted swiftly to create the single European market, so von der Leyen should, now, proceed decisively to provide a similar ‘life-jacket’ at the European level (Guetta 2020).² The EP was determined in its request that the costs should be shared due to the emergencies exacerbated by the pandemic. This request materialised in a resolution that attracted a unanimous vote (European Parliament 2020), and paved the way for what became the Next Generation EU (European Council 2020), the specific recovery effort, presented by von der Leyen at the end of May 2020. The European Parliament represented the social sphere where several parliamentarians reacted to oppose a strict understanding of governance. The social dynamics that expanded there allowed the public manifestation of the position favouring the cooperation and burden share that was included in the motion that united several parliamentarians.

III.4. Assessing the complex effects pointing in opposite directions

Two points arise from the observations of the practices infused with power dynamics during the negotiations within the context of the EU’s governance. First, neither the ‘nature of power’ revealed by the Dutch Finance Minister nor its origin arose from a wide-ranging philosophy, such as the cooperation professed by the Commission’s head, von der Leyen, as an accepted, shared world order. We framed that power

within the argument that what was at stake during the negotiations was a multifaceted social game, where manoeuvring for diplomatic competence was an end in itself. The kind of power in practice that the Minister exhibited aimed to block the consultations. Second, the unanimity of the EP in supporting the Parliament's resolution provided evidence of power. That power was socially determined, and was a product of social interaction. It was made explicit by giving credit to the Commission for providing proposals to make 'social Europe' a real project under construction. Ultimately, power dynamics were active during the talks on Covid-19. As the practice approach revealed, opposing synergies were involved during the negotiations. The social dynamics brought to the surface contrasting outputs which simultaneously expressed 'divisive' and 'burden-sharing' powers.

IV. AFGHANISTAN

IV.1. 'The EU embroiled in Afghanistan after August 2021' is informed by the view that opportunities exist 'in' and 'through' practice, which we examine by exploring how the 'practical sense' of EU diplomats and officials makes 'diplomacy' the self-evident way to interact with Afghanistan under the Taliban (cfr Pouliot 2008, 281). This illustrative case regards diplomacy as a procedure connected to social relations, and views micro-level dynamics as fundamental to its construction. It demonstrates how 'making use of the practical sense' in the real world clarifies the available choices in order to recognise whether or not they suit the conditions of the field (cfr. Cross 2007). Ultimately, it explores the argument that merely following the norms – in this case those of the EU's Treaties – does not always produce the desired results (Pouliot 2008, 281), such as achieving peace and security within the complex context of Afghanistan. It suggests how exploring practices within the social sphere might raise the possibility of joining a collective, communal space, in which peoples confront their claims (p. 282). This social process might help people to come to terms with their past history and the divisions that history has documented, to the extent that peace and security might be transformed into a less distant reality. These two different positions hint at the informal processes that appear so divergent here and represent the effects generated by the EU's governance's practices imbued with power focused on Afghanistan.

IV.2. Steadfastly adhering to the EU's treaties

After the failure to attempt the construction of an Afghan state, the EU chose to renovate its policy (Borrel, September 2021). The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP), Borrell, was prudent regarding the recognition that the Taliban regime had assumed power by forming the government (Borrel, October 2021). The EU had difficult relations with Afghanistan. It demanded 'behavioural conduct' (a balanced relationship between actions and norms), and also condemned its leaders. In 2018, it declared its support for an 'inclusive Afghan-led and Afghan-owned peace process with the government and the Taliban at its centre' (European Council 2018, p. 3). At the same time, in the same European Council's conclusions, the EU censured the Taliban for their (criminal, ruthless) attacks on civilians and officials (p. 5). In mid-September 2021, the European Council fixed guidelines that the caretaker cabinet was to observe, and confronted the Taliban as actors who endangered others. The EU's policy advice documents displayed a commitment to building support according to the western formats. This is proved by

the European Commission's demand that the 'rights based approach working principles' be satisfied. This means 'applying all human rights for all', to observe 'meaningful and inclusive participation and access to decision-making, promote non-discrimination and equality, engage in accountability and the rule of law for all, and encourage transparency and access to information' (European Commission 2021, p. 28). These requests demand a solid observance of the EU's Treaties. Sakwa warns that by exporting 'democratic institutions', there is no equivalent to barter to win the attention of the Taliban (cfr. Sakwa 2018). This implies that the EU's governance is unable to influence the social sphere.

IV.3. Opportunities within the social space

Settling for what is politically expedient and perhaps the only viable solution (Freeman 2002, p. 539; Thier and Chopra 2002) might be an option. Theorists ask what it is that makes violent groups, the Taliban, willing to fight to the death, which is a distinct aspect of their behaviour (cfr. Sen 2007, p. 2-3). Practice theorists insist that the 'possibility of violence' diminishes if a set of diplomatic actions is arranged (Pouliot 2008, p. 280). Practice theory recognises the value of the micro-level dynamics of social relations as a context in which diplomacy may flourish. Theorists appear to suggest that the change of tack might involve attempting to interact more closely with the group's extremists via an intensified dialogue (Sen 2007, p. 83; Alderdice 2021). There are lessons to learn from the sense of guilt of the EU about imposing the 'nation-building' concept on Afghanistan (European Parliament 2021, 2). In particular, the opening up of different channels for interaction might represent a change of course. Soft diplomacy (avoiding meddling with the country's own rights) leads to productive developments. As long as diplomacy remains the goal in mutual dealings, practice theorists claim that one must conclude that the search for peace is alive and well (Pouliot 2008, p. 280). Within the European Union's sphere, there were calls by a group of European parliamentarians that were included in a motion to search for alternative interactions (European Parliament 2021). These calls were expression of social dynamics. Observing that 'it is up to the Afghan people...to solve their problems' (p. 7), the parliamentarians proposed a 'multilateral forum for dialogue' (p. 9), as an open arena that was designed to give a voice to the inhabitants of the country. The parliamentarians stressed that the forum would 'signal the beginning of a system founded on self-determination', and would be based on the 'responsibilities of states towards their citizens and to each other' (p. 9). These calls were recommended within the motion for a resolution that was presented to the EU's institutions. The request for a multilateral forum was a radical proposal regarding the involvement of the local society and the relevance attributed to 'social relations' as a means of achieving peace. The social interaction provoked by the European Parliament contributed to stress the notion that opportunities exist in the 'social space' and that practices within that sphere were called upon as the means and dynamics where diplomacy grows. These developments indicate that the EU's governance practices imbued with power conflicted with the social demands emerging from the European Parliament, generating new dynamics.

IV.4. Assessing the complex effects pointing in opposite directions

'Afghanistan after August 2021' reveals diverse processes that the practice approach exposes concerning the EU's governance when confronting the social context of

Afghanistan under the Taliban. The unwavering compliance with the EU's Treaties is the exhibition of the power dynamics that the practices of EU's governance generated with its established guidelines. These comprised: applying all human rights for all, access to decision-making, inclusive participation, and all of the other requests that the Taliban are asked to understand, and observe, despite their history and social organization. This EU strategy opts for submission to the formal rules. Simultaneously, by focusing on the country's social aspects, the power dynamics engendered by the EU's governance practices generated other effects that were socially determined. These were rooted in the belief that the local social context offered an environment to investigate. The actor, the European Parliament with the parliamentarians and their motion, in this context materialised from the dialectic developed there, via exchanging views on more fruitful interactions and conciliation. This other strategy trusted engaging with the local communities working towards peace. It supported a common and communal discourse, attempting to overcome past contradictions, and attempting to make solidarity resolutions more attainable. These effects veered less towards applying rigid rules or principles, instead turning towards 'exploring the social space' for reconciliation. The contrasting effects deriving from the EU's governance's practices infused with power emerged as a result of the impact of the social interactions on the practices of the EU's governance.

V. MICRO COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

V.1. Practices of EU's governance concerning China's BRI, the Belt and Road Initiative, were debated within the EU in early 2019. This illustrative case involves two micro communities of practice, one in Brussels and the other in Rome, both focused on the EU and China, that the practice approach investigates. It builds on the approach's idea that a group of individuals, linked by mutual engagement and working together on the same tasks, forms a micro-community of practice (Graeger 2016, 490). It considers that, although the partakers in the community develop mutual interactions, their operating together may lead to homogeneity as well as heterogeneity (ibid). In fact, by executing common tasks, the mutual engagement of their practices does not lead to the fusion of their identities (Wenger 1998, 76). These matters, that the approach elucidates, describe the 'social space', in both micro communities examining the EU's agenda as extended to embrace China's BRI.

The micro community in Brussels is the existing community of practice engaged in outlining the EU's policy towards China (cfr Bicchi 2016). It is made by a number of actors, the diplomats of the Union, members of the Commission, and the persons involved in the EU External Action. It is a micro community because it includes a limited number of individuals. It gives inputs to the EU's stance on China and the BRI, and hence it is significant for policy-making. The practice methodology leads us to understand that the social dynamics and practices, within this group, are the represented by the exchanges among the officials and diplomats dealing with the EU's policy. As for the practice approach, agreeing that these people have engaged with the community spirit (cfr Adler-Nissen 2016), they are accepted as having provided contributions to the ensuing political developments. They communicated information to each other about the EU's possible positions on Beijing's policy (Interview A). They contributed their own resources of knowledge and a political assessment of Beijing interaction with Europe, and *vice versa*.

The micro community of practice in Rome, operating at the citizens' level, debated the pros and cons related to an open EU policy on China, and its consequences. This MCP is taken as representing a (very limited though acceptable) share of citizens of a EU state, conveying their views. Interviewed by this author in autumn 2018, this MCP is unrelated to political parties, or ethical or religious groups. The reactions of the individuals there within are important since they concern the EU's governance. As for the practice approach, thinking in 'situationist terms', large-scale social phenomena (e.g. Euroscepticism or Europhilism) materialize via the everyday connections between people (exchange of ideas) in micro-social situations (that is, in groups of individuals) (Adler-Nissen 2016, p. 99).

In terms of actors within the MCP in Rome, the partakers of this community were private citizens: some had some kind of relations with China, members of the public involved in business, persons who had previously held a diplomatic position in Beijing, and also individuals with a role in international organisations. There were Eurosceptics as well as Europhiles, yet persons interested in foreign policy. Regarding their contribution and significance for policy-making, they provided resources bringing in their own experience, alerting to risks, and explaining possible gains, advising on the fusion of foreign entrepreneurs, and criticising the EU's resistance to fusion. They provided resources by practicing political conversation in this context of China networking more closely, and implications concerning European foreign policy.³

As for the approach, dealing with practices, these two group-actors generate inputs to the EU's governance. 'Practice is outside of discourse, but "weaves together the discursive and material worlds" (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 8) engaging in interplay (Neumann 2002, 651)' (Graeger 2016, 481). Stories and narratives socially construct a reality that can be measured empirically (Shanahan et al., 2017). Attention to the working of these communities exposed two opposing processes. The congregation in Brussels highlighted a strategy aimed at implementing a robust approach, discounting China from an inner circle of policy integration. Conversely, the assembly in Rome revealed the dynamism of recapturing Beijing within the sphere of attention to differences and so, by encouraging incorporating China into the wider international community, promoted inclusive cooperation.

V.2. Exclusionary tendencies of fragmentation

In March 2019, in Brussels, self-protective mechanisms were employed in writing reports that were debated in order to shape the official declarations, ready to become policy (Interview A). The micro community engaged in drawing such a policy symbolised the EU's attitude on China and the BRI. As for the practice approach, when people (the EU officials) gather together to discuss how a policy would be drafted regarding an actor (China), these people are involved in social dynamics through their exchange of practices and opinions. Practices were these officials' judgments, in general terms supporting closer interactions as well as others refusing stricter relations (Interview A). As it emerged (Interview B), the EU was bold in calling China 'a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance' (European Commission 2019, p. 1). For the first time, the EU addressed Beijing as a competing challenger by encouraging approaches that differed from those of the European Union (Interview C). The strategic outlook arranged by the EU was severe

and punitive in facing China. The EU supported a screening framework that was adopted by the majority of member states. It served to safeguard their economies from the foreign direct investment, when such operations were judged unfavourable to their economy. Such action had a clear reference to Beijing (Interview B). The EU's decision was presented as being firmly anchored to security and public order (European Parliament 2019). The same strategic outlook declared that the EU needed to effect a 'further policy shift' (European Commission 2019). This meant the recovering of a process aimed at adopting a more realistic and assertive approach concerning the EU's engagement with China (Interview C) It indicated the support of exclusionary tendencies towards fragmentation.

V.3. Inclusionary trends towards integration

Various inputs emerged from the indications suggested in the community of practice in Rome regarding the EU's governance's questioning of China's policy that this author's attendance at the gathering has noticed. The invitation to the EU to consider a Chinese-style market economy, with greater pragmatism and concreteness, was a strong solicitation that was encouraged there. The proposal that efforts should be made to identify and explain what was needed in order to integrate China into the wider world economy was a further contribution that arose within the social environment of the micro-community. This course of practices implied addressing the 'missing link' within a possible policy on China's BRI.⁴ Calls for coherence, cohesion, and attention to differences describe the opinion that new space in the European foreign policy was to be accredited to Beijing. These informal processes prove that substance was proposed to the EU's governance. They reminded the EU of the necessity to accept China as a partner with whom to deepen cooperation, and provide inclusionary trends towards integration.

V.4. Assessing the complex effects pointing in opposite directions

Attention to the micro communities of practice at work facilitated a focus on the informal social processes. The EU's official documents do not necessarily reveal the tone behind the creation of the foreign policy and EU's governance, but the interviews and consultations do help. Inputs concerning how the EU was asked by the social group (Rome) to behave in materialising its relations with Beijing are political components that are brought to light. In the MCP in Brussels, as supported by the interviews, the outlining of the EU's image as doubtful regarding 'sharing with Beijing' and inclined to refuse openness towards China contrasts with the unlocking of the informal social processes that the practice methodology exposed by focusing on the MCP in Rome. The latter's disposition to act leads to a EU's governance that seeks a new direction towards a common political construction with China. The contrasting outcomes of fragmentation and integration, both of which illuminate the back-staging to influence foreign policy, are the product of the practice perspective's releasing of the informal social processes that constitute the EU's governance.

VI. CONCLUSION

VI.1. This paper was led by the purpose of exploring the European Union's governance through the lens of practices, at the same time showing the working of the practice approach through emphasizing the structuring effects of the less formal side

of policy-making. Its objective was concerned with the generative power of practices in the making of the politics of EU's governance in relation to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. It argued that, though the EU's governance (whether global, regional or local) is characterised and supported by an experienced, well-constructed body of institutions, when the official guidelines appear to be poor at dealing with demanding field-situations, EU officials are tempted to test solutions. This process creates a myriad of practices that are important in allowing the continuation of the political activity. We explored the practice methodology leading to the dynamics that are infused with power, and retrieved the contrasting effects of the practices when are confronted by the social interactions. To explain this generative process, we examined practices that form part of the EU's governance, using illustrative cases. They draw support from broader analyses that were earlier elaborated by this author concerning this approach's explanatory capability of the EU's governance's practices. They represent contemporary affairs' practices of different issue/areas that are inherent in the EU's governance: power politics and Covid-19, the EU in Afghanistan after August 2021, and the Micro Communities of Practice and the EU's foreign policy on China's BRI.

The paper has dealt with the question of what one means when speaking about EU's governance, and practices within the EU's governance. And it found that, beyond the normative explanations, the EU's governance is defined by how power is exercised by and within the European Union. It explained that practices within the EU's governance are that system of activities put into action by the EU that may lead to opposed dynamics when impacted on social processes. It addressed the issue of the value of the practice methodology with regard to the observation of the EU's governance by suggesting that the play of inclusion and exclusion configures the space where politics and power enter the political frame. Drawing together the findings of the research, we stress the main conclusions that emerged from the consideration of the illustrative cases: 'the power dynamics confronting the social dialectic'.

VI.2. The power dynamics confronting the social dialectic

The circumstances of the EU's governance's practices, infused with power, that lead in contrasting directions when dealing with social interaction, have been discussed in depth within the investigation. We showed how divisive power politics created versus shared communal strategies, when discussing Covid-19. It was the social exchanges during the negotiations that engendered the discrepancies among the proposed solutions. The practices that aimed at blocking the consultations were fed by contentious politics, whereas the unity of the European Parliament accredited trust to the distribution of the pandemic costs. The common position of parliamentarians within the EP advancing 'social Europe' in support of burden sharing emerged as 'social dynamics'. We interpreted the European Parliament's unanimity as a social process.

Concerning Afghanistan, we showed the compliance with the EU's institutional Treaties vs. the choice of exploring the local social space. Two diverse processes originated from the power dynamics. The formal, influential normative EU contrasted with the proposal of the European Parliament, promoting the social Europe in terms of governance. The dynamics socially determined by the collective support of the EP

encouraged a EU capable of dealing with the complexities ingrained in the local communities. We understood the European Parliament with its occupants as a complex bridging institutional relations and social interactions. Our interpretation allowed the perception of the social connection between the practices permeated with power of the EU's governance and the practices, imbued with the violence that emerged from the Afghan context of a society controlled by the Taliban.

Within the case of the micro communities of practice and EU's policy on China and the BRI, the support of the interviewed officials from the Brussels institutions helped to show the proliferation of exclusionary trends in Brussels vis-à-vis China. The social dialectic of those involved in providing inputs to EU's foreign policy has not favoured an inclusionary tendency. The protagonism of society in the MCP in Rome manifested for more inclusive governance. Hence, the methodological framework revealed its 'functioning' by emphasizing the configuring effects of the less formal side of policy-making. By directing the focus to the power dynamics of one process and its opposite while confronting the social interactions, this paper has shown the contribution of the practice approach to the unpacking of the informal practices that are inherent within the EU's governance.

We hope that this analytical exercise may encourage students of EU studies, or of other regional groupings, to explore further the practice approach's potential. For example, they might apply it to 'migrants crossing the Mediterranean', or moving from 'Myanmar to Indonesia', and observe how the approach deals with the opposing effects ingrained in the governance's power dynamics of the EU, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN), or another regional group when encroaching on the social interactions of those involved, and, thus, disprove or confirm this methodology's capability for providing analytical keys.

NOTES

¹ How the argument developed during the negotiations can be seen in Marchi (2022a).

² More can be searched regarding MEP Guetta's intervention at the European Parliament Plenary of 16-17 April 2020.

³ The source is provided by this author's attendance at the assembly of the MCP.

⁴ This was the expression used by an intervening actor within the micro-community of practice.

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