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Introduction: The Role of the European Union as a Global Player in Environmental Governance

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Introduction

For the last 40 years the environment has been on the agenda at an international level, the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm being the first major conference on environmental issues. Principle 24 in the Declaration of that Conference set out that protection and improvement of the environment should be “handled in a cooperative spirit by all countries, big and small ... through multilateral or bilateral agreements or other appropriate means” (United Nations, undated). Subsequent conferences including the 1992 UN Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg, increasingly brought environmental concerns to wider public attention. Those conferences were “highly influential in developing a ‘global view’ of our planet’s future”, resulting in thousands of initiatives taken locally, nationally or globally, and across a range of environmental challenges (Mebratu, 1988, p. 494). One such environmental concern has been climate change, with UN Climate Change Conferences taking place since 1979.

While the first conference in Rio was attended mainly by scientists, attendance at subsequent conferences included representatives of environmental ministries from countries across the globe, together with representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and have seen shifting alliances between nation states with their own interests and negotiating positions (see for example Gupta, 2010, p. 643; Timmons Roberts, 2011, p. 779). In respect of international environmental politics there has, according to Daniel Keleman and David Vogel been a “dramatic and systematic shift from US to EU leadership since the early 1990s” (2010, p. 431), in part due to the growing influence of environmental groups within the European Union which resulted in some of the world’s strictest and ambitious environmental regulations, and a decline in the influence of such groups in the US where fewer domestic regulations were adopted (p. 432).

Within the context of international conferences and negotiations, John Vogler and Hannes Stephan (2007) indicate that the EU has developed policy competencies across a range of environmental areas and has signed more than 60 multilateral environmental agreements (p. 394). In recognising the international nature of many environmental issues, the EU Europa Website (undated) notes that the EU has some of the highest environmental standards in the world with priorities in the areas of combating climate change, preserving biodiversity, reducing the health impacts of pollution, and the responsible use of natural resources.

It is the governance role of the EU - setting policies and standards, taking action to protect and manage the environment, and pushing forward measures at a regional level which have gone on to have a global impact - which forms the basis of this special issue. However, International environmental regimes and EU environmental instruments do not exist in isolation (see Oberthür and Gehring, 2006, p. 1). Many environmental problems are transboundary in nature. In the example of greenhouse gases, air currents move pollutants from one area to another. In the case of marine pollution (for example, by oil, debris, plastics), pollutants can spread over large distances as a result of wind and tidal action. Similarly, pollutants entering a river in one country will travel downstream and cause harm to the river ecosystems in any other country through which it flows, while deforestation can lead to loss of biodiversity, soil erosion and, potentially, to flooding

during heavy rains. This can again have a downstream and cross-border impact depending on location. By not limiting the special edition to a single environment or issue, the objective was to bring together articles in areas of environmental research that might not normally be considered together, and for those articles to be disseminated to a wider audience than may be normal for these types of articles.

The articles in this special issue are a series of new papers by authors from institutions across Europe, and ranging from Doctoral Candidates to Professors. They examine the role played by the EU in international environmental negotiations, looking at the role of the EU in climate change negotiations at the Copenhagen and Cancun Conferences (Groen, Niemann and Oberthür), at climate change negotiations post-Kyoto (Fernandez-Martin) and at the role of the Rotating Presidency of the EU (Delreux). They also examine EU energy policy (Dupont and Oberthür), and the role played by the EU in developing a marine policy and in the protection of the marine environment from pollution (Carpenter).

Lisanne Groen, Arne Niemann and Sebastian Oberthür, in examining whether the EU is a global leader in climate change negotiations, compare how much of a leadership role the EU was able to play at two conferences, Copenhagen in 2009 and Cancun in 2010. They note that the EU entered the Copenhagen negotiations with ambitious goals and expectations, for example seeking a legally binding agreement on greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) for the period post-2012 after the expiry of the 1999 Kyoto Protocol (United Nations, 1998), but facing many internal political debates and conflicts on issues to be negotiated at that Conference. The unwillingness of both developed and developing countries to make binding commitments at Copenhagen resulted, they suggest, in the marginalisation of the EU and its negotiators. In contrast, at the 2010 Cancun negotiations, the EU arrived with much more limited goals and advocated a set of concrete decisions to implement various elements of the Copenhagen Accord. The EU also established itself in a bridge-building role between different blocs of countries, actively building coalitions based on its position on each issue. The authors of this article conclude that, although divisions between Member States remained on the issues on the negotiation agenda for Cancun, the EU achieved many of its less ambitious but more realistic goals through its coalition - and bridge-building activities, resulting in a far more positive outcome at that Conference.

Rosa Maria Fernandez-Martin also examines the EU role in climate change negotiations, taking the Kyoto Protocol as the starting point of her paper. She examines how the EU has integrated climate change and environmental issues into its decision making processes, and has been a front runner in taking action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions within its own territory. She notes that the EU simultaneously had to deal with enlargement from 15 to 27 Member States (some of those new states being transition economies) while taking actions to implement its commitments under the Kyoto with impacts across a range of policy areas. In this paper the failure of the EU in its leadership role at Copenhagen is again identified as stemming from a lack of consensus between Member States, while the issue of the Rotating Presidency (considered by Tom Delreux in this Special Issue) is also raised. However, that lack of leadership at Copenhagen has, Fernandez-Martin suggests, been mitigated by the EU finding common positions and establishing internal targets on emissions reduction. With this the EU moved towards a low carbon economy and has assumed a leadership by example role.

Tom Delreux takes a more detailed look at the EU internal negotiation mechanisms on international environmental issues, contrasting the role of the Rotating Presidency of the Council of Ministers, post Lisbon Treaty (Official Journal, 2007), with the role of the European Commission at two negotiation sessions – on biodiversity at Nagoya (October 2010) and on climate change in Cancun (December 2010) respectively. He highlights a particular difficulty of EU representation at such negotiations – that is who speaks for the EU – the Presidency or the Commission. Delreux provides a detailed examination of how the EU was represented at Nagoya and Cancun in 2010, and on the practical arrangements made at those conferences for the EU's voice to be heard. He concludes that while the rotating Presidency had maintained its role in the biodiversity negotiations, the Commission had gained the stronger role in the climate change negotiations at Cancun (and subsequently at Durban, 2011), noting that it is the substance and impact of international negotiations which should be the main focus, not who represents the EU in those negotiations.

Claire Dupont and Sebastian Oberthür, in their paper on climate policy integration (CPI) and the EU energy sector, have drawn on a broad raft of literature to develop a conceptual and analytical framework for how energy policy in general, and renewable energy (RE) policy in particular, have developed in light of the EU's climate change commitments in post-Lisbon Europe. While noting that energy policy competences remain at the Member State level, Dupont and Oberthür highlight how those competences have slowly shifted to the European level, with the Commission pushing for energy policy to be developed at the EU level. They contrast the RE policy of the EU which seeks to increase the use of renewable energy sources as one way of achieving its target for reducing GHG emissions by 2020, with the need to maintain secure gas supplies (an issue of energy security), at least until such time as RE developments can fill the gap in EU energy requirements. This paper therefore offers a new framework for the empirical study of CPI, taking account of the EU's long term climate policy objectives and requirements to 2050, and looking at that policy within theories of European integration.

In the final paper in this Special Issue, Angela Carpenter examines the development of a European Integrated Maritime Policy (IMP) which will enable it to benefit from a thriving maritime economy from multiple uses of its regional seas (fisheries, transport, tourism for example), while also protecting the marine environment and ecosystems. The development of the IMP identified the need to integrate different EU policy areas to achieve those economic and environmental outcomes, and to take a sustainable development (SD) approach to managing the marine environment. Carpenter therefore examines the development of an EU definition of SD which goes far beyond those originally developed at the end of the 1980s. Subsequently, her article examines how the EU has moved away from a reliance on international conventions and regimes to protect the marine environment towards introducing its own much stricter standards and regulations, providing the example of EU measures to protect its maritime regions from accidental oil pollution from tanker accidents. In that example, Carpenter identifies that those stricter EU standards were quickly adopted at a global level, illustrating that the EU does play a leadership role in promoting environmental policies that are implemented far beyond its Member States' territorial (or in this case) maritime boundaries.

The authors in this Special Issue underscore the importance of continued action by the EU to protect the environment and the role the EU can play in setting regional standards that have a global impact. The EU is a signatory or contracting party to many and varied international conventions protecting the land, the air and the seas, globally through UN multilateral agreements, regionally and also sub-regionally (for example through agreements on its regional seas). Those agreements include the areas of biodiversity, climate change, protection of the ozone layer, desertification, chemical and waste management, transboundary water and air pollution, and marine and river protection (European Commission, 2012). Irrespective of who speaks for the EU at negotiations, it is vital that it goes to them with achievable, realistic goals, and that it acts to bridge gaps between the many different countries attending those negotiations, each with their own national agendas and requirements. The papers in this Special Issue illustrate only a very small portion of the research – theoretical and empirical – that is taking place on environmental issues but it is hoped that they can highlight the significance of such research to a board audience, through the policy of the JCER to promote cross-disciplinary research in the field of contemporary European Studies.

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