**What’s the story? The European Union, ‘Model Europe’ and its application in Central America – the case of Honduras**

1. Introduction

The European Union has a long tradition of promoting its ‘model’ of regional integration throughout the rest of the world as a way of addressing a wide range of challenges, from economic development to resolving conflicts, from fighting corruption to promoting the rights of minority groups. Doing so has been a key pillar of its ‘normative power’ (Manners, 2002) and has become an essential part of the way the European Union sees itself and its role in the world.

One of the regions where this model has found most frequent application is in Central America. Historically a region full of conflict and instability, with close historic and economic ties to Europe and with a long history of – and interest in - regional integration, the region would seem to be the ideal ground to implement ‘model Europe’.

Yet, despite the EU’s undoubtedly important role in Central America, when it helped broker the peace deals that brought the Central American conflicts of the 1970s and 80s to an end, the current panorama in Central America is far from promising. This is particularly true for the three ‘Northern Triangle’ states of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala which are amongst the most violent countries on earth, as well as amongst its poorest and most corrupt. This despite the fact that the European Union, as well as a host of other donors, have invested heavily in this region in order to make its states viable, its economy prosperous and its citizens secure. In part thanks to considerable effort on the part of the EU, the region also boasts a Central American Integration System (SICA) with a broad political agenda, ranging from a fully-fledged single market to a regional security strategy.

The question this article seeks to answer, then, is why the considerable political and financial investment on the part of the European Union, particularly over the last 20 years, has not had the desired impact? It will be asked whether this failure to achieve success is as a result of the particularities of Central America and its Northern Triangle or whether this lack of success is due to more profound and strategic flaws of the ‘EU model’.

The central argument to be put forward is that the European Union’s model is no longer an adequate narrative to influence policy and development in a form desired by the EU. As the article will show, the lack of ‘traction’ of the EU model is due to a number of interdependent factors emanating both from the EU itself as well as Central America. With these factors in mind, the article will argue that there is an urgent need for the EU to reframe the narrative it wants to tell which is both consistent whilst being able to take account of particular local circumstances.

1. The EU narrative: Model Europe

The argument that this article is seeking to advance – that the EU urgently needs a new narrative through which to frame its actions internationally - in many ways shows the depth of the current EU crisis since the organization has, historically, had a very consistent and coherent narrative through which it has defined itself, both internally and externally, thee term here being defined as ‘a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2012: 3).

Duchêne (1972) defined the EU as a ‘civilian power’ in that its projections onto the world stage are primarily focused on international trade and political, rather than military, engagement. Since then, there has been a rich debate about how the international role of the European Union has evolved and, crucially, how the EU’s *own* perception of its role matches up to both the perception others have of her as well as its actions.

Within this debate, the work of Manners (2002) is seminal. He classifies the European Union as a ‘normative power’ with the ability to ‘redefine what *can* be normal in international relations’ (*ibid*: 253, emphasis in original). Whilst the extent to which the EU has lived up to being such a normative power is disputed, as will be discussed below, there is no doubt that the organization itself was, and continues to be, very happy to embrace and promote the image of being normative and, therefore, different (see, for instance, Nugent, 2010).

Its Common Foreign and Security Policy - conceived in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War -, its development policy, the European Neighborhood policy, as well as many others, are full of references to its normative role, the importance of the promotion of Human Rights, the promotion of democracy, open markets etc. (see Whitman, 2011, for an overview). Critically, the period after the end of the Cold War was also marked by a considerable expansion of EU involvement across the world. From the 1990s onwards, the number of EU actions and missions grew substantially, going well beyond its immediate neighborhoods. Mix (2013) counted no fewer than 16 EU missions under its common security and defence policy alone.

The growing number of these missions, as well as the fact that they were underpinned by the kind of language and objectives referred to above (democracy, Human Rights, open markets etc **Have these been mentioned before?**.) led to the coining of the term ‘Model Europe’ to describe what the EU was doing internationally and why it was doing it (Börzel & Risse, 2009a, 2009b). This model serves to reaffirm the EU’s self-defined role as ‘the promoter of universal values on a global scale’ (Scheipers and Sicurelly 2007: 451). At times, the EU has, in fact, been very open about its intentions (and demands) that other regions replicate its integration experience. For instance, in 2004, in relation to MERCOSUR, the European Commission (2004: 7) stated bluntly that ‘[g]iven that the EU has already shown the route to follow, we expect (and request) that the process is substantially accelerated in Mercosur.’

Bearing in mind the importance of this narrative, it should not be a surprise that there has been a long-lasting debate about the *effectiveness* of ‘Model Europe’ in the literature (Diez 2005; Youngs 2004; Tocci 2007, 2008). Within this debate, it has virtually been seen as a given that the European Union itself falls short of the model it presents to the outside world. Yet, there is disagreement over the question whether shortfalls in the EU’s performance in projecting ‘model Europe’ are a problem of the legitimacy of the organization or one of practical capabilities bearing in mind the special nature of the EU as an organization and its necessity to engage with traditional, sovereign states.

Nicolaïdis & Howse (2002) argue that ‘model Europe’ represents an ideal to be aspired to and not something that has to be, or indeed can be, attained at all times and in all places. Interpreting the EU model as aspirational and idealistic – as something the EU *would like to be* and which it *would like to export* – has been welcomed by some. First of all, it is a much more realistic reflection of what the EU is and can be as it engages across the world with other regions and sovereign states. As one senior EU diplomat from a mission in South America put it: ‘We have to [be realistic and admit that] our influence outside Brussels is quite limited’ (Interview EU Diplomat Brazil, 2013). In simple terms, the European Union, as an organization, can only do what its member states *and* the states it engages with allow it to do. As such, inevitably, model Europe is something aspirational rather than actual.

Such conceptualization also has the advantage, as Diez (2005: 623) puts it, that the EU avoids ‘missionary zeal’, which could often cause problems when applied to other regions, as Lehmann (2013) has shown. This argument has frequently been made by EU diplomats interviewed for this research: ‘Model Europe’, from this point of view, serves as a *guide* rather than a prescription. Amongst the many reasons for such an approach is the fact that any idea of the EU prescribing national governments how to do anything would simply result in those governments ‘shutting the door on us’ (Interview EU Diplomat Venezuela, 2014). The idea of model Europe being an aspiration, then, is often borne out by the experience of EU diplomats on the ground, who are, after all, charged with executing EU foreign policy.

Yet, the idea of seeing the EU model as an aspirational ideal rather than a definitive objective also creates significant problems. In such an approach, how can the EU be made accountable for its actions in any given region? How can progress towards the achievement of a particular strategic goal be judged if one always has the ‘excuse’ ready that what is being expressed are merely aspirations rather than objectives against which to be judged? This fact has led some authors to argue that the EU is actually quite a traditional foreign policy actor (Zelden, 2010). In fact, Cooley (2013) has argued that the EU is actually very conservative rather than normative or transformative in its foreign policy. It does what it can in pursuit of its interests and, to do so, has to make compromises, albeit uncomfortable ones at times.

At the same time, the European Union has also faced criticism from the opposite side of that argument: Despite many EU actors believing that the EU is, in fact, being flexible in applying its model, others have accused the EU of being too inflexible in pursuit of its objectives, of not taking account of the particularities of each case as it tries to implement its model in various places across the world. Iniesta (2013) has made this argument in respect of the EU’s actions in Africa’s Great Lake region, whilst, in a more general critique, Börzel, Pamuk and Stahn (2008) questioned the EU’s ‘one size fits all’ approach to its foreign- and development policy. It is also noticeable that such criticism is not confined to the academy. It has been a recurring theme to accuse the EU of wanting to ‘tick boxes in Brussels’ rather than engaging with, and responding to, the particular conditions encountered on the ground in any given particular region (Interview, Representative of the World Food Program Ecuador, 2014).

The EU, then, has faced apparently contradictory criticisms and pressures as it acts across the world: Accused by some of lacking consistency, it is criticized by others of being too inflexible and unable to respond adequately to the local conditions – the local particularities – it faces.

For all this criticism, the historic evaluation of the EU’s performance as an international actor is still broadly positive. As Lehmann (2012) commented upon the EU receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, there is no doubt that the organization *stood* for something and that, on the whole, it achieved the objectives that it set for itself during its history, turning Europe into the most peaceful region on earth in the process (UCDP, 2008). The reason for this is the fact that the European Union historically, managed to balance its strategic narrative with certain flexibility. It managed to accommodate within this narrative the multiple differences that exist both within the organization and the different perspectives of its partners across the world (Geyer, 2003). In engaging with the outside world, it had a positive story to tell about its own experiences and successes which, in turn, meant that the undoubted differences that existed across time and space internally and externally did not hamper the emergence and continued existence of an organization working coherently in pursuit of shared objectives.

Yet, as Lehmann (2012) also points out, the EU is undoubtedly facing a series of contemporary challenges which, at best, threaten these successes and, at worst, undermine the very basis of its existence and certainly the sustainability of its successes (see also Kramer, 2012). These challenges are both internal and external in nature, though the two categories overlap significantly

1. The European Union’s contemporary crisis: a breakdown of narrative?

**Make reference to the crisis as a breakdown of narrative, not evaluation. Sympthons of crisis**

There is almost universal agreement that the European Union is passing through a profound crisis, agreement which extends to the higher echelons of the organization. In an interview with the author one senior EU diplomat argued that the EU is suffering a deeply problematic ‘lack of leadership’ whilst another went as far as to say that the current state of the EU is symptomatic of a much broader ‘crisis of regionalism’ (Interviews, EU Diplomats Brazil, 2014, 2013).

An enormous amount of literature has emerged on this crisis and it is beyond the scope of this article to go into this in great detail (see, for instance, Lehmann 2015; Copesy & Houghton, 2012). Whilst the main focus of this literature has been the EU’s economic (or so-called ‘sovereign debt’) crisis there has been some acknowledgement that, in many ways, this economic crisis is the *result* of a much deeper and more *political* crisis. Schmitter (2012), for instance, has lamented the breakdown of solidarity between EU member states as one of the core principles upon which the European integration process has historically been based. Others, such as Bittner (2010), have argued that the EU has lost the ability to take strategic decisions about what he called ‘big things’ that impact on the whole of the EU and its citizens, a view shared by many other commentators, and being reinforced by the organization’s response to the current refugee crisis playing out at its Southern and Eastern borders which has led some, both in the academic and the popular press, to wonder whether we are witnessing the end of the European idea and the return of a Europe of the nation states (Meier 2015; Münchau 2015a).

As a result of this crisis, the European Union has become more introvert and preoccupied with its own internal problems. The organization seems to be permanently in crisis mode and the crises that it is confronting are its *own*, not those of other regions or countries. Who would have thought, for instance, that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) would be called to help keep a European Union member state, in this case Greece, afloat? The fact that this is happening has had an undoubted impact on the confidence of the European Union as an organization. As a consequence, the organization has become almost reflexively reactive. The order of the day is to avoid the worst and buy time.

Both the Greek crisis and the refugee crisis serve as perfect examples of this trend. With regards to Greece, the only thing that has been achieved has been a continuous avoidance of what most in the EU still consider to be the worst case scenario of the country falling into default. Yet, strategically, very little has been done in the years that the crisis has now been ongoing. For instance, for all the pressure that Greece has been put under by its creditors, there has been little by way of strategic reform of the Greek political or economic system other than cuts in social provisions whilst the risk of a Euro exit is still very real (Münchau 2015b). Several economists are, to say the least, sceptical about the chances of success of the current bailout deal both as a way to stimulate economic growth in Greece or force reforms, pointing out that this deal does not differ all that substantially from previous bailout deals (Blyth 2013; Krugman 2012, 2015)

At European Union level, the crisis has exposed the failings of the original design of the European single currency, without leading, so far, to profound reforms of that design despite several calls to form some kind of European economic government (Böll *et al*., 2013). In fact, if anything, the Greece crisis has exposed the deepening divisions within the EU not just on Greece but the future of the whole integration process, divisions that run even through governments of individual member states, as in the case of Germany (Gathmann, 2015).

Equally, on the refugee crisis, the one thing missing from the whole debate about the EU’s response has been consensus. The arguments have centred on how many refugees ‘Europe’ can and should accept and how these should be distributed. Even on such basic issues, there has been no agreement with the result that every country is essentially doing its own thing, with Hungary even now building a border fence at one of its internal EU borders, with Croatia. Long-established EU rules – on freedom of movement or on the way refugees arriving in the EU should be treated – are being suspended or simply ignored. All the while there is a total absence of a strategic debate about, for instance, the attitude towards refugees within the EU or how the skills some of these refugees bring may be harnessed within a region facing serious demographic challenges (Kaelin, 2015).

**From here** As already discussed above, for much of its existence, the EU had a very compelling narrative to tell. It was the *embodiment* of the model it was trying to project abroad. Out of the ruins of the 2nd World War it managed to reconcile two historic enemies (France and Germany), helped in consolidating democratic political systems in all its member states and was one of the main drivers behind an almost unprecedented period of economic prosperity, turning Western Europe into the most successful single market of its kind in the world, and the most prosperous and peaceful region anywhere on earth (Nugent, 2010). In addition, the EU not only helped in controlling the tensions of the Cold War that manifested themselves so clearly in Europe, but, following the collapse of Communism, successfully integrated the vast majority of the former Communist states in Europe into the organization. In other words, the EU *lived* its narrative of the benefits of cooperation and integration, of open markets and democratic systems and could point to its success.

Yet, in this success also lie the seeds for some of the problems of today. In simple terms, the narrative that the EU promoted no longer serves for its own internal purposes and therefore is very hard to ‘sell’ to the wider world. With the end of the Cold War, the virtual impossibility of conflict between France and Germany and the integration of the former communist states of Eastern Europe, what was, and is, the European Union there *for*? What is its overarching project and *purpose* of the EU? What, in short, holds it all together?

Answering this question becomes all the more urgent since the *differences* inside the EU have increased exponentially since the accession of the new member states. With now 28 member states the *interests* that are being pursued within and through the European Union differ enormously, political and personal styles vary greatly and objectives are not easily reconciled. Everybody wanted to be in the EU and, on the whole, wants to stay in the EU but the reasons *why* differ greatly (O’Brennan 2006; Geyer & Rihani 2010). Without a new and unifying narrative such a situation can only lead to a lack of cohesion both at home and, as will be shown below, abroad.

Yet, during the 1990s and early 2000s at least the differing objectives and lack of unifying narrative could, at least apparently, be ignored due to the economic success of the EU.[[1]](#footnote-1) The crisis since 2008 has robbed the organization of this particular comfort blanket and has dramatically altered the way the organization is perceived even within Europe. As the EU’s own figures suggest, trust in the organization has declined significantly over the last few years and whereas the EU was historically often perceived as a benign organization which cared about the well-being of its citizens, it is now often seen as one which dictates policy to supposedly sovereign member states with scant regard for the well-being of the population (European Commission, 2013).

The overall impact of the scenario described above has been a self-perpetuating sense of drift within the organization. Unable to effectively address the problems it faces and buttressed by an ongoing economic crisis, the organization is being constantly undermined from within whilst seemingly being unable to stand up in defence of its own values, its own narratives. Hungary, in particular, has openly challenged the EU’s historic narrative by systematically encroaching on fundamental aspects of the EU’s own model internally, limiting the independence of the judiciary and the press whilst its Prime Minister openly advocates and works for the construction of an authoritarian state (Marton, 2014).

Such a scenario obviously does not go unnoticed abroad and it has clearly influenced how other actors in other regions perceive the – and think about – the European Union. The following comment from a senior Brazilian diplomat with responsibility for regional cooperation in South America is representative of many heard by the author during the course of this research: ‘I think the European Union has overreached itself. What they did after the 2nd World War […]we admire them for it but [maybe] it has [run its course]’ (Interview Brazilian Diplomat, 2013).

This same diplomat, during a different occasion, actually explicitly rejected the validity and applicability of the ‘European Model’ not just in South America but more broadly and argued that, perhaps, the EU ‘should look at [other] models of cooperation’, what he called ‘pragmatic regionalism’, that is, limited cooperation between interested parties on specific issues of particular common interest (Interview Brazilian Diplomat, 2014). This ‘South American’ model of regionalism is obviously not *just* a response to the EU crisis. Rather, as Malamud (2012) and Gardini (2013) point out, it also reflects new realities in South America where, as a general rule, ‘regionalism is out, sovereignty back in’. At the same time, the ‘alphabet soup’ of regional organizations in Latin America leaves relatively little choice but to approach regional cooperation in a piecemeal fashion (Glickhouse, 2012). Finally, just like in Europe, the increasingly grave economic and political crises that are gripping some South American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela, for instance) have led to an inward turn, governments being more concerned with their domestic situation (and political survival) than regional schemes (see, for instance, Stünkel, 2014).

For all these particular circumstances, it is still instructive to see that the EU model was quite explicitly rejected by a senior Brazilian diplomat who works in that field of regionalism. According to Cameron (2010), such a view will be a lot more common as the EU crisis unfolds. ‘Model Europe’ seems to have lost its ‘shine’.

Yet, whilst it would seem obvious that any narrative advanced by an organization or actor quite so obviously in crisis as the European Union is at the moment would lose some of its attractiveness, I would argue that the EU model has not so much lost its attractiveness as essentially been abandoned by the organization itself. Not only that, but there seems to be no idea at the top of the organization as to how to deal with the situation or indeed recognize the seriousness of the situation. Just as one example, one ambassador of an EU member state which, at the time, was holding the rotating presidency of the Council of Ministers, argued at an event in which the author participated that the European Union should ‘first solve [its] crisis and then think about a new [narrative]’ (Personal Communication with senior diplomat from an EU member state, 2012).

Yet, as has been shown by the incoherent response to its own internal crises, it is not possible to do one without the other. If there is no broader narrative to hold the organization together and guide its actions, it is not possible to act effectively to resolve any given crisis. The result is an organization internally divided, incoherent and one which, therefore, will not be able to exercise serious influence globally, as the case of Central America will now demonstrate.

1. The EU in Central America: different scenario, same breakdown

**Work in narrative into this section**

As stated in the introduction, Central America has a special place in the history of the European Union. It is here that the EU embarked on one of its first major foreign policy initiatives, playing a key role in bringing about a comprehensive peace deal which brought to an end the various civil- and interstate wars that shook the region during, in particular, the 1970s and 80s (European Commission, 2003).

As Abrahamson (2008) has shown, it was precisely this success which was crucial in helping the European Union define its foreign policy role as that of a model for other regions to follow, as well as being a key promoter of democracy, Human Rights and regionalism to ensure peace and prosperity in regions previously torn apart by conflict.

Yet, success in ending the conflicts has not translated into an ability to construct viable, prosperous and secure states for the vast majority of the population. Amongst the key problems being faced are: extreme poverty which, in turn, has fueled a continuous flight of human capital, especially to the United States; extreme levels of criminal violence which has made Central America the most violent region on earth outside warzones; the corrosive influence of the international drugs trade, which has in Central America one of its main international hubs; political instability as well as endemic levels of corruption (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

Within this context, Honduras occupies a ‘special’ place: For many years the most violent country on earth outside warzones, one of its former foreign minister estimates that ‘20% of all Hondurans’ live either legally or illegally in the United States (Interview former Honduran Foreign Minister, 2014). Economically one of the most unequal countries in the world, significant parts of its territory are controlled by street gangs and drug-traffickers, with the judicial and security system seemingly unable to do anything to alter this situation. Even some Hondurans consider the country to be a failed state (Quispe, 2012).

All of this, despite the fact that the EU, as well as a host of other donners, has invested heavily in the Central American Integration System (SICA) and Honduras itself precisely to make it viable, democratic and stable so that the state can offer its citizens a minimum of security and economic opportunity (European Commission, 2014). Just to give some idea of the scale of the investment made and the scale of the failure endured, taking together the two financial perspectives that began in 2007 and will end in 2020, the EU will have invested almost 500m euros in Honduras so as to ‘[s]upport national efforts to guarantee the universal application of the law and the protection of human rights, particularly focusing on the fight against corruption’ as well as ‘increasing citizen participation in policy and democratic processes, with a special focus on vulnerable groups’, amongst others (*ibid*). Here, then, we can see all the elements of classic ‘model Europe’.

However, between 2002 and 2012, and according to the EU’s own figures, the number of Honduran households in poverty has gone up from 44.2% to 46%; homicide rates increased from 54 per 100,000 people in 2001 to 86 in 2012 (European Commission, 2014) whilst the country came in a lowly 126th out of 175 in the Transparency International Corruption index pf 2014 (Transparency International, 2014). Quite apart from that, the country has been marked by severe political instability ever since the military coup against the democratically elected President Mannuel Zelaya in 2009, whilst many have highlighted the precarious Human Rights situation in the country (Frank, 2012).

There are obviously many reasons that explain the persistence of these problems, as Lehmann, Neto and Haddad (2014) have already pointed out. Nor is this problem confined to Honduras, with the rest of Central America equally struggling to create viable and secure societies (Burrell & Moodie, 2013). Yet, for the purposes of this article, I will focus on what the EU is or is not doing to explain what even it considers to be a challenging environment in which it has not made the progress it would like to have done. Here, narratives become hugely important once again and are linked to the EU’s broader problems already outlined above.

Let us look at the broader narrative first. With regards to Honduras, that narrative has not changed much at all over the last 20-25 years. In all the strategy papers and policies espoused and executed by the EU the references to the core elements of ‘Model Europe’ are plentiful. As shown above, there is talk about Human Rights, the need for broadening of economic opportunity for larger parts of the population, the focus on the importance of Central American regionalism, for instance in the form of the Central American common market, and a host of reform strategies in order to consolidate the democratic system, improve the efficiency of the justice system and increase public confidence in it, improve the performance of the security sector, give a greater voice to civil society etc. (European Commission 2003, 2007, 2010, 2014).

However, in practice, there is a significant disconnect between what the EU says in its strategies and what it does on the ground. For instance, whilst acknowledging that the consolidation of the democratic system was important in light of the military coup of 2009, one senior EU diplomat at the time based in Honduras argued in an interview with the author that the main objective of EU policy in the country was ‘stability’ (Interview EU Diplomat Honduras, 2014). This not only put this diplomat at odds with the strategy papers coming out of Brussels, but also with one of his colleagues in neighboring Guatemala who argued that ‘of course’ the priority for the EU in Central America was ‘to promote Human Rights and [democracy]’ (Interview EU Diplomat Guatemala, 2014).

Such differences across a single organization in terms of the overall objectives of policy make it extremely hard for any policy to have the desired impact. Yet, these differences only get amplified when the EU interacts with local actors in the field, with serious consequences for the chances of any policy actually being effective.

For instance, as briefly mentioned above, the EU has always put great emphasis on the engagement with – and of – civil society in decision-making processes and reform programs. Yet, in Honduras, civil society has been highly critical of the European Union, not simply because some of the organizations do not feel as involved and valued as they perhaps would like to be, but because some of the most important ones argue that the objectives the EU is pursuing, as well as the way they are being pursued, is wrong.

Let us take the much-touted reform of the justice system - one of the key priorities of the European Union (European Commission 2010, 2014) - as an example. One well-known Honduras analyst with close ties to some of the biggest Honduran Human Rights NGOs asked ‘why [members of the Honduran government] would be interested in reform [of the justice system]? They are the ones that benefit from the situation as it [stands]’. In other words, the corruption that marks the justice system, as well as the police and other public agencies, continues because the elites that run the state benefit from it. As the analysts put it still more bluntly: ‘Some of Honduras’ biggest drug traffickers sit in the government, so they [have no incentive] to change’ (Interview Honduras Analyst via skype, 2013).

Representatives of other civil society organizations put their criticisms slightly more diplomatically but still pull no punches. One chief executive of an association of NGOs working with disadvantaged children argued that the EU – by working closely with the Honduran government - was sustaining an illegitimate regime which would simply syphon off money to cement the current system. In fact, this particular executive argued that the government was quite deliberately staying out of the work done by his organization, essentially ‘making us responsible for work that [should be done by government]’ (Interview NGO Chief Executive Honduras, 2015).Another said that the focus on channeling funds through programs at national government level was, in many ways, pointless since in large parts of Honduras the government – the state – was not an effective presence and *would not be* an effective presence simply because it was so mistrusted by the population whose only real contact with the state often came in the form of violent exchanges between police, street gangs and/or drug traffickers that controlled many poor areas (Interview, Country Director of international NGO Honduras 2014; see also Pine, 2008). This being the case, the EU has no real influence to shape the development of these areas which, nevertheless, contain much of its ‘target audience’ in the sense that, in these areas, live most of the economically disadvantaged, those that distrust the justice system whilst being the most likely victims of violent crime (*ibid)*.

Yet, for the Honduran government – and therefore much of the Honduran elite – the key problem to be faced is quite different. For it, the key challenge is dealing with violence which is being perpetrated by particular groups (gangs) within particular areas. Such violence is largely linked to the international drugs trade which, in turn, fuels corruption. For instance, one senior Honduran diplomat suggested that ‘70% of all homicides in Honduras are linked to the drugs trade’ (Personal Communication senior Honduran diplomat 2014).Therefore, the problem is framed largely as a law-and-order issue, as opposed to a social one (Tabory, 2015). Since it is true that, oftentimes, violence is geographically concentrated in poor areas, it is also *not* framed by personal experience but rather something ‘abstract’ that is being transmitted through the media (Olson 2015; Pine 2008). The constant media references to violence, in turn, generate *fear* of violence, particularly amongst the middle classes with broad social and political consequences (Pine, 2008).

This, then, means that different groups in Honduras are defining problems in very different ways. Whilst, for one, preserving the status quo is key and problems are narrowly defined, for the other, the problems faced are the result of deep structural forces that require transformation. Equally, whilst for one, many of the problems are abstract, for the other the problems have a huge impact on everyday life. The European Union, for its part, is keen to incorporate the actors defending both these positions in order to be an effective organization.

One of the reasons it is not managing to do so is precisely because the organization itself is not clear about what it wants or what it is defending. As shown, there is a huge discrepancy between different parts of the organization. For policy-makers in Brussels, ‘Model Europe’ is still the key narrative, yet for agents ‘on the ground’ priorities vary between stability and promoting Human Rights, that is, between ‘Realpolitik’ and ‘normative power Europe’. **This is a central point, structure better**

This inconsistency has also been noted within the upper echelons of the Honduran political class. One former foreign minister complained that the European Union cut (albeit temporarily) diplomatic relations with Honduras after the 2009 coup but ‘did not do so with Egypt. Where is the difference?’ (Interview former Honduran Foreign Minister, 2014). Equally, a senior member of the current Honduran government argued that it was ‘not clear’ what the European Union wanted to achieve in the country, though the help it was giving to consolidate the Honduran economy, to reform the state was, of course, welcome (Interview Honduran government Minister, 2014).

The problems the EU is facing, then, in acting in a country such as Honduras are manifold but come back to the question of narrative, that is, the question of what the guiding principles for its actions are. Not only are there serious disconnects between senior actors within the European Union itself about what its objectives should be, there are also significant differences between those actors with whom the EU seeks to engage within the country, especially about the causes of the multiple problems the country faces and, subsequently, its solutions.

All of these significant differences play themselves out in an environment which is precisely *not* held together by some kind of unifying theme or objective. Actors within the EU, within Honduras and those that interact between the EU and Honduras define what they are doing, why they are doing it and how they are doing what they are doing in widely different ways. The results are obvious: there can be no coherent action across time and space, policy initiatives and any possible positive results at local level cannot be scaled across the entire system. The consequences were spelled out above: For all its investment and actions, the overall situation in Honduras remains decidedly unpromising and the money the EU has spent and is spending is essentially wasted.

1. What’s the story? Linking the EU’s internal and external problems

For all the differences that exist between the problems the EU is experiencing internally and those that it is confronting when acting externally, the above has shown that there are links which can explain why the EU, overall, is passing through such a profound crisis.

Just like its internal problems, the EU’s difficulties in acting externally to, for instance, positively influence the development in Honduras, can be explained by the fact that it is facing an extraordinarily incoherent patterns within which to develop and execute policy. Whether it is in relation to Greece, refugees or corruption and violence in Honduras, the EU itself is riven by internal divisions not only what it is doing but why it is doing it. Just like in Greece, in Honduras it is trying to work with actors that have diametrically opposed views on the origins of the problems being confronted and therefore the best ways to tackle them

More worryingly, still, is the fact that, within the EU there seems very little recognition of the scale of the problems it is confronting as an organization nor the fact that internal and external problems described above are, in their origin, part of the same incoherent pattern within which the organization is acting. In both cases, the narrative that has held the organization together has, at worst, collapsed or, at best, is being challenged by significant actors within the system to the point that it no longer serves as a guide for action or as something that can bind the different parts of the system together.

In both cases, too, what has been noticeable is the significant increase in differences brought about by a host of changes, be it the increase in membership of the European Union, the associated increase in different perspectives what purpose the European Union serves and, therefore, how it should deal with the challenges it faces. Externally, as shown, there have been significant changes in the way not only the European Union is seen and perceived but also in the way Latin America perceives itself and the European Union and the ideas it promotes. There have also been significant changes in how the region, as a whole, thinks about regionalism and regional cooperation, which will obviously have an impact on how an organization which has promoted and defended such concepts – and which itself is in a profound crisis – is seen.

Taken together, the absence of a narrative and the increasing number of differences, mean that the EU does not really know what it is communicating to the outside world, nor how it should do so. One EU ambassador based in Latin America once told the author openly that the EU was ‘terrible’ in communicating what it is, or should be, all about (Interview EU Ambassador 2014).

Yet, one of the reasons the EU has been, and is, so bad at communicating its aims, objectives and its purpose is because it does not perceive of the link between the particular problems it faces (the Greek debt crisis, the refugee crisis, turning Honduras into a prosperous and secure state etc.) with the broad strategic problems it is having (the absence of a narrative, in this case). As stated above, it thinks it can *first* solve those particular crises before it can move on to think about its new narrative and strategic objectives. It sees these issues as sequential. However, as I hope to have demonstrated, they are actually highly interdependent. As a result, they feed each other. The many particular problems the EU is facing both internally and externally are linked by the fact that, for all their seriousness, they are *expressions* of extreme incoherence at the heart of the European Union, an organization without a clear line of thought, which is constantly reactive and which, therefore, cannot cope and manage the innumerous differences which exist within it.

Seeing the current EU crisis in such terms has significant implications for action, as well as the future of the organization.

1. Conclusions: Re-thinking the EU **in Central America?**

The overall argument presented here points to the EU as an organization marked – and hampered – by increasing incoherence. As such, the aim of any future action to move the EU out of its current crisis, is to move the organization to a state of increasing coherence, here defined as a situation in which

* Meaning is shared among agents
* Internal tension is reduced
* Actions of agents and sub-systems are aligned with the system-wide intentionality
* Patterns are repeated across scales and in different parts of the system
* A minimum amount of energy of the system is dissipated through internal interactions
* Parts of the system function in complementary ways

(Eoyang 2001, 30)

To do so in the context of its current state will obviously not be easy. Yet, it is critical that the EU at least *begins* a debate about its broader purpose both internally and externally. In doing so, it has to take into account the many challenges that are being presented to its ‘traditional’ Model Europe. Some of these challenges come from within its own organization – for instance from current Hungarian Prime Minister Orban (Kelemen, 2015) - whilst others come from outside, as in the case of Latin America presented here. Yet, explicitly abandoning a commitment to democracy, the promotion of Human Rights or open markets is clearly equally problematic and would, essentially, destroy the DNA of the organization, which, as the case of Honduras has shown, is still strong particularly in the bureaucracy in Brussels. *That*, in essence, is the intractable problem of the EU: adapting itself to new realities whilst remaining true to its essence. It is, nevertheless, necessary if the organization wants to become effective once more, both in Europe itself and the wider world;

Any exploration of the consequences of such a debate may, at first sight, be uncomfortable. It may mean that a formal split emerges within the European Union between what has been called by some a ‘core’ Europe and an outer fringe (Piris, 2011). In fact, as Kelemen (2015)has argued, it may have to mean punishing those member states that are explicitly working to dismantle the foundations of the EU integration process. Alternatively, it may mean that the EU as a whole – and in its current size – concentrates on what might call its ‘core’ activities of trade and commerce. This, in turn, would have to lead to a serious reconsideration of its international activities or, indeed, the adoption of a different model of regionalism, perhaps along the lines suggested by the Brazilian diplomat cited above. Of course, it may also mean much deeper integration, at least for some, along the lines, for instance, of the economic government suggested by France (Scarpetta, 2015).

None of these options are a given, achieving any of them would not be easy, nor solve all the problems the EU faces. Yet, it is essential that the EU be clear about its overall purpose since a lack of clarity on that issue simply means that the differences will tear the organization apart. The EU crisis is general and it is systemic. It is sustained by incoherent and dysfunctional patterns across all levels and areas of action of the organization. To change the conditions sustaining these patterns to increase the organization’s coherence across time and space must be the order of the day. Developing a coherent narrative fit for the EU’s function would be a significant intervention to increase the organization’s coherence. As the current panorama shows, the urgency of the situation is not to be underestimated.

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1. See figures for GDP growth between 1996 to 2015 under <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/european-union/gdp-annual-growth-rate> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)