

# A New Kid in Town? The Evolution of the EEAS Headquarters' Involvement in EU Climate Diplomacy<sup>\*</sup>

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*Relatively little is known about the precise activities of the European External Action Service (EEAS) headquarters in the European Union's (EU's) international climate diplomacy, especially since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015. This article therefore sketches the evolution of the climate diplomacy activities undertaken by EEAS headquarters between the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) in 2015 and COP26 in 2021. Based on a triangulation of official documents and twenty semi-structured interviews, the article finds that although the EEAS headquarters continues to coordinate and mainstream EU climate diplomacy, it has also become more outwardly-involved and entrepreneurial. This entrepreneurship can be explained by the creation within the EEAS of an Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy, the working style of the appointed ambassador, increased resources at EEAS headquarters dedicated to climate diplomacy, and a favourable institutional context within the EU. These findings provide a detailed and updated insight into the involvement of EEAS headquarters within EU climate diplomacy. Accordingly, they improve our understanding of the EU as a climate actor and also demonstrate the importance of individuals in shaping how the EU conducts its climate diplomacy.*

**Keywords:** EEAS, European Union, climate diplomacy, international climate politics

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This article demonstrates how the headquarters of the European External Action Service (EEAS) has become increasingly entrepreneurial in its involvement in the European Union's (EU) climate diplomacy since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 at the 21st Conference of the Parties (COP21) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). 'EU climate diplomacy' is understood as the EU's bargaining and outreach activities

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related to the EU's international climate policy goals.<sup>1</sup> Although studies have highlighted the important role of the EEAS in EU climate diplomacy, they have mostly focused on the work of EU Delegations, which operate under the responsibility of the EEAS, in bilaterally promoting EU climate policy in third countries.<sup>2</sup> Until now, the involvement of EEAS Brussels headquarters has only been understood at a general level: coordinating climate outreach and mainstreaming climate concerns into EU foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> How it specifically carries out these two activities is less clear, especially since the Paris Agreement was reached in 2015.

In the meantime, the context in which the EEAS conducts climate diplomacy has significantly changed, both internally and externally. Internally, climate policy integration and climate mainstreaming have become even more important policy priorities for the EU, with the European Green Deal calling for the incorporation of climate considerations within nearly all aspects of EU policy, including its foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> Externally, the effects of the climate crisis have become increasingly visible around the world. At the same time, the nature of international climate governance has shifted, with now a focus on implementing the Paris Agreement and countries' nationally determined contributions, while the period 2010–2015 was dominated by the multilateral negotiations on the Paris Agreement. Hence, the EEAS (and EU climate diplomacy in general) is now confronted with a markedly different situation than in the period of the Paris Agreement negotiations.

There is thus a need to provide an updated, detailed picture of the involvement of EEAS headquarters in EU climate diplomacy. This article therefore qualitatively examines the climate diplomacy activities undertaken by EEAS headquarters from COP21 in 2015 through COP26 in 2021. While COP21 stands out as a high point of EU diplomatic activity, COP26 in 2021 was a key negotiation for increasing global ambition on climate at a moment in which science noted the window for averting disaster was rapidly closing. Therefore, it serves as a salient endpoint for the evolution of the involvement of EEAS headquarters in EU climate diplomacy and what factors could help explain this. The analysis is based

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<sup>1</sup> S. Woolcock, *European Union Economic Diplomacy: The Role of the EU in External Economic Relations* (Routledge 2012).

<sup>2</sup> K. Biedenkopf & F. Petri, *EU Delegations in European Union Climate Diplomacy: The Role of Links to Brussels, Individuals and Country Contexts*, 41 *J. Eur. Integration* 47 (2019), doi: 10.1080/07036337.2018.1551389.

<sup>3</sup> K. Biedenkopf & F. Petri, *The European External Action Service and EU Climate Diplomacy: Coordinator and Supporter in Brussels and Beyond*, 26(1) *Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev.* 71 (2021), doi: 10.54648/EERR2021007; D. Torney & M. K. D. Cross, *Environmental and Climate Diplomacy: Building Coalitions Through Persuasion*, in *European Union External Environmental Policy: Rules, Regulation and Governance Beyond Borders* 39 (K. Biedenkopf, C. Adelle & D. Torney eds, Springer 2018).

<sup>4</sup> S. Oberthür & C. Dupont, *The European Union's International Climate Leadership: Towards a Grand Climate Strategy?*, 28 *J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y* 1095 (2021), doi: 10.1080/13501763.2021.1918218.

on a triangulation of two kinds of data sources: official documents and twenty semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with EU and Member State officials directly involved in the EU's climate diplomacy (*see* annex in section 6).

The article finds that while the EEAS headquarters continues to carry out key activities of coordinating and mainstreaming climate diplomacy, the manner in which it does so has slightly changed. Furthermore, in the leadup to COP26, the EEAS became more entrepreneurial, facilitating the EU's involvement in two plurilateral initiatives beyond the UNFCCC: the Global Methane Pledge and the Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP) with South Africa. This entrepreneurial turn can be explained by the creation within the EEAS of an Ambassador at Large for climate diplomacy; the working style of the appointed ambassador, Marc Vanheukelen; increased resources at EEAS headquarters dedicated to climate diplomacy; and a favourable context within the EU.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the literature on evolution of EU international climate diplomacy and the involvement of the EEAS therein. Section 3 presents the evolution of the EEAS headquarters' involvement in EU climate diplomacy between 2015 and 2021. Section 4 offers explanations to the shifts observed in section 3. Finally, section 5 serves as the conclusion.

## 2 STATE OF THE ART

### 2.1 EU INTERNATIONAL CLIMATE ACTION

The EU's position as an international leader on climate issues has been extensively covered in the literature.<sup>5</sup> Although its success has not always been linear, the EU has repeatedly demonstrated its leadership ambitions. Since the early 2010s, it has established itself as a 'leadator', emphasizing bridge building and capacity building in its engagement with other parties.<sup>6</sup> This position was reinforced in Paris, where its diplomatic outreach played a key role in both the agreement being reached and its corresponding level of ambition.<sup>7</sup>

In the years following the adoption of the Paris Agreement, the EU has not only increased its own level of climate ambition but has also focused on convincing other parties to do so, via dialogue, incentivization, and awareness raising.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; R. K. W. Wurzel, J. Connelly & D. Liefferink, *The European Union in International Climate Change Politics: Still Taking A Lead?* (2017).

<sup>6</sup> K. Bäckstrand & O. Elgström, *The EU's Role in Climate Change Negotiations: From Leader to 'Leadator'*, 20 J. Eur. Pub. Pol'y 1369 (2013), doi: 10.1080/13501763.2013.781781.

<sup>7</sup> Oberthür & Dupont, *supra* n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3; Oberthür & Dupont, *supra* n. 4.

EU has demonstrated a capacity to adopt its climate diplomacy to the changing context of international climate governance.<sup>9</sup> Recent scholarship has observed that the EU is increasingly strategic in its climate diplomacy and incorporates geopolitical considerations into how it negotiates and engages with other parties.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the external dimension of EU climate policy is strongly shaped by the implementation of unilateral measures with international implications, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism and the revised Emissions Trading System.<sup>11</sup>

To support this leadership and strategic orientation, the EU has developed a robust bilateral and multilateral climate diplomacy.<sup>12</sup> This diplomacy is coordinated and carried out by a variety of EU institutional loci: ‘Team EU’, with officials from the European Commission and the Member States, who negotiate on behalf of the EU at the technical level within the UNFCCC; the Directorate-General for Climate Action (DG CLIMA) in the Commission, which provides key technical expertise and continuity to the EU’s approach in the UNFCCC; the Working Party on International Environmental Issues – Climate Change (WPIEI-CC) within the Environment configuration of the Council of the EU as well as a number of expert groups below the level of the WPIEI-CC, which prepare and validate the EU’s negotiating positions for the UNFCCC and related fora; the European Parliament, which issues declarations and sends delegations to international climate negotiations; and the EEAS, which is described in the next section.<sup>13</sup> The political responsibility for the climate negotiations remains at the ministerial (and Commissioner) level within the Environment Council.

## 2.2 THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE EEAS IN EU CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

The EEAS has been implicated in EU climate diplomacy since the early days following its establishment in 2011, both with respect to work in Brussels and across the various EU Delegations and Member State embassies around the world.

<sup>9</sup> J. Earsom & T. Delreux, *Evaluating EU Responsiveness to the Evolution of the International Regime Complex on Climate Change*, 21 Int’l Envtl. Agreements Pol. L. Econ. 711 (2021), doi: 10.1007/s10784-021-09541-8.

<sup>10</sup> Oberthür & Dupont, *supra* n. 4; S. Schunz, *The European Union’s Environmental Foreign Policy: From Planning to a Strategy?*, 56 Int’l Pol. 339 (2019), doi: 10.1057/s41311-017-0130-0.

<sup>11</sup> I. von Homeyer, S. Oberthür & C. Dupont, *Implementing the European Green Deal During the Evolving Energy Crisis*, 60 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 125 (2022), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13397; I. Dokk Smith, I. Overland & K. Szulecki, *The EU’s CBAM and Its ‘Significant Others’: Three Perspectives on the Political Fallout from Europe’s Unilateral Climate Policy Initiative*, J. Com. Mkt. Stud. (2023), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13512.

<sup>12</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3; J. Earsom & T. Delreux, *One Big Conversation: The EU’s Climate Diplomacy Across the International Regime Complex on the Paris Agreement Negotiations*, 61 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 198 (2023), doi: 10.1111/jcms.13365.

<sup>13</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3; T. Delreux, *Multilateral Environmental Agreements: A Key Instrument of Global Environmental Governance*, in Biedenkopf, Adelle & Torney eds, *supra* n. 3; T. Delreux & C. Burns, *Parliamentarizing a Politicized Policy: Understanding the Involvement of the European Parliament in UN Climate Negotiations*, 7 Pol. Governance (2019), doi: 10.17645/pag.v7i3.2093.

The creation of the EEAS provided increased – albeit limited – resources and scope for climate outreach within the post-Copenhagen timeframe, both from a strategic perspective and for coordinating bilateral outreach.

Regarding the strategic element, EEAS staff in Brussels collaborated with DG CLIMA on a series of Joint Reflection Papers, which identified opportunities to improve coordination and strategic orientation in EU climate diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> Overtime, these reflection papers became increasingly specific and action-oriented, underscoring the strategic evolution of the EU's climate diplomacy from broad themes to precise, actionable items beyond the realm of the UNFCCC. Hence, this work serves as an example of the EEAS working to mainstream climate into EU foreign policy. This fits with the broader narrative in the literature around the EU's climate diplomacy becoming more strategic and treated as a foreign policy challenge.<sup>15</sup>

The current literature, which has studied the role of EEAS headquarters in EU climate diplomacy at a relatively general level, comes to the conclusion that its involvement is mainly limited to two main tasks: coordination and mainstreaming climate in EU foreign policy. The scholarship notes that the EEAS serves as a liaison between the EU's community of climate experts and the broader EU foreign policy community, while also drafting documents like the aforementioned reflection papers and Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on Climate Diplomacy.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, much more is known about the involvement of EU Delegations in third countries, which fall under the responsibility of the EEAS, in EU climate diplomacy. Biedenkopf & Petri (2019) take stock of the bilateral climate diplomacy activities undertaken by Delegations and seek to explain variation across Delegations. They provide a detailed understanding of both what Delegations do regarding climate diplomacy and the factors that influence it.

Surprisingly, there has not yet been the same level of analysis of the activities of the Brussels-based EEAS headquarters on EU climate diplomacy. Indeed, as mentioned above, the literature has acknowledged its work mainstreaming climate diplomacy into EU foreign policy and its coordination with Member State embassies and EU Delegations. This scholarship repeatedly posits that this limited scope of Brussels-based climate diplomacy activities is due to a lack of resources within EEAS headquarters dedicated to climate change.<sup>17</sup> However, we note two principal shortcomings in this understanding of EEAS headquarters' involvement in EU climate diplomacy. First, although the literature identifies activities undertaken by the staff, such as coordinating and mainstreaming, the latter remain relatively broad

<sup>14</sup> Torney & Cross, *supra* n. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Oberthür & Dupont, *supra* n. 4; Schunz, *supra* n. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 2; Torney & Cross, *supra* n. 3.

<sup>17</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3; Torney & Cross, *supra* n. 3.

categories. It is unclear what exactly the staff does. Therefore, we are missing a detailed understanding of the actual involvement of EEAS headquarters. Second, the analysis of EEAS headquarters is largely centred around the leadup to the 2015 Paris Agreement. Hence, it is less clear what specifically EEAS headquarters is doing in the post-Paris era and, importantly, whether or not that involvement has evolved in recent years.

This is all the more surprising, considering the attention and interest surrounding the appointment of Marc Vanheukelen as the first Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy in 2019 and the increased staff allocations within the EEAS for climate issues.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the European Green Deal has called for the coherent inclusion of climate change within nearly all aspects of EU internal and external policy, which could create opportunities for a more important role for the EEAS.<sup>19</sup> Beyond the EU, the limits of the UNFCCC process have led to an emphasis on alternative, smaller-scale solutions to complement and catalyse the climate transition.<sup>20</sup> Hence, these dynamics likely carry implications for how the EEAS undertakes climate diplomacy. There is thus a pressing need for an updated assessment of the involvement of the EEAS in EU climate diplomacy and the factors shaping it.

### 3 EVOLUTION IN THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE EEAS IN EU CLIMATE DIPLOMACY SINCE 2015

In order to provide an updated assessment of the involvement of EEAS headquarters in EU climate diplomacy, this section examines the evolution of the activities undertaken by the EEAS between COP21 (2015) and COP26 (2021). Fitting with its established involvement as coordinator and mainstreamer, we detail the scope of EEAS headquarters' activities falling under each category. Additionally, based on the empirics, we add an additional category observed in the run-up to COP26: exploiting plurilateral windows of opportunity.

#### 3.1 COORDINATION: FROM TECHNICAL TO THE 'BIG PICTURE'

In 2015, the EEAS had two full-time staff members in Brussels working on climate diplomacy at the policy officer level, with ad hoc involvement from the managerial hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> Their primary task was to coordinate between the different actors

<sup>18</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Oberthür & Dupont, *supra* n. 4.

<sup>20</sup> S. Chan et al., *Climate Ambition and Sustainable Development for a New Decade: A Catalytic Framework*, 12 *Global Pol'y* 245 (2021), doi: 10.1111/1758-5899.12932.

<sup>21</sup> Interviews 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 19.

involved in EU climate diplomacy, particularly from the Commission and the Member States, and specifically to serve as a bridge between the technical discussions within the WPIEI-CC, its expert groups, DG CLIMA and a larger foreign policy audience, namely across EU Delegations. The Brussels-based staff not only coordinated the Green Diplomacy Network, which is made up of environment-focused officials from Member State foreign affairs ministries and the Commission, but also served as the point of contact in Brussels for EU Delegations around the world.<sup>22</sup> According to one EU official, 90% of the staff's work was dedicated to liaising with the EU Delegations.<sup>23</sup> The two EEAS staff members also regularly attended the WPIEI-CC meetings and they were present in the expert groups handling different technical aspects of the climate negotiations, such as mitigation and loss and damage.

EU Member State officials in the WPIEI-CC appreciated the involvement of the staff in the WPIEI-CC and its expert level meetings, adding that it increased the sense of cohesion and coordination amongst the different actors.<sup>24</sup> A Member State official noted that:

*We got on really well. [They were] personally very much involved and engaged and would come to every working party. [They] would come to any meeting, you know, the informal workshop of the Presidency, the different expert groups. [...] In my view, that helped a lot in bringing those discussions together because there was a clear willingness and engagement at the working party level.*<sup>25</sup>

The presence and engagement of the EEAS staff allowed them 'to translate to Foreign Affairs people what is going on in the UNFCCC'.<sup>26</sup> Hence, the EEAS headquarters worked as an intermediary between the climate experts and the larger EU foreign policy community.<sup>27</sup> Within this 'kind of a hub and spoke system', they digested the technical work from the WPIEI-CC and turned it into comprehensible instructions to the more generalist diplomats in the EU Delegations.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, they also relayed information back to the WPIEI-CC on what the EU Delegations in third countries had been doing and any intelligence they had gathered.<sup>29</sup> The climate staff at EEAS headquarters also prepared briefings and materials for other EEAS units and Member State foreign ministries involved in different multilateral fora where climate change was discussed, albeit in a more abstract manner.<sup>30</sup> In 2015, this included fora like the Asia-Europe Meeting, the

<sup>22</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3; Torney & Cross, *supra* n. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>24</sup> Interviews 10, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Interview 19.

<sup>26</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 18, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Interview 7.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews 7, 8, 10.

<sup>30</sup> Interviews 2, 7, 8, 10.

Sustainable Development Negotiations, and the Financing for Development negotiations.<sup>31</sup>

In the intervening years since Paris, the resources available for climate diplomacy at EEAS headquarters have significantly increased. In 2019, the EEAS created the post of Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy and appointed Marc Vanheukelen, who had previously served as a head of cabinet for the Trade Commissioner and as the EU Ambassador to the World Trade Organization, as the first position holder. That provided a high-level focal point for climate outreach. Furthermore, in 2021, the EEAS established a new Green Transition unit within the Directorate Global Agenda and Multilateral Relations, which counts twelve full time staff – a far cry from the two officials in 2015 who largely worked outside an institutional hierarchy.<sup>32</sup>

EEAS headquarters has unsurprisingly continued to participate in the WPIEI-CC and to serve as an intermediary between the climate experts and the broader EU foreign policy community, both with respect to the bilateral Delegations and the EU's multilateral outreach in climate-adjacent fora.<sup>33</sup> While the EEAS headquarters staff indeed continue to regularly attend the WPIEI-CC (and did so for COP26), unlike their colleagues for COP21, they do not attend its expert group meetings.<sup>34</sup> Hence, their interactions with the climate experts are less frequent and less technical in nature than those of their two predecessors.<sup>35</sup> The EEAS headquarters staff instead appears to focus on a broader mandate of serving as 'a focal point within the EEAS for policymaking, guidance and information on the external dimension of the Green Deal notably on energy, climate and environment'.<sup>36</sup> Respondents participating in the WPIEI-CC noted that this shifting approach to the WPIEI-CC has complicated coordination efforts with the EEAS, namely due to the higher profile and busy schedule of the new Ambassador at Large Marc Vanheukelen. According to one EU Member State official:

*One of the challenges we have with Marc is that he is very busy, and he is working at another level. So, he comes in, ...I'm sure they have different settings in which certain discussions are taking place. But in terms of kind of the day-to-day work of the working party and the different layers of work...*<sup>37</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Earsom & Delreux, *supra* n. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Publications Office of the European Union, *Green Transition*, EU WHOISWHO (2022).

<sup>33</sup> Interviews 11, 14, 17, 18, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews 11, 14, 17, 19.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews 11, 18, 19.

<sup>36</sup> European External Action Service, *EEAS Vacancy Notice Seconded National Expert in the Directorate for Global Issues Policy Officer*, 'Green Transition' Division, GLOBAL GI 3 (2023).

<sup>37</sup> Interview 19.

While still indeed attending the WPIEI-CC, the EEAS staff appears less involved and intimately familiar with the technical aspects of the negotiations, notably discussed within the expert groups, than their predecessors were in the leadup to COP21. Overall, in 2021, EEAS headquarters continued its coordination work with the WPIEI-CC in order to serve as a liaison with the EU Delegations and other EU foreign policy actors. However, there was not the same intense, technical involvement that characterized its coordinating role for COP21 in 2015. This suggests that the EEAS has moved from a technical coordinator to more of a general, big picture coordinator, aware of what is happening but not seeking to repeat the same items. It is no longer about a ‘weaker, echo repetition of the same messages that you give in UNFCCC’ but rather seeking to complement the work of the WPIEI-CC.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.2 MAINSTREAMING: FROM PUSHING TO MAINTAINING

With its involvement in drafting Climate Diplomacy Council Conclusions and Joint Reflection Papers in 2015, along with other smaller initiatives, the EEAS climate staff sought to gather interest in climate governance amongst their EEAS colleagues and within Member State foreign ministries. In other words, EEAS headquarters sought to mainstream climate as an issue which could be systematically prioritized and integrated into the broader EU foreign policy. The drafting of Conclusions of the Foreign Affairs Council, which had been issued regularly since 2011, served as an opportunity to raise awareness among foreign affairs ministers that climate diplomacy ‘was not an initiative of a few green people in the organization. It was really something that was becoming mainstreamed and legitimized by the ministers of foreign affairs’.<sup>39</sup> In the leadup to Paris, these Conclusions reinforced an expectation, both internally and externally, that climate was a foreign policy priority for the EU and that the EU would use available instruments to facilitate an ambitious outcome at the negotiations.<sup>40</sup> With such mainstreaming, they attempted to create more opportunities for diplomatic outreach on climate. This mainstreaming was operationalized with work on the Joint Reflection Papers, which were prepared by the EEAS staff and officials from DG CLIMA, who aimed to identify ‘Which other platforms apart from the UNFCCC formal negotiations can be used [...] bringing that into let’s say any possible fora where it could suit’.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>39</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>40</sup> Interviews 5, 7, 8.

<sup>41</sup> Interview 7.

This push to associate climate change with general diplomatic outreach was complemented by several smaller initiatives, notably with respect to the climate–security nexus. Here, the EEAS climate duo also sought to highlight the relationship between climate change and security issues, in the optic of drawing more attention to the negotiations within the EEAS and other foreign affairs ministries. This entailed bringing military officials to climate specific meetings, such as the Petersberg Dialogue, and working on specific projects within the G7.<sup>42</sup> As officials made the connection between climate change and security issues, they became more interested in following the negotiations and supporting diplomatic outreach. According to an EU official, ‘If you’ve got people in uniform talking about climate, it brings some credibility, [...] It is a way to broaden in a way the group of supporters for these policies’.<sup>43</sup> Hence, the push on the climate–security nexus fitted with the broader mainstreaming work of the two–person–strong climate staff at EEAS headquarters: it was a deliberate attempt to develop an expectation that climate was an important foreign policy issue and that it should therefore be a priority in diplomatic outreach.

Thanks in part to the work of this staff, climate became increasingly mainstreamed within foreign policy discussions in the EEAS.<sup>44</sup> This has translated into climate diplomacy becoming ‘broader and broader and more enshrined into EEAS outreach [...] There was a big interest to organize these types of events [outreach], which was not there even in 2015’.<sup>45</sup> Another EU official noted that climate had by that time become established part of the EEAS’s outreach in nearly all countries.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, in the leadup to COP26 in 2021, the challenge was no longer convincing EU institutional actors of the importance of climate diplomacy but rather maintaining a high level of pressure to keep climate on the broader foreign policy agenda. The EEAS headquarters staff now work to ensure that this mainstreamed approach endures. As of 2021, they appear to have done so in two main ways. First, they continue to draft Foreign Affairs Council Conclusions on Climate Diplomacy with ambitious language, supported by the cabinet of Executive Vice President Frans Timmermans.<sup>47</sup> Second, EEAS headquarters engages with foreign affairs ministries in third states directly, as opposed to working via EU Delegations, trying to introduce language on ambition in climate targets and implementation. In the run-up to COP26, this mainly took place via video conference.<sup>48</sup>

Overall, the EEAS headquarters staff have in fact succeeded in mainstreaming climate diplomacy in the leadup to COP21 and in maintaining that pressure in the

<sup>42</sup> Interviews 7, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Interview 8.

<sup>44</sup> Interviews 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.

<sup>45</sup> Interview 13.

<sup>46</sup> Interview 14.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

years immediately following it. Therefore, the EEAS staff have pivoted to taking advantage of climate as a foreign policy priority. They not only ensure it remains a priority but also push for even more ambition.

### 3.3 EXPLOITING PLURILATERAL WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

EEAS headquarters involvement in EU climate diplomacy in 2021 was not only limited to coordinating and mainstreaming. It also exploited plurilateral windows of opportunity, which was not the case in 2015. In the lead-up to COP26, the WPIEICC and the EEAS identified an opportunity to use smaller plurilateral initiatives, bringing together groups of like-minded states, to achieve progress on specific issues, such as loss and damage or reducing emissions of a specific greenhouse gas (GHG). These initiatives are not designed to replace the formal negotiations in the UNFCCC but rather to complement them.<sup>49</sup> According to an EU Member State climate official, ‘There are certain limits in the work that you can achieve in the UNFCCC and in the negotiations. I see the negotiations as a framework for, you know, setting certain goals, certain target, but then you have to implement those targets and then those kinds of initiatives are really transformative’.<sup>50</sup> As an EU official noted ‘The multilateral process, at least the way it has been devised in the UNFCCC context, is too heavy to produce results, especially when they are very political. [...] So you need to have your little results elsewhere that you then plug into the system’.<sup>51</sup> From a diplomatic perspective, the plurilateral initiatives represent an opportunity for collaboration that would not otherwise be available in a formal, multilateral UNFCCC format. As an EU official mused, ‘You have the negotiation space, and you have the other space where you can actually do stuff’.<sup>52</sup>

The following two subsections detail two such initiatives – the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP with South Africa – which came about in the leadup to COP26 and which provide evidence of the increasingly entrepreneurial role of EEAS headquarters in EU climate diplomacy. Both initiatives took the form of non-binding political declarations that were joined by the EU.

#### 3.3[a] *Global Methane Pledge*

What would become the Global Methane Pledge was a joint initiative of the United States (US) and the EU.<sup>53</sup> The pledge was introduced by US President Joe

<sup>49</sup> Interviews 14, 17, 19, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Interview 20.

<sup>51</sup> Interview 17.

<sup>52</sup> Interview 14.

<sup>53</sup> European External Action Service, *Draft Joint Declaration from Energy Importers and Exporters on Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Fossil Fuels* (2022).

Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at a meeting of the Major Economies Forum in September 2021.<sup>54</sup> The Global Methane Pledge, which was formally launched at COP26, calls for its 100+ signatories to reduce methane emissions by at least 30% by 2030 (over 2020 levels).<sup>55</sup> Methane is a potent GHG with a warming potential tens-of-times higher than carbon dioxide, which is nonetheless not directly covered by the Paris Agreement. However, a report from the United Nations Environment Programme suggests that reducing human-caused methane emissions by 45% could avoid as much as 0.3 degrees of warming.<sup>56</sup> Hence, creating a mechanism to reduce methane emissions around the world could have a tangible impact on the ability of parties to meet the overall temperature goals of the Paris Agreement and thereby help reduce the impact of global warming on the planet. Additionally, the arrival of the Biden Administration in the US, keen to rebuild its international climate image, offered a partner with which the EU could engage.

The EU's involvement within the Global Methane Pledge was spearheaded by Ambassador at Large Vanheukelen and his team. They began discussions with counterparts in the US State Department in June 2021.<sup>57</sup> An EU official summarized the development of the initiative as follows:

*Basically, it was the US and us. And then we said, 'Well, you know, methane is such a potent gas, so if we want to do something in the short term about slowing down global warming, methane should be a big priority. [...] So, we started working in a little corner, started ringing lots of countries and in the end, we got traction.'*<sup>58</sup>

Once the language was drafted and other pledgors had been identified, the EEAS and the European Commission submitted a copy of the draft Declaration to the Council Working Party on Energy in September 2021. The Council authorized the Commission to pledge on behalf of the EU shortly thereafter, after no comments or revisions had been proposed by the EU Member States.<sup>59</sup> According to a Member State official, although most methane emissions in the EU come from the agricultural and waste sectors and not from energy sources, 'there was so much political pressure to deliver because we were in the eve of COP 26 [...] that went through the Working Party on Energy'.<sup>60</sup> Notably, there

<sup>54</sup> The White House, *Joint US-EU Press Release on the Global Methane Pledge* (2021).

<sup>55</sup> European Commission & United States of America, *Global Methane Pledge* (2021).

<sup>56</sup> United Nations Environment Programme and Climate and Clean Air Coalition, *Global Methane Assessment* (2021).

<sup>57</sup> European External Action Service, *supra* n. 53. Interviews 1, 7, 8, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Interview 17.

<sup>59</sup> Council of the European Union, *Declaration On Global Methane Pledge* (2021).

<sup>60</sup> Interview 18.

was very little discussion within the WPIEI-CC – the locus for the EU’s negotiations in the UNFCCC.<sup>61</sup>

### 3.3[b] *JETP With South Africa*

JETPs are a new model of plurilateral cooperation between a small group of leading economies and select low-to-medium income states. The first JETP, the one with South Africa, was announced with much fanfare at COP26 in Glasgow. It represented an USD 8.5 billion commitment from France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the US, and the EU to help finance the decarbonization of the South African economy, notably with respect to its electricity system.<sup>62</sup> The EU’s financial contribution is facilitated via the European Investment Bank and includes two loans of USD 500 million each and a grant of USD 35 million.<sup>63</sup> As a package, the JETP offers grants, loans, and guarantees to which the South African government would not normally have access in traditional financial markets in the optic of facilitating investment and transformation that might not otherwise be possible. At the same time as a political declaration, it remains open-ended and as a starting point for more technical cooperation.<sup>64</sup>

Similar to the Global Methane Pledge, the EU’s involvement in the JETP negotiations was spearheaded by Vanheukelen and his team in the EEAS headquarters, with input from the Commission.<sup>65</sup> Germany and France, who are participating in the JETP alongside the EU, also strongly influenced its strategic orientation.<sup>66</sup> According to an EU official, the logic of the EEAS in negotiating the JETP was to overcome some of the typical sticking points within the UNFCCC negotiations:

*Let’s move beyond the rhetoric. Let’s move beyond the sort of North/South discussion of aid, what have you. Let’s dig deeper and let us have a financial package that is significant, then enter into a conversation with a country that is also going much further.*<sup>67</sup>

Hence, it was viewed at EEAS headquarters as an opportunity to work outside of the UNFCCC to facilitate decarbonization and thereby bypassing the sensitivities

<sup>61</sup> Interviews 11, 18, 19.

<sup>62</sup> European Commission, *France, Germany, UK, US and EU Launch Ground-Breaking International Just Energy Transition Partnership With South Africa* (2021).

<sup>63</sup> Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, *South Africa’s Just Energy Transition Investment Plan (JET IP) for the Initial Period 2023–2027* (2022).

<sup>64</sup> L. J. Houston & O. C. Ruppel, *Just Energy Transitions in Progress? The Partnership Between South Africa and the EU*, 19 J. Eur. Envtl. Plan. L. 31 (2022), doi: 10.1163/18760104-19010004.

<sup>65</sup> Interviews 11, 14, 17, 18, 19, 20.

<sup>66</sup> R. Pollock, *Externalisation of the EU’s Just Transition Agenda: An Evolving Journey Approaching a Crossroads*, EU Dipl. Pap. (2022).

<sup>67</sup> Interview 17.

associated with the larger climate negotiations.<sup>68</sup> It was seen as ‘something that I think is very practical, related to the multilateral context, related to the goals of COP26, and where we can actually make real progress’.<sup>69</sup> Negotiations with the US took place at the level of the Ambassador at Large and the US climate envoy. EU and Member State climate officials reiterated that the EEAS, led by Vanheukelen, owned the negotiating process on the EU side.<sup>70</sup>

The EEAS presented the non-binding JETP Declaration to the Working Party on Development Cooperation within the Council on 25 October 2021, just days before the beginning of COP26, where the EEAS ‘stressed the urgency of the matter and the political importance of the Declaration’.<sup>71</sup> The Working Party then authorized the EU’s signature via the written procedure. Hence, the EEAS played an active role not only in negotiating the JETP with partner countries but also in pushing through internal EU approval. Similar to the Global Methane Pledge, the JETP represents the identification of an opportunity at a higher political level, seized upon and coordinated by Ambassador Vanheukelen and his team within the EEAS, to complement the work in the UNFCCC.

#### 4 MAKING SENSE OF THE EEAS’S SHIFTING INVOLVEMENT

##### 4.1 MORE OF THE SAME? COORDINATING AND MAINSTREAMING

Between COP21 and COP26, EEAS headquarters continued to carry out the key activities of coordinating and mainstreaming climate diplomacy. While the scope of these coordination and mainstreaming activities has slightly evolved, the key functions remain.

With regard to coordination, the EEAS staff in Brussels continue to liaise between the climate experts in the WPIEI-CC and the larger foreign policy apparatus, including the EU Delegations. However, EEAS headquarters now appears to do so in a less technical manner, having placed less emphasis on the expert groups of the WPIEI-CC leading up to COP26. Indeed, as was hinted at in section 3.1, this could be attributed to the availability and stature of the new Ambassador at Large, who WPIEI-CC respondents viewed as their focal point for coordination with the EEAS.<sup>72</sup> At the same time, it also reflects a perception

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<sup>68</sup> Interviews 14, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Interview 14.

<sup>70</sup> Interviews 11, 17, 18, 19.

<sup>71</sup> Council of the European Union, *Just Energy Transition Partnership in Support of the Just Transition in South Africa – Authorisation to Sign a Non-binding Instrument – Decision to Use the Written Procedure* (2021).

<sup>72</sup> Interviews 11, 18, 19, 20.

within the EEAS that the WPIEI-CC remains highly technical and as such was not necessarily the most prudent use of its resources. An official noted that the EEAS:

*followed WPIEI discussions, but tended to focus more on the negotiations themselves [...] Very, very important, but the actual...let's say negotiation on mitigation goals, adaptation [...] you cannot force anybody to then actually translate these commitments into reality. So, that is where the climate diplomacy and dialogue with countries comes in.*<sup>73</sup>

In that regard, the EEAS appeared to view the technical, UNFCCC-specific conversations in the WPIEI-CC as less important to their broader work on climate diplomacy. While the EEAS remained involved in the WPIEI-CC, it has found it less relevant to engage in its detailed work, particularly at the expert level.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, this perspective was also reflected by an official working in the WPIEI-CC, who stressed that:

*In a sense, you have this very bureaucratic and very technical and very expert based silo looking strictly at the UNFCCC. Necessarily, the Green Diplomacy Network and the people that are part of that group have a different vision, because they are from foreign affairs ministries.*<sup>75</sup>

With regard to mainstreaming, the EEAS headquarters staff shifted from actively trying to internally mainstream climate into foreign policy circles in the leadup to COP21 to supporting and maintaining climate as a priority in EU foreign policy. In other words, the EEAS climate staff in Brussels had succeeded in drawing attention to climate within the EEAS and in other political and diplomatic circles in the EU. Since 2015, the EEAS has pivoted to the broader integration of climate and even Green Deal-related issues within their outreach.<sup>76</sup> There is increasingly an understanding that 'We want climate neutrality. It is important, but we need to be very vigilant on the external dimension of it'.<sup>77</sup> In that sense, there was no longer a need to convince EU institutional actors of the importance of climate diplomacy; its position as a mainstreamed issue is established. Hence, the EEAS staff logically pivoted to using existing instruments to push for ambition and to keep up the expectation that climate should remain at the forefront of EU foreign policy.

#### 4.2 WHAT IS NEW: EEAS HEADQUARTERS AS A POLICY ENTREPRENEUR

The two cases of the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP with South Africa in the leadup to COP26 exemplify the EEAS headquarters taking a more entrepreneurial involvement in EU climate diplomacy, with Ambassador at Large

<sup>73</sup> Interview 14.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Interview 18.

<sup>76</sup> Interview 14.

<sup>77</sup> Interview 8.

Vanheukelen and his team seeking out plurilateral initiatives to complement the UNFCCC negotiations. In addition to coordinating and pushing the EU foreign policy community to prioritize climate, the EEAS headquarters itself engages with third countries, looks for support, and negotiates these political declarations, eventually going back to the Council for validation. In seizing these opportunities, the EEAS headquarters functions as an entrepreneur of sorts, investing its resources into facilitating the EU's involvement in such plurilateral initiatives.<sup>78</sup> This is a clear shift in the type of climate diplomacy activities undertaken by EEAS headquarters. Yet, what factors could help explain this move to a more entrepreneurial involvement in EU climate diplomacy? Based on the empirics, four potential factors stand out: three related to the EEAS itself and one related to the EU internal context.

First, the creation of the post within the EEAS of Ambassador-at-Large for Climate Diplomacy provided the institutional support and structure for the EEAS headquarters to seek out plurilateral initiatives. According to an EU Member State official, the EEAS's creation of the post and subsequent appointment of Vanheukelen was an indication that 'the External Action Service has changed quite a lot in terms of climate'.<sup>79</sup> Before 2019, the EEAS did not have a high-level focal point to engage directly with third states on climate diplomacy. Instead, the staff had been operating mostly at the policy officer level.<sup>80</sup> The creation of a diplomatic post meant that the EEAS now indeed had a dedicated focal point who could engage with counterparts from third states.<sup>81</sup> Accordingly, Vanheukelen works 'in a different level and the direct engagement is, at least to my understanding, different to the one from [former EEAS staff]'.<sup>82</sup> It could be argued therefore that without the creation of the post, the EEAS likely would not have had the structure necessary to seek out the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP, as they required negotiations and discussions at diplomatic level. This reasoning fits with the expectation of Biedenkopf and Petri (2021) that Vanheukelen's appointment likely represented not only an increased prioritization of climate diplomacy within the EEAS but also a potential for the organization to take on a more proactive role therein.<sup>83</sup>

Second, the working style of Ambassador Vanheukelen also played a key role in the EEAS's involvement in the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP, as it

<sup>78</sup> P. Bocquillon, *(De-)Constructing Coherence? Strategic Entrepreneurs, Policy Frames and the Integration of Climate and Energy Policies in the European Union*, 28 *Envtl. Pol'y Governance* 339 (2018), doi: 10.1002/eet.1820; J. W. Kingdon, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (2011).

<sup>79</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>80</sup> Interviews 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 17, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Interviews 11, 17, 19, 20.

<sup>82</sup> Interview 19.

<sup>83</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3.

created an institutional opening for the EEAS to be more active in climate diplomacy. However, his personal working style appeared to mesh with the opportunity structure at the international level to complement work in the UNFCCC. Respondents noted Vanheukelen's rational approach and his desire to avoid redundancies with work undertaken elsewhere.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, his experience as EU ambassador to the WTO made him comfortable in working within small, plurilateral settings to advance EU objectives. An EU Member State official summarized this approach as 'With the Marc Vanheuckelen approach, he doesn't like to, well, to be an instrument of the climate network, so he just looks for the complements, where he can make a difference on top of what within UNFCCC is done, and really pushing on that'.<sup>85</sup> In that sense, this more complementary approach to climate diplomacy fits with the opening at the international level for smaller, plurilateral initiatives feeding back into the UNFCCC. These findings are not necessarily surprising, as a large literature has demonstrated how individual working and leadership styles can shape institutional roles within the EU, particularly with respect to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission.<sup>86</sup> The influence of Vanheukelen's working style on EEAS headquarters' climate diplomacy suggests this also holds below the leader/ministerial level.

Third, increased resources at EEAS headquarters in Brussels dedicated to climate diplomacy also facilitated its expanded activities. As section 3 demonstrated, in the leadup to COP21, only two staff members were dedicated to climate issues. As of 2022, that number has increased to twelve.<sup>87</sup> Hence, while still relatively small, the EEAS climate staff likely now has more bandwidth to take on more responsibilities and support Vanheukelen to engage with counterparts inside and outside the EU. In the case of COP21, respondents noted that the limited EEAS resources available affected its ability to contribute to EU climate diplomacy.<sup>88</sup> When asked about the non-entrepreneurial involvement of EEAS headquarters regarding COP21, an EU Member State official responded that 'There were some institutional barriers, so you know...I think the EEAS had absolutely minimal resources'.<sup>89</sup> Again, while not directly brought up in the COP26 interviews, counterfactually speaking, the fact that the number of climate-dedicated staff at EEAS headquarters had grown could have helped create the

<sup>84</sup> Interviews 11, 17, 19, 20.

<sup>85</sup> Interview 11.

<sup>86</sup> J. A. Koops & G. Tercovich, *Shaping the European External Action Service and Its Post-Lisbon Crisis Management Structures: An Assessment of the EU High Representatives' Political Leadership*, 29 Eur. Sec. 275 (2020), doi: 10.1080/09662839.2020.1798410.

<sup>87</sup> Biedenkopf & Petri, *supra* n. 3; Publications Office of the European Union, *supra* n. 32.

<sup>88</sup> Interviews 3, 5, 7.

<sup>89</sup> Interview 5.

conditions for increased activity on climate diplomacy, including supporting the entrepreneurial initiatives.

Finally, in addition to the above EEAS-specific factors, the EEAS's involvement in the two initiatives was also facilitated by a favourable context within the EU. Indeed, both the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP were political declarations and as such were non-binding.<sup>90</sup> The EEAS had the manoeuvrability to negotiate informally. With respect to the Global Methane Pledge, the EU at the time did not have a singular approach to methane emissions. Instead, it was addressed separately in different sectors (and thus Council configurations).<sup>91</sup> In that respect, the absence of a cross-sector methane strategy offered an opening for the EEAS, which could then negotiate the pledge beforehand without having to refer to a specific piece of EU legislation or associated Council working party. Regarding the JETP, the financing likely fell outside the intergovernmental scope of EU foreign policy as the EU's since-formalized financial commitments are relatively modest in scope and pass through the European Investment Bank.<sup>92</sup> This offered additional flexibility and manoeuvrability to the EEAS. Additionally, the involvement of two large EU Member States, France and Germany, provided support and validation for EU (and EEAS) involvement. Hence, this favourable EU internal context suggests that it was not exclusively EEAS-related factors that allowed it to seize the opportunity at the international level to engage in these initiatives.

#### 4.3 THE EEAS IN THE EU'S FUTURE CLIMATE DIPLOMACY

Overall, these findings suggest that EEAS headquarters has increased the scope of work it undertakes with respect to EU climate diplomacy. Its successful mainstreaming of climate change within EU foreign policy circles and subsequent pivot to emphasizing and coordinating the Green Deal reflect an increasingly mature and responsive approach to climate diplomacy that takes into account the Union's overall climate priorities and geopolitical realities. Moreover, given its recent entrepreneurial role, EEAS headquarters can even be considered a relevant player in the EU's climate diplomacy in its own right. Hence, these developments within the EEAS have the potential to enhance the EU's overall climate diplomacy toolbox and to better equip the EU to respond to the current challenges to international climate governance.

Yet, the explanatory factors evoked above raise key reflections on the durability of EEAS headquarters as a policy entrepreneur. Indeed, this new role was facilitated by the creation of a new post – Ambassador at Large for Climate

<sup>90</sup> Council of the European Union, *supra* n. 59; Council of the European Union, *supra* n. 71.

<sup>91</sup> Interviews 7, 8.

<sup>92</sup> S. Keukeleire & T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union* (3d. ed. 2022).

Diplomacy – and the individual who filled it, Marc Vanheukelen, along with increased EEAS resources and a favourable internal context. From this, two challenges stand out. First, with Vanheukelen stepping down as Ambassador at Large in 2023, the working style of his successor will likely affect whether or not the EEAS headquarters continues to remain a relevant actor in EU climate diplomacy. Second, it is unclear if Member States and EU institutional actors will continue to give the EEAS the manoeuvrability and flexibility to work on plurilateral initiatives as they did with the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP. Hence, while its shift to ‘big picture’ coordination and maintaining climate as a foreign policy priority are likely to endure, EEAS headquarters’ entrepreneurship is far from a given going forward.

## 5 CONCLUSION

This article has examined the evolution between 2015 and 2021 of the involvement of EEAS headquarters in EU climate diplomacy. It finds that while the EEAS headquarters continues to carry out key activities of coordinating and mainstreaming climate diplomacy, the manner in which it does so has slightly changed. This changing scope can be explained by a shift in how EEAS headquarters viewed UNFCCC negotiations and the increased prioritization of climate within the EEAS and EU foreign policy circles. In addition to these key activities, we also find that EEAS headquarters has become entrepreneurial, seeking out and facilitating the EU’s involvement in the Global Methane Pledge and JETP with South Africa – both announced at COP26. This entrepreneurship can in part be explained by the creation within the EEAS of an Ambassador at Large for Climate Diplomacy, the working style of Ambassador Vanheukelen, increased resources at EEAS headquarters dedicated to climate diplomacy, and a favourable institutional context within the EU.

The findings make three main contributions to the literature. First, they provide insight into the involvement of EEAS headquarters within EU climate diplomacy. Up until now, the work on the EEAS has mainly focused on the work of EU Delegations in supporting EU climate objectives. Second, by looking at both COP21 and COP26, the article offers an updated look at the EEAS and how it has evolved with respect to climate diplomacy in the midst of a different internal and external context since 2015. Third, in examining the interactions between the EEAS headquarters and the various other EU institutional actors involved in climate diplomacy, it improves our understanding of the EU as a climate actor and demonstrates the importance of individuals in shaping how the EU pursues its climate objectives internationally.

Although the article provides detailed insight into the involvement of EEAS headquarters in climate diplomacy, future research could investigate in a more

comprehensive manner if and how the role of the EEAS has changed in other areas of EU diplomacy, such as with respect to the Delegations and bilateral outreach. Additionally, with the Global Methane Pledge and the JETP both expanding and taking on new roles in international climate governance since COP26, research could examine the EU's (and other actors' involvement) therein over time.

## 6 ANNEX: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

<i>Interview #</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Category</i>
1	12/02/2021	EU
2	16/02/2021	EUMS
3	17/02/2021	EU
4	18/02/2021	EU
5	22/02/2021	EUMS
6	25/02/2021	EU
7	03/03/2021	EU
8	04/03/2021	EU
9	08/03/2021	EUMS
10	06/04/2021	EUMS
11	01/07/2022	EUMS
12	01/07/2022	EUMS
13	04/07/2022	EU
14	06/07/2022	EU
15	15/07/2022	EU
16	19/08/2022	EU
17	30/08/2022	EU
18	31/08/2022	EUMS
19	16/09/2022	EUMS
20	05/10/2022	EUMS

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This proposal package must be received at the editorial office no later than **1st December 2023**; the final decision will be announced by **20 December 2023**. Publication will occur in the following year.

Please note that all special issues are required to be topical and interdisciplinary in nature (historical themes will not be considered). They must also remain within the space budget of **150 pages (64000 words)**. The managing editor can help with this assessment.

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