

# Ego versus Alter: Internal and External Perceptions of the EU's Role in Global Environmental Negotiations

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## Abstract

This paper compares how European and non-European participants in international environmental negotiations perceive the EU's role in such negotiations. Three dimensions of the EU's role (environmental ambition, diplomatic activity and influence) are assessed in three UN-wide environmental forums (the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions on chemicals, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Environment Assembly). The paper presents original data collected through an online survey with 659 delegates who participated in the negotiations in the three forums in the period 2018–19. Comparing the ego perception of delegates from the EU with the alter view of delegates from non-EU countries, the paper finds that the ego and alter perceptions of the EU's ambition, diplomatic activities and influence are largely similar. Both ego and alter see the EU as a highly ambitious, active and influential actor in global environmental negotiations.

**Keywords:** perceptions; environment; international negotiations; European Union

## Introduction

The European Union (EU) is usually portrayed as an important actor in global environmental negotiations, where it attempts to play a leading role (Schunz, 2019). The EU presents itself as an advocate of global environmental governance and multilateral environmental agreements (European Commission, 2015). The academic literature, mostly relying on empirical evidence from EU documents or interviews with EU policy-makers, generally confirms this assessment by describing the EU as 'an important actor in global environmental governance' (Torney *et al.*, 2018) or even as a 'frontrunner' (Damro, 2006). But does this European assessment of the EU's role correspond to how the EU is perceived by its international negotiation partners? In other words, to what extent does the EU's self-image match with the impressions from its non-European negotiation partners? Relying on data from an online survey, this paper compares how participants in international environmental negotiations from the EU and its member states perceive the EU's role to how participants from non-EU countries see the EU. It thereby focuses on three role dimensions: the ambition of the EU's positions in terms of environmental protection, the diplomatic activities conducted by the EU, and the influence of the EU on the outcome of the negotiations. Whereas ambition refers to what the EU wants, diplomatic activity refers to what the EU does, and influence to what the EU achieves. Analysing the EU's role in international environmental negotiations is useful to better understand the impact of the EU as a global actor in this policy field, where many environmental issues are transboundary in nature, and on which the EU has developed a relatively dense set of environmental legislation internally.

The paper addresses two main shortcomings in the existing literature. First, the current understanding of the EU's role is often based on EU-centric assessments, relying on empirical observations originating within the EU itself (for example, Groenleer and Van Schaik, 2007; Delreux, 2014a; Liefferink and Wurzel, 2017; Groen, 2018). Several studies use EU documents and/or interviews with policy-makers from the EU institutions and member states as empirical evidence. However, the self-conception of one's role, the so-called ego perspective, often differs from how one's role is perceived from the outside, the alter perspective (Kilian and Elgström, 2010). Primarily focusing on European assessments, the literature might provide an incomplete picture of the EU and the evaluation of the EU's role risks to be partial or even incorrect (Keuleers *et al.*, 2016). Whereas there are some notable exceptions (Elgström, 2007; Kilian and Elgström, 2010; Parker *et al.*, 2017), there is currently a 'lack of research that compares self- and external images of the EU' (Chaban *et al.*, 2019). This paper aims to fill that gap by shedding light on the extent to which the self-perception of the EU as a global environmental actor corresponds with the perceptions of non-EU countries.

Second, literature on the EU in global environmental negotiations focuses significantly on climate politics (Groen *et al.*, 2012; Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013; Parker *et al.*, 2017). Whereas other environmental issues, such as the production and use of chemicals, the loss of biodiversity or sustainable mobility, are also important, the role of the EU in global negotiations addressing these issues has received less attention. Countering the climate-bias in the literature, this paper studies the EU's role in three UN-wide environmental forums: the regime on chemical governance with the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm (BRS) Conventions, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA).

Comparing ego and alter perceptions of the EU's role in these three environmental forums, the paper addresses the following research question: *To what extent do ego and alter perceptions of the EU's role in global environmental negotiations differ?* The comparison between the ego and alter perceptions of the three role dimensions – ambition, diplomatic activity and influence – is based on empirical data from an online survey with delegates from EU and non-EU countries who participated in the negotiations in the three forums in 2018 and 2019. Using the same measurement tool to assess the ego and alter perceptions secures the validity of our ego-alter comparison. Our results show that ego and alter perceptions of the EU's role are largely similar, which challenges the claim of role theory that these perceptions are likely to differ. The only difference between the two perspectives is that the share of EU delegates perceiving the EU as being the most ambitious and the most active actor is slightly larger than the share of delegates from third countries assessing the EU's ambition and activity in that way. However, we do not observe a similar tendency for the EU's influence. Overall, the EU perceives itself and is perceived by others as a highly ambitious, active and influential actor in all three environmental forums. Our findings suggest that EU-centric assessments of the EU's role in international environmental negotiations are not biased, as they are confirmed by the perceptions of outsiders.

The paper is structured as follows. Section I reviews the literature on the EU as an international environmental negotiator and on external perceptions of the EU as an international actor. Section II presents our conceptual framework and the hypothesis based on role theory. Section III discusses the methods and the original dataset based on the online

survey. Section IV presents the data, and compares the ego and alter perceptions of the EU's environmental ambition, diplomatic activity and influence. The final section concludes.

## **I. Internal and External Perspectives on the EU as an International (Environmental) Actor: State of the Art**

### *The EU's Role in Environmental Forums*

This section reviews the existing literature on the EU's role in international environmental negotiations, with a focus on ambition, diplomatic activity and influence. First, the literature generally characterizes the EU as a leader in international environmental negotiations, defending ambitious environmental policies and advocating for strong levels of environmental protection (Vogler, 2005; Oberthür and Roche Kelly, 2008). Its dense web of relatively stringent environmental policies has incentivized the EU to externalize this environmental ambition to the international level (Kelemen, 2010; Burns and Tobin, 2018). The EU's main strategy has been to lead by example, which implies that the EU showed the feasibility of ambitious environmental policies domestically and promoted the same level of ambition internationally (Parker *et al.*, 2012; Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). Nevertheless, there are also exceptions to the EU's leadership and high level of environmental ambition. For instance, the EU defended rather conservative positions in the negotiations on the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing or on the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (Oberthür and Rabitz, 2014). The EU has been described as a leader particularly in the field of climate change (Afionis, 2017; Wurzel *et al.*, 2017), but the EU's leadership failed at the 2009 Copenhagen Conference of the Parties (COP). The EU moderated the ambition of its international climate policies afterwards, which allowed it to weight on the negotiations on the Paris Agreement (Oberthür and Groen, 2018).

Second, the EU is considered an active party in international environmental negotiations. Studies focused initially on the EU's international actorness, namely its ability to be active and function deliberately in global environmental governance (Groenleer and Van Schaik, 2007). The specific activities of the EU in international negotiations, such as trying to build coalitions and mediate between parties (Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013), have also been studied. In the negotiations of the Paris Agreement, the EU contributed to the establishment of the High Ambition Coalition, which ultimately helped to adopt the Paris Agreement (Oberthür and Groen, 2018). The EU is one of the most vocal actors in climate negotiations and its activities usually focus on seeking compromises (Woolcock, 2012; Petri and Biedenkopf, 2020). Similarly, in CBD negotiations, the EU mostly acts as a mediator between developing and developed countries (Groen, 2018). Briefly, the literature generally indicates that the EU is an active player in international environmental negotiations, mostly relying on bridge-building activities.

Third, the EU's influence in international (environmental) negotiations is quite often subject to academic research. The EU has a varying track record here. On the one hand, the most prominent example of the EU's failure to be influential is probably the Copenhagen climate change conference (Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). Likewise, in the 2012 Rio+20 conference, the EU's influence was only marginal, and other actors,

such as the US, Brazil or the Group of 77 (G77) were successfully pushing for unambitious policies (Doran *et al.*, 2012; Delreux, 2014b). On the other hand, the EU has been an influential actor in for instance the negotiations of the CBD as well as the Cartagena and Nagoya Protocols (Groen, 2018). Also, in climate negotiations, the EU has been influential on some occasions. Particularly after the diplomatic failure in Copenhagen, the EU has been relying on a more diplomatic, mediating role and regained influence on the climate negotiations (Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013). Especially at the 2015 Paris COP, the EU succeeded in influencing the outcome of the negotiations (Parker *et al.*, 2017; Torney and Cross, 2018). Overall, the findings on the EU's influence are thus mixed. There is however a tendency in recent years that the EU's goal achievement increases and that it has successfully adapted its strategy to a more flexible approach, leading to a higher level of influence in international environmental negotiations (Schunz, 2019).

This overview shows that the literature usually portrays the EU as an ambitious, active and influential player in international environmental negotiations. There are, however, two caveats with this state of the art. First, many studies on the EU as an international (environmental) actor rely on EU-centric resources and assess the EU's role from the perspective of the EU itself (Keuleers *et al.*, 2016). Second, the literature primarily presents empirical evidence from climate change negotiations, leaving other environmental negotiations aside (for example Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013; Wurzel *et al.*, 2017; Oberthür and Groen, 2018). This paper's comparison between the ego and alter perspectives of the EU's role in environmental negotiations allows to judge the extent to which our current understanding of the EU's role is biased or rather confirmed by how the EU is seen from the outside.

### *The EU as an International Actor from an Outside Perspective*

Although the alter perspective of the EU's role in international affairs is comparatively understudied (Keuleers *et al.*, 2016), a number of scholars of EU foreign policy have examined how the EU is perceived through the eyes of non-European actors. These studies mostly conclude that ego and alter perceptions differ, as outsiders tend to see the EU in less positive terms than the EU assesses itself. A major example is the research project on the perception of the EU by actors from the Asia-Pacific region, where the external perceptions were measured through interviews with policy-makers and media representatives, public and elite opinion polls, and media analyses (Chaban *et al.*, 2006; Chaban and Holland, 2008, 2010, 2014). Another project focusing on external perceptions of the EU resulted in the edited book by Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010), which presents case studies on perceptions from single countries, such as the US, China or Brazil, as well as from international organisations and the media. Taken together, these case studies show that when elites, citizens, media and civil society groups from third countries are asked to assess the EU's influence and significance as an international actor, the findings differ from the EU's self-images (Fioramonti and Lucarelli, 2010). Some elites doubt the EU's significance as an actor, whereas others argue that the EU is not sufficiently united in order to be considered an international actor. Other scholars analyse the perceptions of the EU by single countries. For example, Pardo (2015) studied the perceptions of the EU

as a normative power in the eyes of Israel, and Tsuruoka (2008) analysed the expectation deficit in the relationship between the EU and Japan.

Whereas these studies show that the outside perceptions of the EU differ from the existing self-images of the EU as established in the literature, very few studies explicitly compare ego and alter perceptions. Trying to counterbalance the large amounts of EU-centric literature, most perception studies have indeed exclusively focused on outside perceptions. The question on the concrete differences between ego and alter perceptions has remained largely unaddressed – which is precisely the gap this paper aims to address. The main exception to this trend is the study by Chaban *et al.* (2019) who compare the perceptions by EU (ego) and Ukrainian (alter) actors of the EU's role in the Ukrainian crisis. Relying on interviews, they show that the ego and alter assessments differ at least to some extent.

Turning to the EU's role in international environmental negotiations, three studies have explicitly addressed external perceptions of the EU there. First, studying external perceptions of the EU's leadership in climate change negotiations, Parker *et al.* (2017) use a large-scale survey asking party delegates and observers to international climate conferences to identify parties and groups that played a leading role in the climate COPs from 2008 to 2015. The most frequently recognized leaders are the US, China, the G77 and the EU. The EU's leadership recognition was particularly low at the 2009 Copenhagen COP. In the early 2010s, the EU restored its leadership image in the eyes of others, but the perception of the EU as a leader then plummeted again in 2015 (Parker *et al.*, 2017). In addition, perceptions of the EU differ according to the geographical affiliation of the respondents. For example, a majority of European respondents recognized the EU as a leading actor, whereas only about one third of African respondents agreed with this assessment. Therefore, there is a mismatch between the EU's self-image and the perceptions by actors outside Europe in the sense that the EU seems to overestimate its leadership compared to the perceptions by others.

Second, also Kilian and Elgström (2010) assess external perceptions of the EU's leadership in climate change negotiations, albeit before the Copenhagen COP. In their study, based on interviews with both EU and non-EU governmental and non-governmental delegates who participated at COP14 in 2008, the EU's self-description as a credible leader is mirrored by outside perceptions. Whereas the authors find some small differences, the overall conclusion of this study is that ego and alter perceptions of the EU's leadership in pre-2010 climate negotiations largely correspond.

Third, Elgström (2007) studies the EU's leadership perceptions in the United Nation's Forum on Forests (UNFF) and in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 2004. Relying on interviews with EU and non-EU party delegates, he argues that whereas the EU is perceived as one of the most influential actors in UNFF negotiations, it is not perceived as a leader. Interviewees from both EU and non-EU countries largely share perceptions, yet the EU sees itself slightly more positive, especially regarding its prediction of the EU's role in the future. Similar to these findings, EU and non-EU party delegates agree that internal coordination is a challenge for the EU's influence in CITES too, but EU delegates 'are much more optimistic as regards the possibilities of lessening its negative effects' (Elgström, 2007).

These three studies on how the EU is perceived in international environmental negotiations have four limitations, which this paper aims to overcome. First, the study by Parker

*et al.* (2017) only identifies the actors that are perceived as climate leaders, but does not reveal insights on more specific features of the EU's role. Second, the studies by Elgström (2007) and by Kilian and Elgström (2010) were conducted in 2004 and 2008 and thus provide a potentially outdated picture. Third, both studies also rely on a rather small dataset with less than 20 interviews per case. Fourth, the studies by Kilian and Elgström (2010) and Parker *et al.* (2017) focus solely on climate change negotiations, leaving other environmental regimes understudied. Taken together, these four limitations are addressed in this paper, which conceptually disentangles the EU's role into three dimensions (ambition, diplomatic activities and influence), employs a large-scale survey on recent negotiations in which the same questions are asked to EU and non-EU witnesses, and focuses on non-climate environmental negotiations.

## II. Ego and Alter Perceptions of the EU: Role Theory and Hypothesis

This paper compares internal and external perceptions of the EU's role in international negotiations relying on role theory. Roles are social positions, which 'are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor' (Harnisch, 2011). They are determined by a given context and refer 'to the behaviour of an actor in a specific issue area or in a certain organizational forum' (Elgström and Smith, 2006). The starting point of role theory is that an actor's role is to be approached from two different angles: the ego and alter perception, which provides 'different perspectives on the same phenomena' (Herbst and Conradie, 2011). Helping to describe potential discrepancies between ego and alter perceptions, role theory claims that ego and alter perspectives are likely to differ (Herbst and Conradie, 2011; Chappell *et al.*, 2019), because their perceptions are in general 'the result of the subjective or psychological cognition of the observer rather than the objective reflection of the object that is being observed' (Shiming, 2010).

Psychology and behaviourist theories shed light on how ego and alter perceptions are likely to differ. Psychologist studies have shown that self-conceptions of individuals, but also social groups, are usually more positive than the views of others (Taylor and Brown, 1988; John and Robins, 1994; Herbst and Conradie, 2011). The main reason is that 'people have a basic need to see themselves in a positive light in relation to relevant others' (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). Presuming that we can 'treat states as if they were people' (Greenhill, 2008), we extend this expectation about the positive bias in the self-perception of individuals and social groups to actors – here the EU – in international negotiations.

This paper disentangles three dimensions of the EU's role in global environmental negotiations: ambition, diplomatic activity and influence. First, *ambition* is the extent to which the EU prefers a negotiation outcome that will lead to a high level of environmental protection. The EU is considered to be an ambitious actor if it is among those actors in international negotiation processes that prefer stringent environmental policy outcomes (Burns *et al.*, 2020). Second, *diplomatic activities* are the actions employed by the EU to promote its positions in international environmental negotiations and to reach out to third parties (Bäckstrand and Elgström, 2013; Groen, 2018; Petri and Biedenkopf, 2020). Third, *influence* is the extent to which the EU has an impact on the outcome of international negotiations (Groen *et al.*, 2012; Van Schaik, 2013; Chaban *et al.*, 2019). The three dimensions of the EU's role thus reflect the process of international negotiations: the EU

starts negotiations with a specific preference on how ambitious the outcome of the international negotiations should be; then, it engages in diplomatic activities during the negotiations; and lastly, it may have some influence on the outcome of the negotiations.

Assuming that the ego and alter perceptions of the EU's ambition, activity and influence are likely to differ in the direction advocated by role theory, we develop the following hypothesis:

*H: EU delegates assess the EU's role more positively than non-EU delegates do.*

To operationalize this hypothesis for the three dimensions of the EU's role, we develop three sub-hypotheses:

*Ha. EU delegates perceive the EU as being more ambitious than non-EU delegates do.*

*Hb. EU delegates perceive the EU as employing more diplomatic activities than non-EU delegates do.*

*Hc. EU delegates perceive the EU as having more influence than non-EU delegates do.*

### III. Data and Method

The three dimensions of the EU's role are measured through a large-scale online survey with delegates to international environmental negotiations from both the EU (namely EU institutions and EU member states) and third countries. Participants to the negotiations in the three environmental forums were selected from the BRS COPs in 2019, the CBD COP in 2018, and the fourth session of UNEA in 2019. These three negotiations took place in highly institutionalised, UN-wide environmental forums with quasi-universal membership. Although the BRS Conventions, CBD and UNEA are largely similar as negotiation forum, they also differ on a number of aspects. First, whereas the three forums are less politicized than the climate forum of the UNFCCC, UNEA and CBD are usually dealing with more political issues than the BRS Conventions, where negotiations are most of the time highly technical. Second, the legal status of the EU differs. Whereas the EU and its member states are parties to the BRS Conventions and to CBD, in UNEA the EU is an observer and all EU member states are UNEA members. Nevertheless, also in UNEA, the EU mostly negotiates as a single actor. It is represented by the European Commission or the rotating presidency, similarly to the negotiation arrangements in the BRS Conventions and CBD. Third, contrary to

Table 1: Number of Delegates having received and having completed the Survey

	<i>BRS Conventions</i>		<i>CBD</i>		<i>UNEA</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>EU</i>	<i>non-EU</i>	<i>EU</i>	<i>non-EU</i>	<i>EU</i>	<i>non-EU</i>	
invited	179	677	315	1,174	207	592	3,144
completed	71	151	95	237	36	69	659
response rate	39.7%	22.3%	30.2%	20.2%	17.4%	11.7%	21.0%

UNEA, the US is only an observer in the BRS Conventions and CBD, which may affect the way the EU's role is perceived by non-EU delegates.

We assess the three dimensions of the EU's role by relying on the observations of delegates to the international negotiations. The survey was sent to all delegates from parties to the BRS Conventions and the CBD, as well as delegates from UNEA members.<sup>1</sup> We relied on the lists of participants as published by the secretariats of the forums to identify all delegates to the specific meetings. All delegates with a valid email address received the survey. Table 1 presents the number of delegates who were invited to participate in the survey, as well as the number of delegates who completed the survey. Delegates from all five UN regional groups participated.<sup>2</sup> The overall response rate is 21 per cent, which is in line with what is often achieved in this kind of online surveys (Van Mol, 2017). The expected response rate is indeed not so high because of two reasons. First, we did not have any prior relationship with the delegates who received the survey invitation. Second, elites are usually under time pressure and have no personal gain by participating in the survey (Walgrave and Joly, 2018).

The targeted online survey included quantitative scaling questions, assessing the three role dimensions in two ways. First, we asked delegates to assess the *overall* ambition, diplomatic activity and influence of the EU and of a number of other important parties or states. A clear explanation of the three role dimensions was provided, in order to assure that all participants interpreted them in the same way. The rationale behind asking the respondents to rate not only the EU but also other actors was to avoid an EU-bias in the data, as this incentivizes the respondents to apply the same assessment criteria for the EU and other major actors. We asked participants to 'rate parties according to their general level of ambition/activity/influence during negotiations'.<sup>3</sup> The rating was based on a 5-point scale, asking if the actor is among the least ambitious/active/influential actors (score 1); is less ambitious/active/influential than the average actors (score 2); is among the average ambitious/active/influential actors (score 3); is more ambitious/active/influential than the average actors (score 4); or is among the most ambitious/active/influential actors (score 5). Moreover, each question had a 'do not know' option allowing participants to opt-out in case they were not willing or capable to answer the question.

Second, we asked delegates to assess the ambition, diplomatic activity and influence of the EU at an *issue-specific* level. The issues are forum-specific policy objectives and agenda items. We asked participants to 'evaluate the EU's ambition/activities/influence in comparison to other actors for the following objectives and agenda items'. For the BRS Conventions 12, for CBD 9 and for UNEA 8 issues were assessed. The same 5-point scale as for the overall assessment was used. The triangulation of the different measurements allows us to check the internal validity of our results.

#### IV. Ego and Alter Perceptions of the EU's Role: Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of how the three dimensions of the EU's role are perceived by delegates from the EU and its member states on the one hand, and delegates

<sup>1</sup>Although the EU is formally not a member of UNEA, we included the delegates from the EU in the UNEA survey as well.

<sup>2</sup>Among the non-EU respondents, the largest share come from the African Group and the Asia and the Pacific Group, which makes that the perspective of developing countries is sufficiently represented in our dataset.

<sup>3</sup>In UNEA, it is not 'parties' but 'members'.

from third countries on the other hand. The general conclusion is that there are no considerable differences between the ego and alter perceptions for the overall assessment of the three dimensions, but EU delegates tend to describe the EU more often as the most ambitious and the most active actor than non-EU delegates do. However, we do not find such minor differences in the ego and alter perceptions for the EU's influence.

*Ambition*

We hypothesized that EU delegates perceive the EU to be more ambitious than non-EU delegates do. The data on the overall assessment shows that EU delegates have a slightly more positive image of the EU's ambition than non-EU delegates do, but the difference is very marginal (see Figure 1). On average, for the three environmental forums combined, the ego perceptions were only 0.1 scale points higher than the alter perceptions. This pattern is found for the three forums separately as well. In addition, these observations are confirmed by our issue-specific measurement. In all forums, both EU and non-EU delegates rate the EU's ambition at a very similar level for all issues.

Figure 1 also indicates that, both from an EU perspective and from a non-EU perspective, the EU is considered to be a highly ambitious actor in international environmental negotiations. The EU's average ambition score is 4.5 for EU delegates and 4.4 for non-EU delegates, meaning that both groups perceive the EU to be more ambitious than the average actors in international environmental negotiations.

Although the average ambition scores on the overall question only slightly differ, EU delegates tend to rate the EU's ambition more often in the highest category (score 5) than non-EU delegates do (see Figure 2). In other words, the average assessment of the EU being an ambitious actor is shared by ego and alter, but the share of EU delegates assessing the EU as among the most ambitious actors is slightly higher than the share of non-EU delegates. In all forums combined, 59.2 per cent of the EU delegates attribute the highest

Figure 1: Ego and Alter Perception of the Level of Ambition of the EU

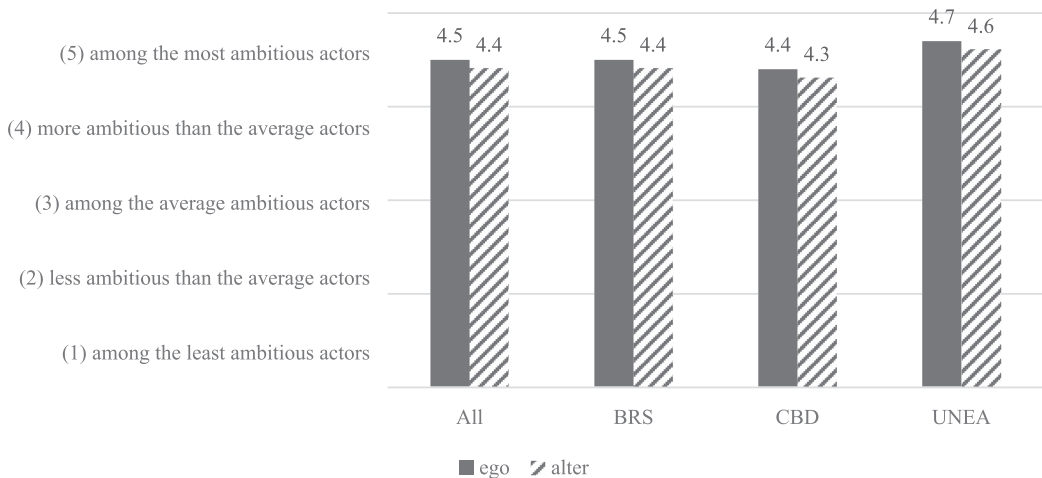
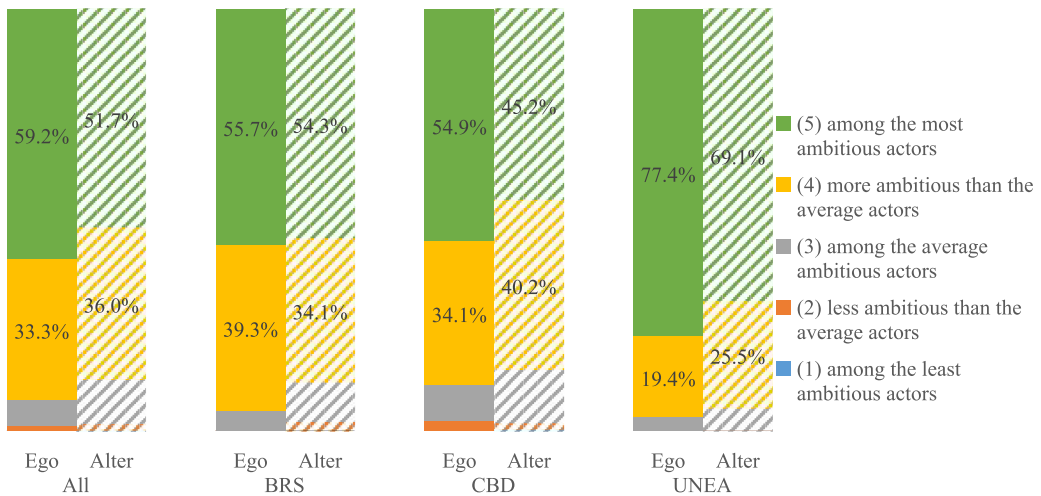


Figure 2: Percentage of Respondents per Answer Category for the EU's Ambition



score 5, whereas only 51.7 per cent of the non-EU delegates agree with this assessment. In UNEA, the share of EU delegates attributing a score of 5 to the EU's ambition is 8.3 percentage points higher than the share of non-EU delegates attributing the highest score. Similarly, the difference in CBD is 9.7 percentage points. For BRS, the 5 category is also more often chosen by EU delegates, but the difference with the non-EU delegates' assessment is less significant. In all forums, we observe more variation in the data among non-EU respondents compared to EU respondents.

Figure 2 also shows that both EU and non-EU delegates describe the EU as more ambitious in UNEA than in the BRS Conventions and CBD. A possible explanation might be the nature of the issues negotiated in UNEA. Whereas the issues discussed in the BRS Conventions and in CBD are specific and technical issues, often having economic implications, UNEA covers more general environmental questions. It seems to be easier for the EU to defend more ambitious positions when it does not have to consider concrete economic implications and when it can advocate more principled, pro-environment and pro-multilateralism policies. Moreover, the EU's ambition might be assessed by the survey respondents in an implicit comparison with the US. As the US is not a party to the BRS Conventions and the CBD, but is a member of UNEA, outsiders might rate the EU as being more ambitious in UNEA, where the US is a rather unambitious actor.

When ambition is measured at issue-specific level, the differences between the ego and the alter perceptions are a bit more outspoken, particularly for categories 4 and 5. The observations confirm our finding on the overall measurement, namely that EU delegates tend to rate the EU more often in category 5 than non-EU delegates do. Differences between the share of EU respondents and the share of non-EU respondents who attributed a score of 5 to the EU's ambition are more outspoken in BRS than in CBD and UNEA.

The ego and alter perceptions of the EU's ambition in international environmental negotiations are rather similar, indicating that the EU is more ambitious than the average actors are (score 4) or is among the most ambitious actors (score 5). However, particularly

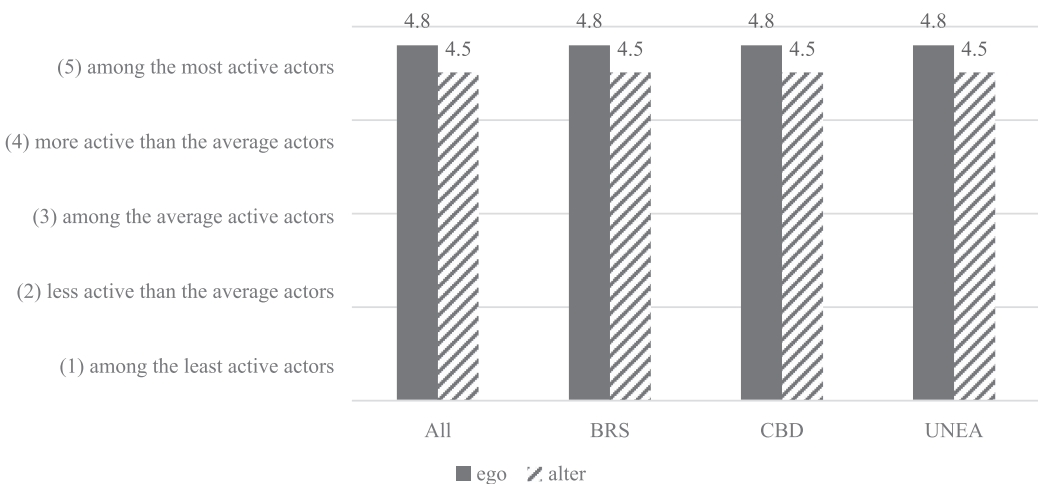
when measured at issue-specific level, there are differences between the ego and alter assessment of the EU’s ambition: ego rates the EU more often in the highest category 5 than alter does. Our tentative explanation would be that the fact that the EU is less seen as being ‘among the most ambitious actors’ by third countries is related to the fact that the EU usually justifies its positions on rather technical issues by referring to scientific reasons. It might be the case that third countries assess these scientific justifications as a lack of environmental ambition, whereas the EU sees them as an argument for ambition. Especially developing countries, which often face serve environmental impact and which rely less on scientific knowledge than the EU, might criticise the EU for such positions.

*Diplomatic Activity*

As for the EU’s diplomatic activity, we expected EU delegates to perceive the EU as being more active than non-EU delegates do. Our findings on the overall assessment of diplomatic activity are similar to our findings on ambition: the ego perceptions of the EU’s activity are slightly more positive than the alter perceptions (see Figure 3). The difference for the three environmental forums combined is with 0.3 scale points a bit higher than the difference we identified for ambition. This observation is similar in all three forums. The issue-specific measurement confirms this minor difference between ego and alter perceptions.

In addition, Figure 3 shows that the EU is assessed, by all delegates, as being more active than the average actors are (score 4) or even among the most active actors (score 5). On average, EU delegates rate the EU’s level of activity at 4.8, whereas non-EU delegates rate it at 4.5. This finding corroborates with the EU-centric literature arguing that the EU is highly active in international environmental negotiations. We do not identify any significant differences between the degree of EU activity in the three forums.

Figure 3: Ego and Alter Perception of the Level of Activity of the EU



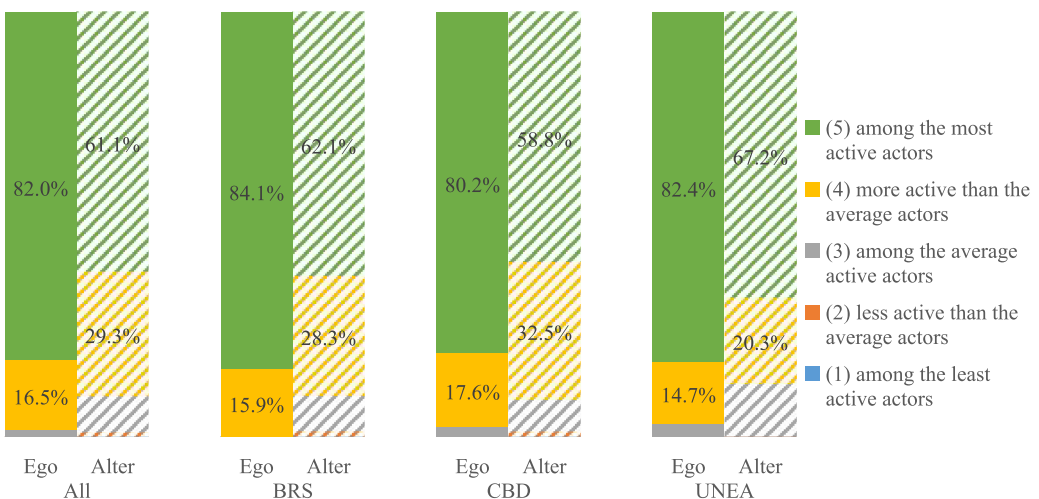
Whereas the differences between the average scores on the overall question only differ slightly, EU delegates rate the degree of EU activity more often with score 5 than non-EU delegates do (Figure 4). This means that EU delegates tend to perceive the EU more often as being among the most active actors in environmental negotiations. 82 per cent of EU delegates attribute the highest score 5, whereas only 61.1 per cent of non-EU delegates agree with this assessment. This means that approximately 40 per cent of non-EU delegates do not see the EU as being among the most active actors. For BRS, the difference between the share of EU delegates and the share of non-EU delegates giving score 5 is 22 percent point, for CBD it is 21.4 percent point. In UNEA, the difference of 15.2 percent point is less outspoken. As far as the answer categories 1 to 3 are concerned, non-EU respondents have attributed these scores more often than EU respondents did. Although the differences are stronger than for the EU’s ambition, they remain limited.

Whereas the ego assessments of the EU’s activity in the three forums are nearly identical, we identify minor differences in the alter perceptions between the three forums. In UNEA, the alter assessment in category 5 was with 67.2 per cent significantly higher than in CBD, with only 58.8 per cent (Figure 4). Hence, according to non-EU delegates, yet not confirmed by EU delegates, the EU is more active in UNEA than in CBD and the BRS Conventions.

Measured at issue-specific level, the ego and alter assessments of the EU’s activity slightly differ for the highest categories. Indeed, the degree of EU activity on the lion share of the 29 issues assessed was a little more positive through the eyes of ego than through the eyes of alter. Differences on category 5 are stronger in BRS than in CBD. In UNEA, we find some differences between ego and alter, yet they go in different directions and are not consistent.

In conclusion, EU delegates and non-EU delegates assess the EU’s diplomatic activities in international environmental negotiations relatively similar. Both perspectives confirm that the EU is more active than the average actors are (score 4) or among the most

Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents per Answer Category for the EU’s Activities



active actors (score 5). The differences for the highest category 5 indicate a tendency of EU delegates to assess the EU’s diplomatic activities more positively than non-EU delegates do. This is particularly the case when activities are assessed at issue-specific level. The EU thus tends to overestimate its level of activity on specific issues compared to its negotiation partners.

*Influence*

For the EU’s influence, we hypothesized that EU delegates perceive the EU as being more influential than non-EU delegates do. On average, we do not find any difference between the ego and alter assessment of the EU’s ambition for the overall assessment (see Figure 5). The issue-specific measurement confirms the general impression that ego and alter perceptions do not differ for the EU’s influence in international environmental negotiations.

Moreover, Figure 5 shows that the EU is seen as an actor with a high level of influence in international environmental negotiations. As the average score is at 4.5, ego and alter perspective alike, the EU is indeed more influential than the average actors are (score 4) or even among the most influential actors (score 5). Neither in the eyes of ego nor in the eyes of alter, there is a significant difference between the EU’s influence in the BRS Conventions, CBD or UNEA.

Even when examining the overall assessment per category, we cannot identify any substantial difference between the ego and alter perceptions. Contrary to the results on ambition and activity, the share of EU delegates and non-EU delegates assessing the EU’s influence at scale point 5 is nearly the same. Approximately 61 per cent of EU and non-EU delegates attributed the score of 5 to the EU’s influence. Hence, nearly 40 per cent of delegates do not see the EU as being among the most influential players. For BRS and UNEA, the alter perception is marginally more positive, whereas for CBD the ego perception is slightly more positive.

Figure 5: Ego and Alter Perception of the Level of Influence of the EU

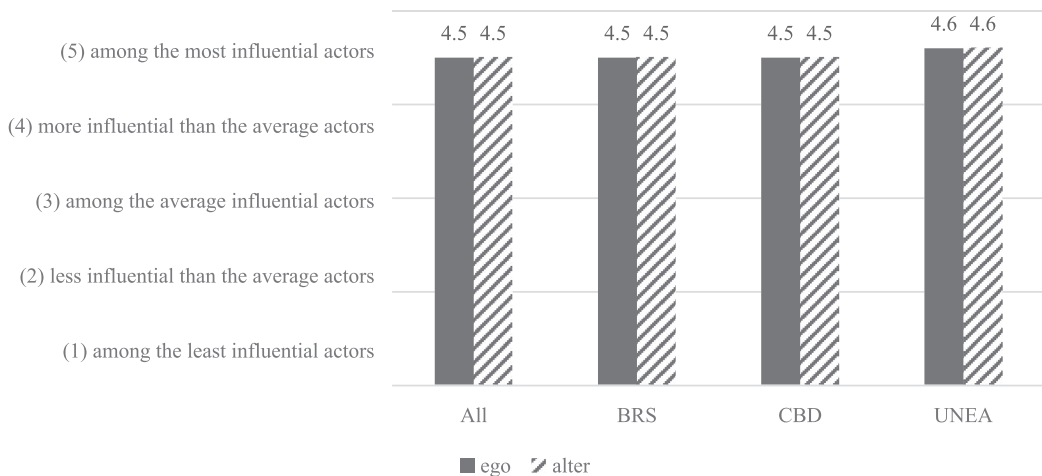
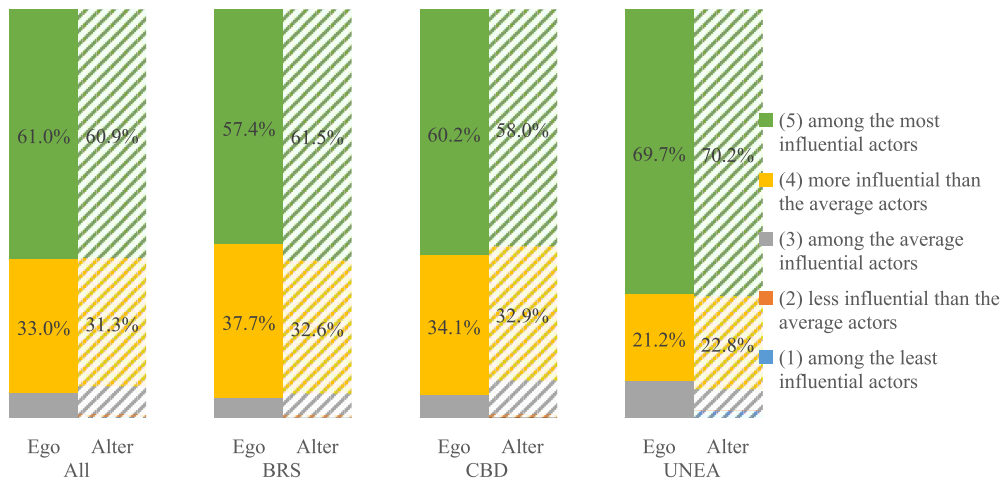


Figure 6: Percentage of Respondents per Answer Category for the EU's Influence



influential actor is shared by ego and alter, the expected positive bias in the responses by EU delegates is not confirmed.

In addition, Figure 6 indicates that the EU's influence for UNEA is more often assessed with scale point 5 than for the BRS Conventions and CBD, both by ego and by alter. For UNEA, category 5 was chosen by approximately 70 per cent of delegates, for the BRS Conventions and CBD only by approximately 60 per cent. Our tentative explanation would be that these differences are probably due to the more political nature of the negotiations in UNEA. In the BRS Conventions and in CBD, usually binding decisions are adopted, making it more important for many countries to be involved and to be influential players. Political statements, such as a ministerial declaration adopted by UNEA, might be more relevant for big players, such as the EU, than for smaller states, which might explain why the EU is considered as one of the most influential players therein.

Small differences between the ego and alter perceptions can be identified when influence is measured at issue-specific level. EU delegates tend to attribute score 5 more frequently than non-EU delegates do. However, compared to the EU's ambition and diplomatic activities, ego and alter assess fewer issues differently. Indeed, on many issues there is no significant difference in the categories 4 and 5. In addition, we also find counterexamples of alter assessing the EU's influence slightly more positive than ego.

Overall, the ego and alter perceptions of the EU's influence are very similar. Both EU and non-EU delegates agree that the EU is more influential than the average actors are (score 4) or even among the most influential actors (score 5). Even at issue-specific level, the differences are very small. Hence, we do not find evidence of EU delegates perceiving the EU's influence more positively than non-EU delegates do.

## Conclusion

Systematically comparing ego and alter perceptions of the role of the EU in international negotiations in the BRS Conventions, CBD and UNEA, this paper finds that delegates

from the EU and delegates from non-EU countries perceive the EU's ambition, diplomatic activity and influence in a similar way. In general, the EU's role is thus not assessed more positively by insiders than by outsiders. However, if some minor differences between the ego and alter perspective are identified, they go in the theoretically expected direction that the EU perceives itself more positively than it is perceived by its negotiation partners. These minor differences exist in the assessment of the EU's ambition and diplomatic activity, yet not to the same extent in the assessment of the EU's influence. There are also minor differences between ego's and alter's perception of the EU's influence on some specific issues, but they are not consistent, as EU delegates assess the EU as more influential than non-EU delegates on some issues, whereas on other issues the opposite pattern emerges. Hence, overall, our findings disconfirm the argument of role theory that ego's and alter's perceptions of ego's role differ. While we hypothesised that EU delegates will assess the EU's role more positively than non-EU delegates, our empirical data does not confirm this hypothesis.

Our findings apply to the negotiations for all three dimensions of the EU's role and in all three environmental forums. This conclusion has important implications for the state of the art of the literature on the EU as an international environmental actor, which is often relying on EU-centric empirical observations and analyses. Our comparison shows that such EU-centric assessments are very similar to the perceptions of the EU by outsiders. Hence, our analysis suggests that the risk that studies exclusively relying on EU sources produce biased, partial or incorrect results is low. Nonetheless, scholars should be careful when interpreting EU-only assessments, as there is a small chance of getting slightly more positive results compared to an outside perspective. This is especially the case when the EU's diplomatic activities are assessed. This finding on the BRS Conventions, CBD and UNEA is likely to apply to the EU's role in similar environmental negotiations in other forums, which are comparable to the forums of this study in terms of geographical scope, level of institutionalization and politicization. For more politicized forums, such as the UNFCCC, results might differ, as shown by the study of Parker *et al.* (2017).

Assessing the ego and alter perceptions of the EU through an online survey provides several measurement challenges, which we want to reflect on. First, it is important that all respondents share the same understanding of the three dimensions. We ensured this by presenting clear explanations in the survey. Second, our survey was explicitly framed as a survey on the EU, as a result of which the participants could be partly biased. However, by including a comparison with other countries and regional groups into the overall assessment, we intended to counterbalance such a bias as this should incentivize the respondents to assess the EU in a comparative perspective. This comparison shows that the EU achieved the highest scores on all three dimensions. A more detailed investigation on how the EU compares to other actors is a venue for further research.

Our analysis also leads to a clear conclusion on the EU as an actor in international environmental negotiations: the EU is indeed perceived to be among the most ambitious, most active and most influential players in global environmental negotiations – largely confirming the overall image of EU environmental leadership. There are, however, some slight differences between the forums: the EU is seen to be more ambitious and more influential in UNEA compared to its ambition and influence in CBD and BRS. Whereas we have provided some tentative explanations on these differences, research explaining (slight) variations in the EU's role in these forums is needed. Follow-up interviews with

survey respondents seem promising to gain a better understanding of the reasons behind the role perceptions of the EU. In addition, further systematic comparative research on European and non-European perceptions of the EU as a negotiator in other multilateral settings, such as international institutions dealing with non-environmental issues or even more informal club-like organizations, will reveal whether the similarity between the ego and alter perceptions are specific to the environmental negotiations in densely institutionalized international context or rather travel beyond that setting. Another further venue of research could also be to disaggregate the alter perspective in order to examine whether the EU is perceived differently by delegates from non-EU countries depending on their geographical affiliation.

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