Institutional dynamics in international organizations: lessons from the recruitment procedures of the European external action service

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Abstract
This article examines how organisational designs develop by proposing a novel theoretical framework that views organisational change as resulting from a dialectic process between interpretive agents. The key claim is that existing formal procedures (such as recruitment processes, our empirical focal point) are subject to involved actors' *interpretive efforts*. This results in a bargaining situation based on the interpretations of the principal actors, which may induce a feedback loop whereby the original procedures are amended. The empirical relevance of the theoretical argument is illustrated via a case study of the hiring procedures in the European External Action Service.

Keywords
Institutional entrepreneurship, European External Action Service, European diplomacy, Translation, Bargaining.

Word count
10565 words

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Introduction

Max Weber viewed bureaucratic structures as 'a rationally designed tool, deliberately structured and restructured in order to improve the ability to realize externally determined goals' (Olsen 2006: 12; Weber 1978). This purported importance of formal structures has instigated extensive research on organisational design and the dynamics of institutional and organisational change (Wendt 2001; Olsen 2006; Buhr 2012). Institutional entrepreneurs are therein often viewed as key protagonists (Battilana et al. 2009; Murdoch 2012), and recent work analyses both the enabling and temporal conditions under which such actors drive institutional change (Buhr 2012).

Little attention has, however, been given to the nature of institutional entrepreneurs' activities. While we are gaining a fair understanding of *whether* and *when* institutional entrepreneurs are able to instigate change, less is known about *how* they do so. One important exception is Maguire and Hardy's (2006) study on institutional entrepreneurs' use of discourse, which argues that such actors engage in a 'discursive struggle' to shape institutions. Yet, this contribution fails to take into account that 'between the context and response is the interpretive actor' (Scott 2008: 78; March and Olsen 1998). In this article, we therefore focus on institutional entrepreneurs' *interpretive efforts*. We argue that these represent a key antecedent to any use of discourse because actors 'bring different interpretations regarding the 'rules of the game' into their interaction' (Bezes and Lodge 2007: 131; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). As a result, we maintain that institutional change results from a 'dialectic' process between 'interpretive agents' (Bell 2011: 884).

More specifically, our theoretical argument starts from the claim that although existing institutions 'largely determine the context of the action', they nonetheless remain subject

to ‘the pressures and manipulations of the actors’ involved (Crozier and Friedberg 1980: 18-19). Agents’ *interpretive efforts* thereby play a key role (Czarniawska and Sevon 1996; Bell 2011). Such efforts not only determine agents’ understanding of existing institutions, but also cause existing institutions to be ‘actively transferred and translated’ (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008: 219). Different agents can thereby form varying interpretations, leading the original institutions to become effectively ‘diverted from [their] original intention’ (Crozier and Friedberg 1980: 18-19). The ensuing diversity of opinion results in a bargaining situation – or ‘discursive struggle’ (Maguire and Hardy 2006: 7) – based on the ‘perceptions, motivations, positions, power, and manoeuvres of [the] principal players’ (Allison 1969: 690). It is this ‘ongoing struggle over meaning’ that induces institutional development (Maguire and Hardy 2006: 8; Schmidt 2008; Saurugger 2013).

Although the main aim of this article lies in refining the theory of institutional change, the arguments brought forward clearly have empirical implications regarding the way – and why – the rule definition of important decision processes in any organisation evolves over time. The theoretical argument is therefore empirically illustrated via a case study of one specific international organisation (IO): i.e. the European External Action Service (EEAS).[1] The EEAS – formally established by Council decision 2010/427/EU of 26 July 2010 to assist in the governance of the European Union’s foreign policy, and operational since January 2011 – provides an interesting test-case. It is not only one of the most important institutional innovations in EU foreign policy governance, but also remains a novel service in full development (e.g. the first internal review of its functioning took place in 2013; Ashton 2013). This is important because the inherent ambiguities and uncertainties related to any new and complex institutional framework open up space for the contestation of existing practices and the influence of strategic actors (Weiss 1982;

Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Adler-Nissen 2014). Moreover, its 'interstitial nature spanning various organizational fields' makes the EEAS a 'carrier of ambiguity' in and of itself (Bátora 2013: 609), which creates further room for interpretive efforts.

The empirical focus lies on EEAS' recruitment procedures for personnel from member states' diplomatic services for three reasons. Firstly, recruitment processes are important for any organisation's internal functioning and decision-making, since they determine the profile of its officials and thereby shape the basic features of, and preferences embedded in, its decision-making behaviour (Meier and Nigro 1976; Murdoch et al. 2014a).[2] Hence, all actors involved are likely to have a strong desire to influence them (see, for instance, David [2007] for an excellent study of member states' strategic interference in the recruitment processes of international bureaucrats). Secondly, recruitment processes, especially in the developmental stages of any organisation, remain open to adaptation (Weiss 1982). Consequently, they provide a setting particularly conducive to the study of incremental institutional change. Finally, recruitment processes by construction involve multiple actors who closely interact, and are likely to develop strategies for attaining outcomes that best serve their interests (Weiss 1982; Johnston 2005). Such environment thereby allows evaluating how the actions of, and interactions between, multiple agents lead to institutional change.

The empirical analysis builds on a unique new dataset collected between March 2011 and February 2012. In line with theoretical predictions, we find that one of the key requirements placed by the EEAS on applicants from the EU member states – i.e. the need to enclose a 'Proof of diplomatic credentials' (issued by the member states' Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)) as part of their application package[3] – was interpreted very

differently, depending on member states' diplomatic traditions, position in the EU and ambitions regarding their influence on EU foreign policy. Moreover, as the representatives of member states learned and discussed each others' interpretations, a broad understanding of 'diplomatic credentials' gained dominance. In turn, this created a substantial pressure on the EEAS to revise its recruitment requirements, which it did in the spring of 2011.

The article makes the following contributions. First, from a theoretical perspective, it elucidates how institutional change can arise from a 'dialectic' process between 'interpretive agents' (Bell 2011: 884). Second, it adds to our understanding of institutional entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of agents' interpretive efforts in *how* institutional entrepreneurs broker change. Third, from a policy perspective, it provides new insights into the EU's changing approach towards foreign policy in everyday practice (Hocking 2002; Duke 2002; Diez et al. 2011).

A theory of institutional development

A basic tenet of sociological institutionalism holds that institutions are not created by social engineers or intentional designers, but are socially constructed (Gooding 1996). In such view, institutional *development* has been argued to critically depend on 'interpretive agents [who] interact dialectically with institutions and wider structural contexts' (Bell 2011: 884; Crozier and Friedberg 1980). This closely resembles the idea, raised in the bureaucratic politics approach (Allison 1969; Durbin 2007), that public policies can be viewed as the 'outcomes of various overlapping bargaining games' based on the 'perceptions, motivations, positions, power, and manoeuvres of [the] principal players' (Allison 1969: 690). In either case, the activities of strategic actors as interpretive agents

– understood as ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ (Battilana et al. 2009) in the former literature, and ‘policy entrepreneurs’ (Buhr 2012) in the latter – become of prime concern.

One approach to modelling agents’ interpretive efforts in more detail is provided by the theory of organisational translation (Czarniawska and Sevon 1996; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008; Røvik 2012). Inspired by Callon (1986) and Latour (1987), this theory highlights the ‘dynamic aspects of circulating ideas’ (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008: 219) and the active role therein of organisational actors. More specifically, agents’ interpretive efforts can be understood as *translation* processes whereby an idea is first ‘translated into abstract representations’ (Røvik 2012: 6) – referred to as the transferred knowledge construct – and then subsequently fitted into the target domain. As this target domain is unlikely to be a *tabula rasa*, the imported construct is liable to induce some degree of (prior) deinstitutionalisation (in the sense of Oliver 1992; Dacin and Dacin 2008). This directly implies that the degree and form of agents’ interpretive efforts will, at least in part, be determined by the antecedents and predictors of deinstitutionalisation processes. These include political pressures (that reflect ‘a political response to changing power distributions (…) or threat of failure or obsolescence’; Oliver 1992: 570), functional pressures (reflecting ‘changes to the perceived utility or technical instrumentality of [existing] practice’; Oliver 1992: 571), and social pressures (that reflect forces outside actors’ direct control, such as ‘changes in state laws or societal expectations’; Oliver 1992: 575).

Because agents’ interpretive efforts determine their actions and discourses, they are critical precursors of the ‘discursive struggle’, which induces institutional development

(Maguire and Hardy 2006: 8; Bezes and Lodge 2007; Schmidt 2008; Saurugger 2013). This is most easily illustrated by unpacking the process of institutional change into three closely connected stages: *interpretation, interdependence* and *recursiveness* (see figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

In the first stage, agents *interpret* (or 'translate') existing organisational structures or practices. As mentioned, this stage depends on the presence of certain antecedents of deinstitutionalisation processes, which may occur 'both within and beyond the organization' (Oliver 1992: 566). For instance, functional pressure towards deinstitutionalisation of existing practices is likely to arise whenever their benefit is perceived to weaken or disappear. This may be due to increased competition for limited resources – such as, for instance, competition over a restricted number of advertised posts in a recruitment setting – which forces organisational members to be innovative. It might also be linked to changes in the organisation's environment that 'discredit or challenge the utility of the operating assumptions of organizations' (Oliver 1992: 574). Whatever the underlying reason, such circumstances provide institutional entrepreneurs with an instrumental motive to reinterpret existing practices. Similarly, political pressure towards deinstitutionalisation is likely to build up when intra-organisational consensus for given practices declines. This can arise, for instance, when the distribution of power shifts within an organisation (Oliver 1992). Agents' interpretation of existing organisational structures or practices should in such circumstances best be seen as a (conscious) political response to protect one's interests or viability.

In the second stage, different interpretive agents are affected by each other's interpretations (and ensuing actions), which can be referred to as the *interdependence* of the translation process.[4] Such interdependence arises because the political, functional and social benefits of holding onto one's own views may be limited when others are changing their position. Indeed, as also shown in the literature on (spatial) public policy interdependence, when one unit's actions negatively affect another's outcome, a 'strategic complementarity' between different units' decisions develops (Franzese and Hays 2008: 747). This, in turn, generates pressure towards copying one another's actions (Geys 2006; Franzese and Hays 2008). Although different agents may copy each other following a strategic evaluation of such action (a mechanism known as 'strategic emulation'), it is important to stress here that copying need not involve rational cost-benefit, means-end calculations. It can also arise as a means of 'adapting to uncertainty prior to any detailed ends-means calculation of the benefits of doing so', known as 'mimicking' behaviour (Johnston 2005: 1021). The absence of cost-benefit calculations makes such 'mimicking' conceptually distinct from rational emulation, and also implies that the second stage of our model does not necessarily impose full rationality on the part of the agents involved.

Clearly, interdependence requires that different agents become aware of each other's interpretations. Hence, the interdependence of the translation process is more likely to arise in dense networks, as these allow institutional entrepreneurs to navigate more swiftly the flow of information within and between institutions (Crozier and Friedberg 1980) and 'facilitate (…) diffusion of institutional norms' (Oliver 1992: 578; Bell 2011). This implies an important role for the composition of, and one's position in, social networks. Novices within an existing network, for instance, may be more likely to follow

the examples of others, because 'copying what most other actors are doing [could be] minimally necessary to survive in a new environment' (Johnston 2005: 1024). Moreover, it can also be expected that emulation processes (whether strategic or via mimicry) are directed towards the interpretations of particular actors, while ignoring those of others. In studies of spatial public policy interdependence, for instance, stronger effects are generally observed for jurisdictions sharing a border, or lying within a certain distance from each other (Geys 2006; Franzese and Hays 2008), because such close neighbours are more likely to add 'political pressure' due to their higher influence or perceived 'criticality' (Oliver 1992: 571). More generally, it may be expected that frequent (in)formal interactions heighten the likelihood of strategic emulation or mimicry (Johnston 2005).

Finally, the third stage in the process of institutional change consists of a feedback loop from the interpretive agents back to the original institution. This can be referred to as the *recursiveness* of the translation process. That is, an idea originating in A that appears transformed in B might, in turn, affect the original idea in A. Clearly, this 'return' travel need not occur directly from B to A. More indirect routes are possible, and even probable. The key issue, however, is that ignoring such feedback loops is only valid under the assumption that translation processes from A to B and from B to A are perfectly symmetric (in the sense that a transformation that occurs during the travel from A to B would be *perfectly* undone during the travel from B to A). Such assumption makes sense within standard diffusion theories since no change in the transferred construct is assumed to occur, and any potential feedback loop thus becomes conceptually irrelevant (Rogers 1983; Ashworth *et al*. 2006). It is, evidently, much less innocuous when transformations are allowed to occur.

Crucially, it is in this final stage that various agents' diverse interpretations meet in a 'discursive struggle' (Maguire and Hardy 2006: 7), which can 'change the institutional status quo in some shape or form' (Reed 2004: 415). Evidently, such feedback loop again requires awareness of diverse interpretations (see above). More important, however, is that some degree of openness to change should exist not only in B, but also in A. Should the latter not be the case, a feedback loop will be unlikely to materialize, and an overly 'innovative' interpretation on the part of any agent could become counter-productive. Furthermore, the characteristics of the interpretive agents co-determine the likelihood of a successful feedback loop. For instance, the presence of actors with high bargaining power might augment political and/or social pressure towards deinstitutionalisation and organisational change. The institutional status quo is thus more likely to be challenged when interpretive agents have a higher degree of legitimacy (Weiss 1982).

An application to recruitment procedures in the EEAS

The theoretical framework set out in the previous section suggests a number of empirical implications. In this section, we illustrate some of these by applying our model to the development of the recruitment procedures in one specific international organisation (IO): the European External Action Service (EEAS). The focus thereby lies particularly on the requirement that personnel from EU member states' diplomatic services – who are to make up 33 percent of EEAS' staff (Regulation No 1080/2010 of 24 November 2010 of the European Parliament and the Council) – enclose a 'Proof of diplomatic credentials' (provided by the member state's MFA) with their application package to the EEAS. The restriction to member states' officials' recruitment procedures reflects the fact that the remainder of the EEAS' staff – which derives from the Commission and the Council

Secretariat-General – was automatically transferred to the new service with their posts.[5] The focus on the 'Proof of diplomatic credentials' is driven by two facts. On the one hand, this 'Proof' represented a fundamental requirement advanced by the EEAS, such that the analysis deals with an issue central to the studied recruitment process. In effect, it also reflects the fact that personnel from member state diplomatic services are hired by the EEAS to represent EU-level interests in terms of foreign policy (like diplomats), rather than administer these policies (like bureaucrats). On the other hand, the ambiguous nature of the requirement (discussed in more detail below) makes it a natural choice to analyse the dialectic process between interpretive agents (Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Røvik 2012).

Decision-making within international organisations (IOs) such as the EEAS generally comes about as the result of 'continuous bargaining between governmental delegates [and] the international organisation's bureaucracy' (Reinalda and Verbeek 2004: 19). This includes decision-making on recruitment processes, as witnessed by David's (2007) study of member states' strategic interference in the recruitment processes of international bureaucrats. In line with this general observation, linkages with, and agreement from, member states' officials are also imperative to the EEAS' functioning. This not only refers to member states' officials taking a proactive role in 'uploading' their specific foreign policy preferences (Balfour and Raik 2013), but also contributing 'ideas and views' on the further development of the EEAS' internal organisation (Ashton 2013: 2). The governance and design specificities of the EEAS thus provide a natural environment for assessing the theoretical micro-foundations of organisational change, and further specifying key concepts of our theoretical model (summarized in figure 2).

Figure 2 about here

For instance, functional and political pressures towards the deinstitutionalisation of initial recruitment procedures in the EEAS (i.e. in stage 1 of our theoretical model) can be expected from the extreme competition among member states' officials for a fairly limited number of advertised posts. Evidently, a lenient interpretation of existing recruitment procedures in such an environment increases the chance of at least some candidates succeeding, and thereby helps to safeguard one's influence over EU foreign policy. Such influence over 'the way in which the international bureaucracy works and to steer it in certain directions or to prevent other countries gaining increased influence' is generally considered an important objective of member states in IOs (Trondal 2010: 251). In our specific setting, especially officials from larger member states with long diplomatic traditions and a central position in the European Union – that arguably face a more 'imminent threat of failure or obsolescence' (Oliver 1992: 570) in light of the EEAS' establishment – might be more likely to opt for flexible interpretations of existing recruitment procedures.

Within stage 2 of the theoretical model, an incentive to copy others' interpretations – whether as a result of strategic cost-benefit calculations or due to non-strategic mimicry (see above) – is likely to arise because only one person can be hired for a given job (Johnston 2005; Geys 2006; Franzese and Hays 2008). As suggested earlier, the interdependence between actors' interpretations within this stage is likely to depend on the composition of, and different actors' positions in, social networks. From this perspective, one might expect officials from large, prestigious, leading EU member states acting as potential role models or reference points. The reason is that their actions might

be more likely to increase 'political pressure' on officials from other member states given their higher influence or perceived 'criticality' (Oliver 1992: 571), and may be viewed as a more 'authoritative source of interpretation' (Hobolth and Martinsen 2013: 1412) or as 'legitimis[ing] similar behaviour in other nations' (Weiss 1982: 295). Equally, networks based on historical or geographic ties between countries might support more frequent, informal meetings of their officials – and thereby ease information transmission, as well as increase the likelihood of strategic emulation or mimicry.

Finally, with respect to stage 3 of the theoretical model (i.e. feedback effects), a broader interpretation of EEAS' recruitment procedures can only be beneficial when the EEAS accepts (at least in part) this new interpretation. As this depends on the bargaining power of the actors involved (see above), officials from large, prestigious EU member states may again play an important role here because their bargaining power is likely to be higher (Tallberg 2008; Bailer 2010). As such, their actions might add more political and social pressure on the EEAS. Moreover, their actions may achieve a higher degree of legitimacy in the eyes of other actors (Weiss 1982).

Data and methodology

The empirical analysis exploits information from two main sources. First, we employ official documents related to the staffing of the EEAS. These include, but are not limited to, the minutes of the core group of the Consultative Committee on Appointments (CCA) – which meets periodically to assess EEAS' recruitment procedures – and the EEAS staffing document of June 2012. This is complemented with information obtained from various websites dedicated to news on the European Union (e.g., EuropeanVoice.com, EUObserver.com and Bruxelles2.eu) and transcripts from interviews conducted between

November 2012 and March 2013 by Subcommittee C of the Select Committee on the European Union of the UK House of Lords.

Second, to obtain more direct insights into the EEAS' recruitment process, 29 semi-structured interviews with 32 respondents were conducted, recorded and transcribed. These interviews (referred to as Interviews 1-29 below to maintain confidentiality) took place between March 2011 and February 2012 either via telephone (19 interviews) or face-to-face (eight interviews), and lasted between 30 and 95 minutes.[6] The questions were structured around five main topics (i.e. structure, objectives, practical operation, selection criteria and application support for EEAS' recruitment programme), and principally concerned the *first and second* major hiring rounds (or 'rotations') for the EU delegations and EEAS Headquarters in Brussels that were open to member states' officials.[7] Both rotations consisted of numerous positions being posted at irregular intervals (i.e., the first rotation between January-March 2010; the second rotation starting in the summer of 2010). The inclusion of both rotations as well as their protracted nature is important for the analysis. First, covering the first rotation is essential since member states officials at that time had only limited information regarding EEAS' conception of 'diplomatic credentials' (see below), which allows assessing variation in subsequent interpretations. Second, covering the second rotation – as well as the time variation within both rotations – provides the opportunity to gauge the interdependence between divergent interpretations and the recursiveness of the process.

In terms of respondent selection, our interview list contained the officials carrying direct responsibility for member states' recruitment policy into the EEAS in *all* 27 member states,[8] as well as members of the EEAS' Human Resources Directorate. For member

states, respondents were members of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 25 out of 27 countries (with positions ranging from Head of Unit and Counsellor to Director-General and Ambassador), and the country's Permanent Representation in Brussels for the remaining two countries (both at Counsellor rank). For the EEAS, we interviewed the Deputy Head of Division in the HR directorate responsible for recruitment of temporary member states' officials. All foreseen interviews were concluded, implying that all member states are represented in the dataset. Direct citations from these interviews are italicised below.

Before turning to the results, it is important to mention two generic concerns regarding qualitative research based on interviews. The first relates to the risk that respondents provide politically correct views. This is especially likely for questions regarding the activities of their own institution in potentially sensitive areas – as is here the case. To address this, respondents were not only asked about the activities of their own institution, but also about those of other institutions involved in EEAS' recruitment process. This increases the internal validity of the dataset by providing the opportunity to cross-validate the obtained information. Further cross-validation was introduced using information from official documents and media sources (see above). The second common concern is that interview quotes might have been strategically selected to sustain the argument. The analysis below therefore followed a data reduction strategy in which the interview transcripts were coded and categorized in several rounds by the first author – with cross-validation by the second author – to increase the reliability of any inferences drawn from the material. This strategy enables the discovery of broad patterns and common themes in the answers of various respondents. We then linked these patterns to the theoretical model to verify its empirical implications, and introduced direct citations from the

interviews merely as illustrative examples (though we admittedly selected quotes that best illustrate a given point).

Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis consists of two parts. First, we discuss why the notion of diplomacy can be viewed as a 'transferred knowledge construct' in the hiring procedures for personnel from member states' diplomatic services in the EEAS. Then, the following three sub-sections assess recent developments in these hiring procedures in light of the three stages of the process of institutional change set out above. It is important to observe here that our unit of analysis does not concern member states themselves, but public officials representing them (see also below). In contrast to the statist ontology in much foregoing work on IOs (which treats IOs as epiphenomena of *state* interaction; Barnett and Finnemore 1999, 2004; Anderfuhren-Biget *et al*. 2013), we thus provide 'an analysis of the 'social stuff' of which bureaucracy is made' (Barnett and Finnemore 1999: 700-701).

Still, as national public officials are by definition employed by member states, the preferences and actions of these 'embedded agents' are assumed to be guided at least to some extent by country-specific motivations and values (e.g. in terms of their traditions of diplomacy). That is, following Johnston (2005: 1029), we view 'individuals as national agents'. This reflects the idea that member states generally have explicit or implicit guidelines shaping the conduct of their officials, or may develop gatekeeping activities (Duke and Lange 2013; Murdoch *et al*. 2014a). Such home country influence is particularly likely in our setting as we study the diplomatic field. This revolves, by definition, in large measure around the defence and support of the nation state interests,

and thus is a policy field where national identification can be seen as a 'core' value. While this does not make member states 'unitary' actors, officials from the same member state are likely to be guided in part by such common preferences and values. Of course, this does not necessarily imply full rationality on the part of member states, nor their officials, since actors 'who are more deeply socialized may be more strategic in their behaviour precisely because they are true believers' (Johnston 2005: 1015).

'Diplomacy' as transferred knowledge construct

The notion of diplomacy constitutes one of the central concepts in international relations between sovereign states (Hocking and Smith 2011; Adler-Nissen 2014), and plays a central role in EEAS' recruitment process for personnel from member states (see above). Diplomacy can be viewed as a 'tradition': i.e., a set of 'institutionalized organisational behaviors or practices (…) created and managed by mindful custodians' (Dacin and Dacin 2008: 331; see also Shils 1981). It is characterised by 'practices that emphasize a sense of community enshrined in codes of behaviour protected through conventions of diplomatic immunity' (Hocking et al. 2012: 69), which reflect a strong 'industry orthodoxy or traditional way of doing business' (Dacin and Dacin 2008: 329; Bátora 2005, 2013). Still, as with all traditions, some of the involved practices (e.g., symbols, rituals, participants, and so on) are more central than others, such that one can distinguish between core and ancillary elements of traditions (Shils 1981; Dacin and Dacin 2008). In the case of diplomacy, 'communication, negotiation and the representation of interests [are] traditionally associated with diplomacy' (Hocking et al. 2012: 9; Hocking and Smith 2010) – and can be seen as its core elements – whereas bilateralism/multilateralism, formal/informal engagement and the dynamics of network management reflect examples of ancillary elements (see also Hocking and Smith 2011; Hocking et al. 2012).

When all actors involved – i.e., within the EEAS and member states – have the same understanding of the core and ancillary elements of diplomacy, the requirement of 'diplomatic credentials' will pose no problems of understanding. However, the breadth of policies covered by the EEAS extends well beyond traditional diplomacy. It includes 'also political engagement, development assistance and civil and military crisis management' (EEAS CEO David O'Sullivan, as cited in Bátora 2013: 606) as well as attempts to shape the structures of governance in international fora (i.e. 'structural diplomacy'; Keukeleire 2004; Keukeleire et al. 2009). Similar statements were made also by High Representative Catherine Ashton (Ashton 2013) and the Executive Secretary General of the EEAS (Vimont 2012). This suggests that the 'functions, operations and goals of this 'diplomacy' have changed so much that it is better seen as having been replaced by a quite different institution' – often referred to as *European diplomacy* (Diez et al. 2011: 129; Duke 2002; Hocking and Smith 2011; Adler-Nissen 2014).

Crucially, therefore, the EEAS' broad task-portfolio and ambitions, as well as the diverse structural and procedural demands inherent in the 'multistakeholder' diplomatic framework of the EU diplomatic system (Hocking and Smith 2011) complicate an unambiguous reading EEAS' requirement for 'diplomatic credentials'. It indeed implies that 'diplomacy can be reinterpreted outside the state-centred script of traditional diplomacy' (Hocking and Smith 2011: 27). This is confirmed in our interviews. Due to the lack of guidelines provided by the EEAS (Interviews 4, 6, 7, 19; CCA Committee 2012), bringing up the 'Proof of diplomatic credentials' in the interviews often generated responses indicating a clear interpretive effort: e.g., '*We really understand that…*' (Interview 5), '*For us it means that…*' (Interview 7), '*We would interpret it as…*'

(Interview 10), '*That means, from our point of view…*' (Interview 13). It follows then that within our theoretical framework, diplomacy can be seen as the knowledge construct embedded in the requirement for 'diplomatic credentials'.

Stage 1: Interpretation

During the first rotation between January-March 2010, interpretations of the notion of 'diplomatic credentials' varied widely. Within some member states, it was interpreted '*in the narrow sense*' (Interview 11) or using a '*conservative approach*' (Interview 19), such that applicants were required to be '*member of a national diplomatic staff*' (Interview 3; also Interview 4, 11, 19, 22, 24). This was 'enforced' in many cases by only posting EEAS vacancies on the MFA intranet, thus restricting access to them to members of the diplomatic service only: '*It's not really open for everyone*' (Interview 5, 19; Duke and Lange 2013; Murdoch *et al*. 2014a). Especially among officials from the smaller, new member states, this narrow approach appeared to follow from a desire to stick as close as possible to the literal meaning of the vacancy notice (Interview 20, 26). In other cases, justifications entailed either legal arguments (e.g., the '*statute of the […] diplomatic service is incorporated in [my country's] law*'; Interview 4), '*union policy*' (Interview 19) or arguments of a more moral character (e.g., '*we could not certify that* [i.e., diplomatic credentials for officials from other ministries] *because it would not be true*'; Interview 4, 11).

In other member states, however, the need for diplomatic credentials was interpreted less restrictively, and public officials '*would not sit on a monopoly for [the Ministry of] Foreign Affairs*' (Interview 10; also Interviews 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21). Instead, they allowed and/or encouraged people from other ministries (such as Defence, Trade or

Finance), whose profile or experience was relevant to the vacancy, to apply as well. In some cases, it sufficed that the prospective candidate had worked '*in an international department (…), even not abroad*' (Interview 10). Nevertheless, some international experience – such as '*working in an international organisation, in international missions and any foreign policy related work*' (Interview 16; also Interview 19, 21) or experience in the country's Permanent Representation in Brussels (Interview 14, 15, 21) – was generally required.[9]

The latter provides an important indication regarding what member states' officials perceive as core and ancillary elements of the diplomatic tradition. Indeed, since the core elements of any given tradition are likely to be very enduring and resistant to change (Shils 1981; Dacin and Dacin 2008), any 'editing' takes place by emphasising relevant, and downplaying less suitable, *ancillary* elements within this tradition (Shils 1981). In the deinstitutionalisation literature, such adjustment 'at the margin' is known as 'dilution' (Dacin and Dacin 2008: 346). Allowing relevant experts *without* direct foreign policy experience, but *with* some international experience, into the pool of applicants for posts within the EEAS (see above), can be seen as one such dilutive effort. It does not affect the core symbols and rituals involved in diplomatic work, but it broadens the group of government officials that can be involved in such practice by 'editing out' the need for pure foreign policy experience.

One could argue that these varying views of 'diplomatic credentials' merely reflect variation in the understanding of 'diplomacy', rather than a true interpretation of the EEAS' recruitment requirement. Two pieces of evidence suggest, however, that this is not the case. First, officials in big member states with a substantial diplomatic tradition –

including France, United Kingdom and Germany – were more likely to apply a lenient interpretation '*from the very beginning*' (Interview 10), while officials in small and new member states with a limited diplomatic tradition – including Latvia, Slovakia, Estonia and Bulgaria – were often more restrictive. Yet, the former set of countries' long diplomatic legacy is built on a 'high regard for its diplomatic establishment' (Pertusot 2012: 6; Hague 2011; Burke 2012), not on a broad interpretation of diplomacy.[10] Second, the recruitment process within member states' own diplomatic services (which often differs substantially from the procedure of the EEAS; Duke and Lange 2013) has not been brought in line with positions taken with respect to EEAS' recruitment requirements. This first of all supports the general opinion that in foreign policy administration 'bureaucratic conservatism' is 'one of the most notable features of EU member state bureaucracies' (Hocking 2002: 5; Manners and Whitman 2000: 260-261). However, it also suggests that European diplomacy is viewed as an institution parallel to, but different from, national-level diplomacy (noted by most interviewees; see also Pertusot 2012; Möller and Rappold 2012).

Interestingly, being '*open-minded*' about candidates from other ministries was found to be relatively successful, '*which confirmed that this is a better policy*' (Interview 10; also Interview 13, 21, 27).[11] This conforms to the idea that when holding on to a given institution no longer brings the expected benefits, the 'functional necessity of the practice' is undermined (Oliver 1992: 581) and institutional entrepreneurs have an instrumental motive to work towards its deinstitutionalisation (see above). This observation is further supported by *i)* a confidential document from the German Foreign Ministry, leaked to The Guardian in February 2010, which suggested that 'Berlin and Paris are anxious that they are losing the battle to win key positions in the new service'

(Traynor 2010) and *ii)* subsequent demands from, among others, the German Green Party that the EEAS allows 'Member States [to] (…) send staff who are not from their 'diplomatic service'' (Brandtner 2010). Since this was not allowed under the EU staff regulations, the German Green Party argued that national government officials should be 'inventive' and 'choose to provide the EEAS nonetheless with such experts by channelling them through their 'diplomatic services'' (Brandtner 2010).

Stage 2: Interdependence

Stage two of the process of institutional development holds that the interpretive efforts of different actors will be *interdependent* (see figures 1 and 2). A key pre-condition for such interdependence is that member states' officials are aware of the differences in their approaches. This appears to have been the case since '*comparing notes and exchanging information (…) about the process*' occurred frequently among the officials of smaller groups of countries (Interview 16; also Interview 19).[12] More often than not, and in line with findings from studies of spatial policy dependence, such groups reflected close geographical and/or historical links (Interviews 3, 5, 7, 12, 16, 23, 24). These networks exploited 'a mutual interest in pooling knowledge and ideas' (Hocking and Smith 2011: 29), and the EEAS' application process became '*definitely one of the issues which are usually on the agenda during our bilateral talks*' (Interview 5; also Interview 18, 20). Moreover, several other discussion fora were employed to exchange information, such as the regular COREPER meetings[13] and irregular informal meetings of (representatives of) the Secretariats-General of the member states' MFAs (Interview 6, 20, 21). In line with the theoretical model's stress on the importance of network density and composition in this stage of the process, this suggests that the extent of these (in)formal networks allowed institutional entrepreneurs to navigate the flow of information within and

between institutions (Crozier and Friedberg 1980) and helped to 'facilitate (…) diffusion of institutional norms' (Oliver 1992: 578; Olsen 2003). As a result, member states' officials were often very well aware of the '*different approaches of MFAs to EEAS with respect to the question how to select the members of the diplomatic staff*' (Interview 4; also Interview 3).[14]

Information about each other's interpretations is, however, only a first step. This information should subsequently affect other players' interpretations. There is substantial evidence to support this second stage, since several respondents indicated that '*we also had to adopt our strategy (…) after we discussed with different member states*' (Interview 18). This appears to have been particularly true for officials from small and new member states (e.g., Latvia, Slovakia, Estonia, Bulgaria), who were initially more restrictive in their interpretations (see above). Some also explicitly admitted that they initially '*didn't know how to approach it to be honest*' (Interview 15), which left significant space for imitative behaviour. This confirms our theoretical proposition that novices within an existing network are more prone to strategic emulation or mimicry (Gheciu 2005; Johnston 2005).

Even so, there is no clear indication that officials from specific member states arose as opinion leaders. Most 'followers' seem to have built on what they perceived to be the dominant interpretation in their environment, rather than follow the lead of, say, officials in member states with a larger, more prestigious diplomatic service. Only one respondent indicated that a broad view of diplomatic credentials was employed in the country's MFA because '*he made a research and he found that the British Foreign Office used the same procedure*' (Interview 29). This goes against the idea that interpretive efforts of officials

in prestigious, leading EU member states may add 'political pressure' given their higher influence or perceived 'criticality' (Oliver 1992: 571).[15] Rather, it appears that closeness in terms of historical and/or geographic ties – for instance, between Austria, Hungary and Slovakia (Interview 1, 4, 24) – was critical as it supported more frequent, informal meetings and easier information transmission (see above).

One potential explanation for the latter observation may be that large and small member states in the EU have different demands from, and preferences with respect to, the EEAS (e.g., in terms of consular matters or crisis management; Avery, 2012; Jarc, 2012), and face different challenges in terms of their 'resource make-up and ability to be present in places around the world' (Persson, 2012: 419; Bicchi, 2012; Wlachovsky, 2012). Officials from smaller member states may thus more closely identify with one another, which is important given the significance of 'prior identification' for imitative behaviour (Johnston 2005: 1022). Another explanation may be that officials from smaller member states simply aimed to follow what was perceived as the most successful approach, rather than any particular leader. Such 'voluntary imitation of a superior model' conforms to the idea that 'receivers copy an organisational form because of its perceived functionality' (Olsen 2003: 512; Oliver 1992), which is closely related to the fact that strategic emulation and mimicry at least in part reflect 'survival behavior' (Johnston 2005: 1024).

Stage 3: Recursiveness

The third and final stage in the process of organisational change relates to a potential feedback loop. From this point of view, there were two reasons why some openness towards a broader interpretation of 'diplomatic credentials' on the part of the EEAS could have been anticipated by member states' officials. The first lies in the fact that the 2011

revision of article 110 of the official EU Staff Regulations introduced a provision that 'the administrative departments of the institutions and the agencies shall consult each other regularly concerning *the application of* these Staff Regulations' (European Commission 2011: 21, italics added). These meetings – conducted within the Preparatory Committee for Matters Relating to the Staff Regulations (CPQS) – clearly suggests the ability, and willingness, of EU institutions to retain flexibility with regard to their staffing regulations. The second reason lies more directly in the evaluation procedure adopted by the EEAS. This closely followed that of the Commission – particularly in the pre-selection stage, where candidates' CVs were evaluated using the Commission's point system by (what at that time were still) Commission officials (Interview 11, 19; CCA Committee 2012; Duke and Lange 2013). Since a diplomatic service was '*not something that the Commission had had before*', those involved in the pre-selection stage were unaccustomed to – and unacquainted with – '*what the national diplomatic services have been*' (Interview 11; Bátora 2013). Moreover, the Commission evaluation system was created for assessing experts, not diplomats (Central Staff Committee 2010; CCA Committee 2012). Consequently, the system was inherently geared towards a more positive evaluation of individuals with bureaucratic and managerial, rather than diplomatic, expertise (Interview 2, 11; Duke and Lange 2013).

Two further elements then pushed towards a readjustment of the EEAS' application requirements. First, the interpretive efforts of member states' officials created a substantial force against the status quo, particularly since officials within the big member states applied a lenient interpretation (see above). This created significant political and social pressure on the EEAS to officially adjust its recruitment requirements (Oliver 1992). Second, the regular occurrence of formal and informal meetings between

(representatives of) the Secretariats-General of the MFAs and the HR Directorate of the EEAS (Interview 4, 16, 17, 24) created an environment conducive to the exchange of information and interpretations. Such 'intensive, face-to-face interaction' (Johnston 2005: 1015) and dense social networks are, as argued above, critical for the work of institutional entrepreneurs.

In the spring of 2011, the EEAS replaced the requirement to provide a 'Proof of diplomatic credentials' with a 'Letter of support' from the country's MFA and the requirement to have at least a certain number of years of 'relevant diplomatic experience' (Interview 6, 7, 20). While the motivation behind this change was not explicitly articulated by the EEAS at the time of the change (Interview 3, 20), formal statements were later made to frame it as reflecting a desire for '*loosening up of the strict diplomat characteristics*' (Interview 3). Yet, informally, EEAS officials admitted that '*since some of the member states approached very creatively this 'member of the foreign service', that is why they had to give in to the pressure and somehow rewrite this requirement*' (Interview 20).[16] As a result, the broader interpretation that had gained ground became institutionalised (whereas the narrow interpretation became further de-institutionalised) at the level of the EEAS. The EEAS in effect 'modified' its existing practices by 'mixing them with the new knowledge construct' that had developed among member states' officials (terminology from Røvik 2012: 22). This is consistent with the view that institutional change derives from a struggle over meaning whereby 'new discourses do not neatly supplant legacy discourses, but, instead, are made to overlap' (Maguire and Hardy 2006: 7).

Concluding discussion

Recent theoretical and empirical research has given institutional entrepreneurs a key role in analyses of institutional and organisational change (Battilana et al. 2009; Buhr 2012; Murdoch 2012). This literature concentrates on *whether* and *when* institutional entrepreneurs' involvement is imperative, but pays little attention to *how* they do so. In this article, we aimed at refining the theory of institutional change by highlighting how institutional entrepreneurs' interpretive efforts can influence the rule definition of important decision processes within an organisation. The key argument thereby entails that institutional change results from a 'dialectic' process between 'interpretive agents' (Bell 2011: 884). Using a unique new dataset, we assess this theoretical framework on the EEAS' recruitment procedure for personnel from EU member states' diplomatic services.

Our empirical results provide substantial empirical support for the theoretical framework: (i) EEAS' recruitment criteria were interpreted in different ways by member states' officials, (ii) member states' officials copied each other's interpretations, and (iii) EEAS' selection procedures adjusted to these interpretations. Interestingly, the adjustments made by the EEAS to its vacancy notices started another interpretation process among member states' officials as it created '*a lot of questions all over Europe*' (Interview 20; also Interview 3, 28) and left ample room for interpretation (Interview 7, 14, 15, 16, 19). As there currently is a consensus that all IOs are not alike, it is important to keep the specificity of the analysed organization in mind. Most generally, there are important differences between organizations of integration (such as the European Union and its institutions and services) and organizations of cooperation among states (such as the United Nations). Moreover, the EEAS is *de facto* a fairly independent service of the European Union, and its mission is to define and defend a European foreign policy (while

keeping in mind sovereignty of the member states). From this perspective, it is important to observe that, using secondary data sources, results in line with those obtained from the EEAS dataset are shown to hold also with regard to UN member states' personnel policies (Weiss 1982), and the Europeanisation of EU member state public policies (Martinsen 2005; Hobolth and Martinsen 2013).

These findings are important beyond their theoretical contribution. From a policy perspective, studying changing recruitment processes provides one way to elucidate shifting objectives and aims of organisations (and its members). The reason is that hiring procedures directly affect the profile of any organisation's officials and, as such, critically shape the basic features of ensuing decision-making patterns (Meier and Nigro 1976; Murdoch et al. 2014a). This also holds in the diplomatic field, such that 'who is – or should be – involved in [diplomacy] and what forms and practices it should assume' becomes a fundamental question for any diplomatic service (Hocking et al. 2012: 9). Consequently, this study's findings help understand the European Union's changing approach towards foreign policy. This holds particularly in an era when 'the institutions of diplomacy (…) have to work with a growing community of stakeholders' and when 'diplomacy is becoming the business of managing networks' (Hocking et al. 2012: 9). Consequently, the changing recruitment practices of the EEAS appear to reflect a 'process of innovation in the diplomatic field' (Bátora 2013: 609).

NOTES

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[1] Although our main empirical focus lies on the primary EEAS dataset, we exploit Weiss' (1982) study of the League of Nations/United Nations, and Martinsen's (2005) and Hobolth and Martinsen's (2013) studies of Europeanisation processes in EU member states' public policies as secondary data sources to highlight the more general applicability of the model. Note also that our emphasis on *public* organisations does not imply that our arguments fail to likewise apply to *private*-sector organisations (Arellano-Gault et al. 2013).

[2] This view is central to the literature on *representative bureaucracy*, which argues that the composition of the public sector workforce – in terms of, for instance, civil servants' former institutional affiliations, education backgrounds or geographic origins – profoundly shapes their behaviour and performance in office (Meier and Capers 2012; Peters et al. 2013; Murdoch et al. 2014b).

[3] While this application stage represents only part of the entire recruitment process, a 'Proof of diplomatic credentials' is one of three fundamental documents required in this first stage (besides a curriculum vitae and a motivation letter). We return to this below.

[4] This obviously assumes that there is more than one agent interpreting the organisational procedures. If this is not the case, this stage naturally becomes obsolete.

[5] Scholars of international organizations often differentiate between three pillars of actors within such organizations: *i)* state representatives (e.g., UN General Assembly or EU Council of Ministers), *ii)* bureaucrats, and *iii)* a network of consultants, experts, academicians (Weiss et al. 2009). As the individuals whose recruitment practices we study are supposed to represent EU-level interests in terms of foreign policy, and not member states' interests, this locates them under the second pillar. Still, it should be observed that they are diplomatic staff, and not bureaucrats in a strict sense (see also below). Moreover, while not crucial to the analysis below, successful applicants remain Member State officials since their positions are set up as temporary posts (for maximum 10 years), upon completion of which the official's home institution is required to re-integrate him/her among its staff. Note also that MFAs could exploit their role as providers of this critical document to influence which of their staff were able to apply. Murdoch *et al*. (2014a) as well as Duke and Lange (2013) indicate that at least some Member States effectively take up this role as 'gatekeepers'.

[6] Due to time constraints, two respondents provided written answers to the questions in the interview guide.

[7] The recruitment of Member State officials was organised within the rotation system through which EU officials change post on a regular basis (Europa.eu 2010). Note also that although the EU had no embassies prior to the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the Commission maintained 'representations' in 136 countries. With the Lisbon Treaty's ratification, these were transformed into EU 'delegations' (i.e. embassies).

[8] This represents the situation at the time of our interviews. Following the accession of Croatia on 1 July 2013, there are now 28 EU member states.

[9] Similar interpretive efforts occur with respect to personnel-related issues in other IOs. Weiss (1982), for instance, discusses the introduction of an oath of office including a 'pledge of international loyalty' in the League of Nations in 1932. The US State Department then undertook 'a complete study', and decided that this oath 'was not a pledge of allegiance, but simply a declaration of loyalty and therefore compatible with the dictates of citizenship' (Weiss 1982: 296). This indicates a substantial interpretive effort with respect to the wording of this oath. Martinsen (2005) shows that our argument extends also beyond personnel issues. In April 1998, the European Court of Justice ruled that national healthcare services should be extended to migrant workers. Martinsen (2005: 1042) shows that in response to this ruling the Danish government 'revised its interpretation of 'service'' such that 'the vast majority of Danish healthcare services fell outside the definition' implied by the ruling.

[10] Their more flexible interpretation may, however, be seen as a 'functional necessity' (Oliver 1992: 581). In line with such view, the UK Foreign Office recently indicated that the 'secondment of national diplomats into the EEAS is offering the UK an opportunity to make up its position somewhat' (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2013: 20).

[11] For instance, by April 2013 the UK had secured 22 positions for member state diplomats in the EEAS. Four of the successful candidates (or 18%) were from departments *outside* the UK Foreign Office (including Defence and International Development) (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2013: 21).

[12] See also the 'Joint Letter' from the foreign ministers of Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland and Sweden to the HR/VP Catherine Ashton from 8 December 2011.

[13] COREPER stands for Committee of Permanent Representatives. It 'consists of the Member States' ambassadors to the European Union' and is 'chaired by the Member State which holds the Council Presidency' (cited from http://europa.eu/scadplus/glossary/coreper_en.htm).

[14] Interestingly, recent work by Hobolth and Martinsen (2013) highlights a similar network-driven *interdependence* in the interpretation of EU rules by the national bureaucracies responsible for their implementation. Transgovernmental networks (TGNs) 'composed of sector-specific experts' are indeed shown to play a central role in 'the development of shared understandings' (Hobolth and Martinsen 2013: 1411).

[15] It also goes against Weiss' (1982: 297) observation that within the United Nations in the 1970s 'other nations inevitably attempt to copy the United States or Soviet Union' (i.e. the two major contributors to the UN budget at the time) in terms of the personnel policies they imposed on their UN representatives.

[16] Referring once more to Weiss' (1982) study of the League of Nations/United Nations, a similar feedback loop can be observed also in that case. The staff regulations of the League of Nations in the 1920s forbade officials from making public political pronouncements or simultaneously holding political offices in their home country. However, some officials – for instance, from France, Germany and Italy – opted for a very loose interpretation of this prohibition. The official Staff Regulations of the League of Nations were subsequently amended in the 1930s 'mainly as an antidote to the blatant manipulations of international officials with Italian and German nationalities' (Weiss 1982: 294).

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Figure 1: Overview theoretical framework

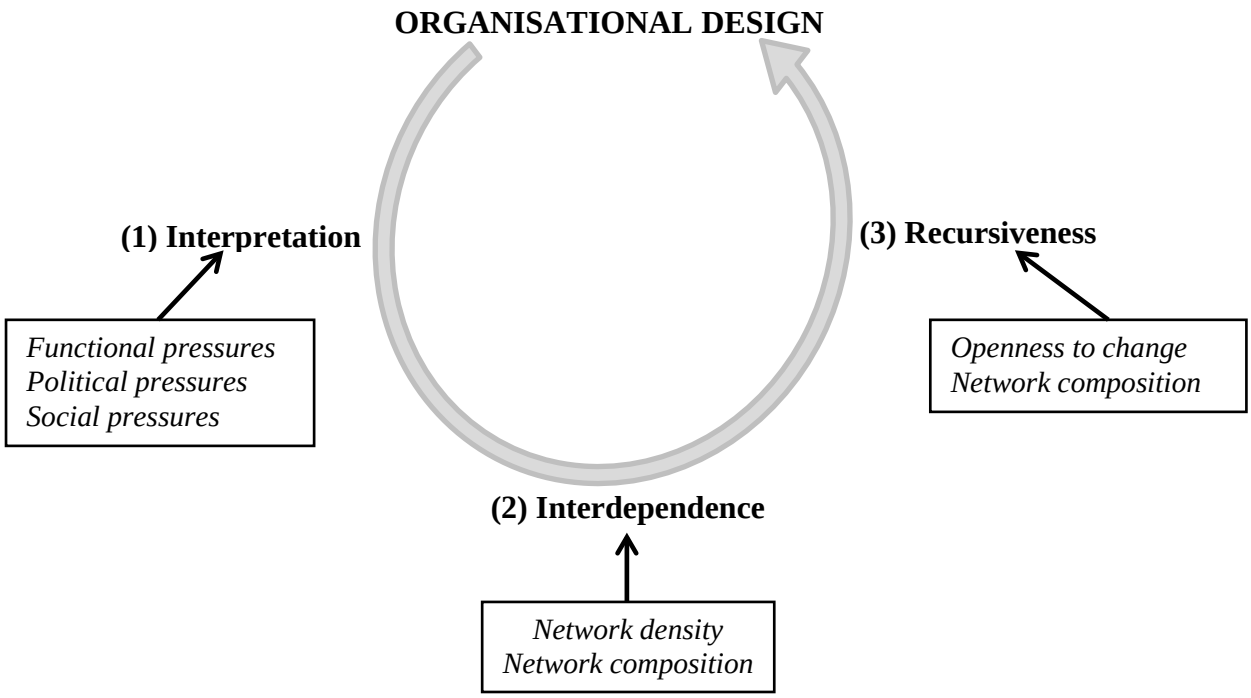

Figure 2: Operationalisation of theoretical framework for EEAS case