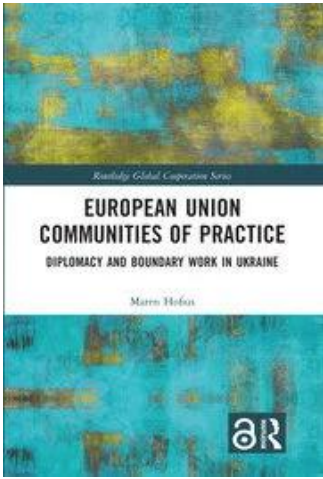


Book Review:
European Union Communities of Practice: Diplomacy and Boundary Work in Ukraine

Hendra Manurung*

Faculty of Defense Strategy, Republic of Indonesia Defense University.

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Website: <https://jcountst.ut.ac.ir/> | Email: jcountst@ut.ac.ir |

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European Union Communities of Practice: Diplomacy and Boundary Work in Ukraine (2024) by Maren Hofius and published by Routledge in 2024 as part of the Routledge Global Cooperation Series. This interdisciplinary volume critically examines the European Union's post-Maidan engagement with Ukraine through the lens of Communities of Practice (CoP). It argues that the EU's foreign policy is not merely a product of formal institutions and treaties, but is actively constructed and enacted through informal, socially situated groups of practitioners. The analysis focuses on two key groups: the EU's diplomatic boundary spanners on the ground in Ukraine and the Ukrainian public officials embedded in EU-supported reform frameworks. The study explores how these transnational CoPs, united by a shared enterprise of European integration, develop their own repertoire of practices, norms, and identities. It investigates their crucial boundary work in mediating between the EU and Ukrainian administrations, translating and adapting policies, norms, and legal standards to the local context. This process is shown to be inherently political, involving negotiation, contestation, and the (re)drawing of symbolic and administrative boundaries between Europe and Ukraine. Ultimately, the book demonstrates that the everyday social practices and informal learning within these communities are central to understanding the on-the-ground reality of EU external governance and normative power. It concludes that the success and limitations of the EU's transformative agenda in Ukraine are fundamentally shaped by the dynamics of these practitioner networks, offering a nuanced, practice-driven explanation for the complex outcomes of the Association Agreement and reform process.

With this introduction, we will review this book.

Maren Hofius's book, *European Union Communities of Practice: Diplomacy and Boundary Work in Ukraine* (2024) analyzes European Union (EU) diplomacy and community-building in Ukraine through a practice-based approach and field observations. This book presents a sophisticated, practice-theoretical analysis of European Union diplomacy, using the case study of EU engagement in Ukraine prior to and in the early stages of the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion. Its central argument is that the EU's external action, often seen as fragmented and institutionally complex, is best understood through the lens of Communities of Practice (CoP). These are groups of practitioners such as diplomats, officials, experts bound together by a shared domain of interest, a communal repertoire of practices, and a joint enterprise. The author contends that by examining these communities and their boundary work, it can illuminate the often-hidden, constitutive social rules that hold the EU's diplomatic community together and explain its resilience, adaptability, and internal dynamics in a challenging geopolitical environment like Ukraine. The book highlights how diplomatic actors in Ukraine's border regions

shape the EU's boundaries and identity, going beyond the traditional central focus in Brussels.

The analysis is structured to first establish the theoretical and methodological groundwork before applying it empirically to EU diplomacy in Ukraine. It opens by situating itself within a critical gap in International Relations (IR) and European Studies literature. The author identifies what is termed the community problem. Traditional IR theories, particularly realism and liberal institutionalism, often treat actors (states, the EU as a *sui generis* entity) as pre-formed, rational utility-maximizers interacting in an anarchic system. They fail to adequately explain how collective agency is constituted, maintained, and evolves through daily social interaction. EU studies, while rich in analyzing formal institutions, policies, and legal frameworks, often overlooks the informal, socially embedded world of the practitioners who enact Europe on the ground.

The Chapter One argues that the EU's external action is particularly plagued by this analytical shortcoming. Obsessed with questions of actorness, coherence, and effectiveness, mainstream scholarship misses the lived experience of being an EU diplomat. How do officials from diverse national backgrounds (member-state diplomats) and institutional cultures (European External Action Service, Commission Directorate-Generals) come to develop a shared understanding of their role and purpose? The book proposes that the answer lies not in treaties or organizational charts, but in the social practices of community-making. It posits that the EU in Ukraine functions as a complex ecosystem of overlapping and nested Communities of Practice, and that its diplomatic output is a product of the continuous negotiation within and between these communities.

Chapter Two delves deeply into the theoretical framework of Communities of Practice, drawing primarily on the work of Etienne Wenger but refining it for the context of international diplomacy. The core components are outlined:

Domain. The shared area of concern and commitment that legitimizes the community. For EU practitioners in Ukraine, this is the broad domain of EU-Ukraine relations, encompassing association, reform, integration, and resilience.

Community. The social fabric of relationships built through mutual engagement. This includes not just formal meetings in the EU Delegation in Kyiv, but coffee breaks, reporting rituals, joint travels, and crisis coordination sessions.

Practice. The shared repertoire of tools, frameworks, stories, concepts, and discourses that the community develops over time. This includes the *acquis communautaire*, monitoring templates for reform progress, specific jargon (approximation, conditionality, DCFTA), and shared historical narratives about Ukraine's European choice.

The author's key theoretical innovation is linking CoP to the concept of constitutive rules. Drawing from social theory (e.g., Searle, Giddens), the chapter argues that practices are not just what community members do, but they enact and reproduce the underlying rules that define their very social reality. The practice of drafting a joint EU Heads of Mission report, for instance, is governed by constitutive rules about what counts as legitimate evidence, what the EU position should sound like, and who has the authority to contribute. Therefore, by studying these practices ethnographically, one can reverse-engineer the often-unspoken social grammar of the EU diplomatic community. The chapter positions CoP as a meso-level theory that connects micro-level practices to the macro-level structure of EU foreign policy.

In Chapter Three, it acknowledges the challenge of studying often opaque, informal, and security-conscious diplomatic environments, this chapter is a detailed exposition of the book's innovative methodology. The author makes a crucial distinction: the methodology is practice theory, focused on uncovering the tacit, practical knowledge that guides action. The method is fundamentally ethnographic and interpretivist. The research is based on extensive fieldwork, primarily involving semi-structured, practice-oriented interviews.

The author utilized documentary analysis of internal, process-oriented documents (drafts of cables, meeting minutes, informal coordination emails where possible) and participant observation in public diplomatic forums and settings. The triangulation of these sources allowed for a reconstruction of the community's lifeworld. The chapter thoughtfully addresses significant ethical and access challenges, reflecting on the researchers' positionality and the compromises necessary when studying elite, closed professional fields, especially in a conflict-adjacent context.

Chapter Four discusses the theory and method are applied to the case of EU diplomacy in Ukraine. The central concept here is boundary work. The author argues that the essential practice defining the EU diplomatic community is not just internal cohesion, but the continuous work of managing boundaries. Three key types of boundary work are analyzed in depth:

- 1. Internal Boundary Work (Brussels-Kyiv).** This examines the constant negotiation between the field (the EU Delegation and Member State embassies in Kyiv) and headquarters (EEAS, Commission, Council in Brussels). Practitioners in Kyiv develop a shared, localized understanding of the Ukrainian context. A core practice is translating this on-the-ground reality into the institutional language and political timelines of Brussels. The community's skill lies in framing local needs (e.g., urgent budgetary support, specific regulatory advice) as alignments with or challenges to core EU policies, thereby performing their role as the eyes, ears, and voice of the EU.

2. **External Boundary Work between EU and Ukraine.** This involves collectively defining and enacting the boundary between the EU as a diplomatic community and its Ukrainian interlocutors. Practices here include the rituals of diplomacy (joint committee meetings, monitoring missions), but also the subtle work of socialization such teaching, mentoring, and modeling European norms and procedures for Ukrainian counterparts. The book shows how this is not a one-way transfer, but a negotiated process where Ukrainian agency constantly reshapes the EU community's own understanding of its reform goals.
3. **Inter-Community Boundary Work (within the EU Ecosystem in Kyiv).** The EU presence is not monolithic. The chapter meticulously maps the different, sometimes competing, CoPs: the core political/diplomatic community centered on the Delegation and major Member State embassies; the technical assistance and reform experts (often from Commission services or contracted agencies); and the crisis/security community that grew post-2014 and especially after 2022. The practice of boundary work involves brokering knowledge and coordinating action across these communities, for instance, ensuring that a technical rule-of-law project informs the political dialogue, or that security assessments shape development programming.

The conclusion synthesizes the findings to present a powerful alternative narrative of EU external action. The EU in Ukraine emerges not as a unified, hierarchical actor, but as a resilient, adaptive network of practitioners held together by a shared, practice-based commitment to a joint enterprise. Its strength lies precisely in its ability to perform boundary work to absorb internal diversity (different national and institutional perspectives), interface with a complex local environment, and adapt to shocks like war.

The book concludes by asserting the value of a Practice Theory and Communities of Practice approach for IR and EU studies more broadly. It moves analysis from the abstract level of the EU to the concrete human interactions that constitute it. This lens, the author argues, explains aspects of EU foreign policy that traditional models cannot: its persistence despite apparent incoherence, its capacity for incremental learning, and the deep social cohesion that often underpins its formal unity. The final reflection considers how the trauma and extraordinary pressure of the 2022 full-scale invasion acted as a stress test, ultimately strengthening the bonds and clarifying the joint enterprise of the EU diplomatic community in Ukraine, while also setting the stage for new forms of boundary work with an emerging war diplomacy community.

In sum, the book makes a significant contribution by offering a

granular, socially grounded theory of EU diplomacy. It successfully demonstrates that to understand the EU as an international actor, one must understand the communities of practice that perform its diplomacy and the constant, often invisible, boundary work through which they sustain their shared world and engage with others.

Conflict of interest

The author declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical considerations

The author has completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Reference

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