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The European Union as a Normative Power? Between Rhetoric and Reality – An analysis of the European Union's Record on the promotion of Human Rights

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I visited the Fundação Escola de Comércio Álvares Penteado (FECAP) on the invitation of Professor Claudia Marconi. The visit gave me the opportunity to engage with the people at the Centre and the students. During the visit I gave a number of lectures, which are briefly summarized in this note.

Lecture 1: Medindo o impacto da União Europeia sobre o comportamento de empresas na área de Direitos Humanos

During this workshop, I outlined the main themes that I intended to explore during my time at FECAP, the overarching one being what I consider to be the (increasing) gap between the EU's rhetoric, on the one hand, and what the organization is willing and able to do in practice, on the other.

In this lecture I applied this argument to the EU's approach to the promotion of Human Rights, showing that, when it comes to it, the EU will (almost) always choose the interests of business, commerce and the market over normative considerations, including the protection of human rights, be it in relation to individuals or companies.

Drawing a historical line from the Treaties of Rome to the present day, I argued that history shows that the EU was actually quite late in incorporating the protection and promotion of Human Rights into its treaties and, even then, has done relatively little to enhance the enforcement of its own Human Rights obligations in relation to individuals and companies.

This gap between rhetoric (which the EU has promoted increasingly ever since the end of the Cold War) and practice, I argued, has been the result of a mixture of several factors, ranging from 'culture of consensus' within and between the institutions of the EU to the complex decision-making processes to increasingly diverging normative and political priorities between and amongst member states.

Drawing on some specific cases like the EU's actions in response to the military coup in Honduras in 2009 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine I concluded that, taking these factors into account, there seems little prospect of the European Union becoming a global 'champion' of Human Rights in practice any time soon. Instead, a more likely scenario is an increasing divergence between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of some EU institutions, especially the Commission, and the actions of those institutions, and the member states, on the other.

Lecture 2: As políticas externas da União Europeia – Entre poder e impotência

In my second lecture, which was given within the framework of the regular undergraduate course on the European Union at FECAP, I returned to the theme of the gap between rhetoric and practice, this time applied specifically to the area of foreign policy. Once again, I took a historical perspective, arguing that, whilst the EU took a while to develop its own foreign policy, its very foundation and continued existence is the expression of a key part of its member states' foreign policy.

In relation to the foreign policy actions of the EU itself, I divided my lecture into three parts: Firstly, the slow beginnings of a European foreign policy during the 1970s. Second, the period from the end of the Cold War to the onset of the economic crisis of 2008 – with particular attention being paid to the 1990s and the attempts at ‘nation building’ in the wake of 9/11 – and, thirdly, the EU’s role in the world in the wake of the global financial crises and the rise of populism across the world, including in many EU member states.

What I show is that, across these periods, for all their differences, one consistent theme has been the failure of the EU to expand its power and influence decisively and sustainably beyond the area of trade. Despite many attempts, progress in areas like defense has been halting and very gradual.

In the last part of the lecture, I argue that, whilst being due to a large extent to the fact that the EU is simply not a state and, therefore, should not be judged as such, this expectation–capability and credibility gap has grown wider over recent years due to the increasing fragmentation within the EU as a result of the rise of populist forces in the EU who simply do not share the vision of ‘benign multilateralism’ which the EU has traditionally advanced. As a result, the EU seems ill equipped to act decisively on the global stage in an era of permanent, multiple and interlocking crises.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kai Enno Lehmann is an Associate Professor at the Institute of International Relations at the University of São Paulo in Brazil. His main area of research and teaching is multilateralism in response to crises, with particular focus on Europe and Latin America.

Lehmann's work has been published by a variety of academic journals, including the *Journal of Common Market Studies and Cooperation and Conflict*. He has given many hundreds of interviews on a number of media platforms talking about the future of multilateralism in an era of multiple, and permanent, crises.

Apart from his work in academia, Professor Lehmann also acts regularly as a Consultant for the German Federal Ministry of International Development and the Bertelsmann Foundation, amongst many others.

He is a Research Fellow at the *Centro Brasileiro de Relações Internacionais* (CEBRI) and a non-Resident Research Fellow at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). He is also a member of the International Studies Association and an Associate Member at the Royal Institute for International Affairs, Chatham House, in London.

