

UNANIMITY-DRIVEN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE EU'S LIMITATIONS AS AN EFFECTIVE GLOBAL ACTOR

By

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Abstract

The European Union holds a distinctive position in global politics, often viewed as an economic powerhouse with significant diplomatic network. However, this substantial economic power frequently struggling to assert unified geopolitical influence on the global stage. This thesis investigates why this gap exists between the EU's potential and its actual global actorness. It argues that the primary reasons lie in the structural and procedural constraints embedded within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which stem from member states' continued retention of sovereign control and their practice of advancing national agendas through the use, or threat, of veto power. Reliance on unanimous decision-making creates this intrinsic tension, hindering swift and coherent external action. Based on an analysis of CFSP mechanisms and case studies across three distinct geopolitical contexts, this research highlights the impact of divergent national interests. It also shows how inconsistent adherence to core EU principles by some member states deepens internal divisions, further weakening the EU's external effectiveness. The policy-oriented section of the thesis explores obstacles to reform, including proposals such as expanding qualified majority voting (QMV), but not only, and reveals that these constraints are fundamentally political rather than merely technical. The thesis concludes that bridging the gap between the EU's international aspirations and these complex internal political and procedural realities is vital for fulfilling its global potential.

Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned, Irakli Machaidze, candidate for the MA degree in International Relations, declare herewith that the present thesis titled “Unanimity-Driven Foreign Policy and the EU’s Limitations as an Effective Global Actor” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person’s or institution’s copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 21 May 2025

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Introduction

***“European shaping power remains limited.
...The idea of power is new to Europe.”***

Josep Borrell 2024

Understanding how global power is structured and whether we live in a multipolar world is a constant and important debate in International Relations. The fluidity of power and the numerous interpretations it invites explains the complexity and persistent fascination of world politics. To engage this question with contemporary relevance, it is crucial to move beyond classical theoretical frameworks, which primarily focused on sovereign states, and incorporate the dynamics of rapidly evolving geopolitical realities. This is particularly pertinent when considering the European Union, a unique non-state actor often assessed using criteria traditionally applied to nation-states in the discourse on superpower status.

While the European Union possesses a strong ideological foundation that could foster coherence and influence among its members and on the global stage, its fundamental capacity to project power effectively remains significantly constrained by internal divisions and a lack of unified approaches across key policy areas (Hoffmann 1995). A central puzzle of this thesis, one that also reflects a timely concern in European studies scholarship, is why the EU, despite its vast economic resources, unmatched diplomatic reach, and ambitious normative agenda, continues to fall short in translating this potential into coherent and decisive global action.

As Jean Monnet famously suggested, achieving true European integration requires not merely cooperation or maintaining a balance between national interests, but rather a fundamental “merging of the interests of the European peoples” (Monnet 1976, 361; translation mine). Nowhere is this challenge more evident than in the domain of foreign policy, where member states must move beyond negotiation toward genuine collective will. This makes foreign policy a particularly revealing site for examining the deeper structural tensions within

the EU, especially the persistent gap between its declared global ambitions and its limited practical impact.

This thesis takes that tension as a point of departure and hypothesizes that a key obstacle lies in the EU's decision-making architecture, specifically, the procedures and institutional constraints embedded in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). By focusing on the CFSP, thesis seeks to assess not only the EU's internal coherence but also its identity and credibility as a global actor, an identity that, contrary to Monnet's vision, still appears fragmented and interest-driven rather than truly integrated.

Against this backdrop, the central research question guiding this study is: How have CFSP's decision-making procedures inhibited the EU's capacity to act as a global (super)power since the Lisbon Treaty?

In addressing this question, the analysis will begin by asking: How have CFSP's institutional rules, particularly the unanimity requirement, shaped the EU's ability to respond to foreign policy crises? This will include close attention to the ongoing tension between unanimity and the proposed shift toward qualified majority voting (QMV). Next, the thesis will examine specific cases, such as the EU's sanctions policy against Russia, responses to the Israel-Gaza conflict, and debates over enlargement, to explore how and where decision-making deadlock has delayed or diluted collective action. Finally, it will ask: What institutional reform pathways are available to overcome these constraints, and what political or normative trade-offs would a transition toward QMV entail? Before making this case, however, it lays the necessary groundwork by examining the structural and institutional context in which these challenges arise.

The introductory chapter establishes the analytical framework for the thesis by examining the origins and structural characteristics of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy. It explores the initial ambitions for the CFSP as a unified foreign policy

tool, contrasting these with the practical realities shaped by its unique institutional design. A key focus is placed on the challenges posed by the unanimity requirement for decision-making, highlighting how this procedure, often described as operating under the “shadow of the veto” (Juncos and Pomorska 2024), contributes to complexity and inherent disagreement within the policy. The chapter further explores how the intergovernmental nature and operational dynamics among member states impact the CFSP’s coherence and capacity for effective external action (Lonardo 2018). By outlining these foundational structural and political constraints, this chapter provides the essential context for understanding the complexities and limitations inherent in the CFSP. It thus serves as the crucial starting point for the thesis’s subsequent investigation into the specific challenges the EU faces in projecting its influence on the global stage.

Building upon the structural analysis, chapter 2 provides empirical illustrations of the challenges and limitations facing the CFSP through the examination of specific case studies. It focuses on how the increasing politicization of foreign policy within the EU, particularly exacerbated by the unanimity-driven decision-making framework, impedes the Union's ability to act effectively as a global actor influencing international affairs (Biedenkopf, Costa, and Góra 2021). Through detailed examination of cases including the EU’s imposition of sanctions against Russia, its fragmented response to the Israel-Gaza conflict, and its engagement with aspirant member countries, this chapter demonstrates the practical consequences of internal contestation. These cases highlight how divergent national interests and decision-making bottlenecks hinder the EU’s capacity to formulate and implement timely, coherent, and impactful foreign policy. By presenting these concrete examples, Chapter 2 empirically grounds the structural issues identified earlier, illustrating why and how the CFSP’s design translates into tangible ineffectiveness on the global stage.

Chapter 3 turns to an exploration of potential pathways for reform. It examines various mechanisms and proposals aimed at overcoming the challenges, particularly those related to the unanimity rule, that constrain the EU's foreign policy action. The chapter considers alternatives ranging from the more effective use of existing Treaty provisions, to procedural innovations and mechanisms allowing for differentiated integration. It concludes the thesis's exploration by highlighting the complex political dynamics and inherent paradoxes involved in balancing the pursuit of greater external effectiveness with the need to maintain internal unity and respect for member state sovereignty, thus summarizing the potential future trajectories for EU foreign policy.

Methodological approach and conceptual framework

By examining the structural limitations, empirical realities, and potential reforms of the CFSP, this thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities that shape the European Union's role and limitations as an effective actor in contemporary global politics. To achieve this, thesis employs a qualitative methodological approach that integrates institutional analysis with illustrative case studies to investigate the complex relationship between the EU's foreign policy architecture and its capacity for global actorness. The study builds on a layered body of literature review, beginning with classical International Relations theories on superpowers and power distribution. It then gradually narrows its focus to the European Union, examining it in the body chapters as a unique global actor and a constrained, yet potential, superpower.

To ground its analysis in concrete practice, this study employs three carefully selected case studies that reflect the EU's engagement with foreign policy across different regional and geopolitical contexts. These include: the EU's sanctions response to Russian aggression in Ukraine, its engagement with the Israel-Gaza crisis, and its approach to enlargement and relations with aspirant member countries. Rather than isolating each case to a single sub-question, the cases are chosen for their collective ability to illuminate the persistent role of national interests in shaping EU foreign policy, regardless of the issue area.

In each case, the unanimity requirement within the CFSP has either delayed decision-making, diluted outcomes, or revealed deeper structural limitations on collective action. Together, these cases allow for a cross-regional analysis of how institutional design interacts with diverging member state interests, thereby offering a more comprehensive picture of the limitations that prevent the EU from acting as a unified global power.

This research draws primarily on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy analyses, official EU communications, and reputable media reports. This documentary

approach provides both breadth and historical depth, enabling a comprehensive understanding of EU foreign policy developments and the institutional dynamics underpinning the CFSP. While it does not capture the full complexity of behind-the-scenes deliberations, the analysis of publicly available material allows for the identification of recurring patterns, institutional limitations, and the influence of national interests across different foreign policy contexts. As such, the methodology is well-suited to uncover systemic dynamics and evaluate the structural factors shaping the EU's external actions.

This thesis develops a conceptual framework that bridges classical International Relations theory with a focused analysis of EU foreign policy mechanisms. Central to this framework are clear definitions of “global actorness” and “superpower status,” both of which are established and highlighted in the literature review. Global actorness, in this context, refers to the “capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system” (Sjöstedt 1977, 16). Superpower status, building on traditional IR definitions (e.g., military, economic, diplomatic dominance, and global reach), is assessed here not as a strict binary but as a spectrum, with the thesis examining the extent to which the EU's attributes align with or diverge from this ideal, particularly in its ability to act decisively.

This study adopts CFSP decision-making mechanisms as its primary analytical lens because these procedural frameworks are arguably the most direct and immediate determinants of the EU's capacity to translate its collective potential into unified and effective external action. While alternative theoretical lenses, such as “normative power Europe” or “ontological security,” offer valuable insights into the EU's identity, values, and internal cohesion, they do not directly explain the persistent impediments to decisive action that form the core puzzle of this thesis. namely, the link between foreign policy projection and the decision-making structures that shape its formation. NPE, for instance, illuminates the EU's unique approach to spreading its norms and values, but does not directly address the institutional hurdles to rapid

policy deployment in crises (Manners 2006b). Similarly, ontological security research focuses on how states maintain their sense of self in international relations, exploring how identity and the need for continuity can shape their foreign policy preferences (Mitzen 2006).

However, while national security traditions are relevant to understanding member state behavior, they are tangential to the procedural and institutional barriers within the CFSP decision-making system itself, which are the primary concern when analyzing structural impediments to decisive EU external action. Given that EU member states have historically maintained divergent security arrangements, ranging from independent national policies to alliances beyond the EU, the concept of “security” within the CFSP has remained largely symbolic. This is one reason why the thesis focuses primarily on the foreign policy dimension of the CFSP. By concentrating on its mechanisms, the study offers a targeted explanation for the operational gap between the EU’s ambitions and its practical capabilities. The analysis rests on the assumption that, despite formal aspirations for deeper integration, member-state sovereignty will continue to shape foreign policy decisions, making the negotiation of interests within CFSP procedures a persistent and critical challenge.

Literature review and hypothesis contextualization

A growing body of work, particularly from international think tanks and academic journals, contends that the contemporary world is not truly multipolar. Instead, only two nations possess the economic scale, military strength, and global influence necessary to be considered true poles: the United States and China (Bekkevold 2023; Brooks and Wohlforth 2023; Røren 2024; Bunde and Eisentraut 2025). This viewpoint, however, is met with opposition. Some argue that the assumption that multipolarity requires multiple states with roughly equal capabilities is misleading. In reality, multipolar systems are often asymmetrical, with two, three, or more dominant powers alongside several middle powers competing for influence, and this is the world we live in today (Ashford and Cooper 2023; Dahi and Demir 2025; Chenoy 2023). This aligns with the scholarly concept of “unbalanced multipolarity” (Nilsson 2021) and sets the stage for examining how both traditional state powers and unconventional actors like the EU are situated within global power structures.

Despite its considerable resources and influence, the EU faces internal decision-making constraints that limit its potential to function as a true superpower (K. E. Smith 2014). Highlighting this dimension is essential, as today’s international system is shaped not only by state-to-state dynamics but also by the roles of complex regional and supranational entities, like European Union, which is nonetheless evaluated using the same criteria traditionally applied to sovereign states in determining superpower status.

Naturally, this debate extends far beyond a simple discussion of polarity. It leads us to deeper theoretical questions: What does it take to be considered a global superpower? Classical IR literature offers guidance here, but it should be noted that the discourse has evolved significantly from the highly polarized context of World War II and the Cold War to a more nuanced modern understanding. Kenneth Waltz, for example, provides a tangible framework for identifying great powers, asserting that a state becomes a pole within the international

system if it holds a disproportionately large share of global resources and excels across multiple dimensions of power. These include population size, territorial reach, resource endowment, economic capacity, military strength, political stability, and overall state competence (Waltz 1979). Building on this foundation, Paul Kennedy argues that no state can truly claim great power status without possessing sufficient military strength to defend itself and project force beyond its borders. In his view, the ability to exert influence internationally is largely determined by the tangible economic and technological resources available to a state (Kennedy 1989). Applying these classical definitions to the EU reveals a fundamental mismatch: while the Union collectively possesses significant economic and technological power, it lacks centralized control over military assets and suffers from political fragmentation, which is reflected in its foreign policy projection (Manners 2006a).

Helmut Schmidt and Zbigniew Brzezinski outline four decisive domains that define global power: military, economic, technological, and cultural strength. However, they also emphasize a crucial yet often overlooked factor, the ability of a power to actively shape and solidify key partnerships that can, over time, evolve into formalized institutions (Schmidt and Brzezinski 1998). This perspective shifts the conversation toward a more contemporary and liberal international order framework, aligning with the views of John Ikenberry. According to him, alongside other crucial and more tangible factors, the ability to shape global institutions and enforce rule-based governance through foreign policy is not just an extension of power, but one of the defining characteristics of a superpower. This reflects a broader understanding of global order as an interconnected and interdependent system. In a liberal hegemonic order, power is not merely exerted through force but is used to establish a system of rules that weaker and secondary states willingly integrate into (Ikenberry 2011).

Having laid out the theoretical foundations, still largely rooted in a realist perspective, it is now essential to move beyond abstract categorization and examine where the European

Union fits within these frameworks. To this end, the work of Stanley Hoffmann is particularly insightful. As one of the pioneering scholars in the field, Hoffmann emphasized that assessing the EU's potential as a global power requires a nuanced understanding of European foreign policy, transatlantic relations, and the shifting roles of other major powers, particularly the United States, in an increasingly interdependent world (Hoffmann 1987b). At the heart of Hoffmann's perspective on international relations is his rejection of the realist notion that states behave as uniform, self-contained entities, like to billiard balls, regardless of their political or economic systems. Instead, he argues that a state's foreign policy is deeply influenced by its internal social structures, national ideology, and historical context (Hoffmann 1987a). This brings us to the point that the EU's uniqueness, both in its structure and in the way it generates and exercises power, sets it apart. However, when measured alongside other global actors, its inability to deliver comparable outcomes undermines its ability to compete effectively on the world stage.

One school of thought argues that Europe is a "quiet superpower," having carved out a unique role in the post-Cold War era. According to this perspective, the EU has become a dominant force in civilian forms of influence, often working in tandem with the United States to shape global affairs (Moravcsik 2009) and EU's economic strength, political cohesion, and commitment to democratic values position it as a formidable global actor (McCormick 2017). In fact, some contend that Europe is the only region besides the U.S. capable of exerting influence across the full spectrum of power, from "hard" military strength to "soft" diplomatic and economic leverage (Moravcsik 2010).

However, a counterargument widely accepted in academic discourse challenges this classification. While Europe undoubtedly possesses many instruments of power, including those typically associated with superpowers, it ultimately falls short of achieving true superpower status (Buchan 1993). This is not simply due to its lack of a unified military force,

as is often suggested, but rather because Europeans themselves do not perceive their role as the ultimate guarantors of their own security (Laïdi 2008). This self-perception remains a fundamental obstacle to Europe's emergence as a fully realized global power.

Having said that, some scholars take this debate even further, questioning whether the very nature of the European project is compatible with the concept of power (Manners 2002). They argue that Europe's foundational philosophy is rooted in a rejection of traditional power politics (Scheipers and Sicurelli 2007). This vision suggests that the EU was designed not to project power in the conventional sense but to transcend it through deep integration and collective governance.

However, the key to addressing this question lies in recognizing that the EU's idealistic founding principles have evolved over time, often in response to global realities. This shift began earlier than many assume. As far back as the 1970s, the development of "European Political Cooperation" (EPC), which later became the foundation for the EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy, the central theme of this thesis, reflected an emerging need for Europe to carve out an independent geopolitical role (Schirm 1996). Yet, throughout this period, the EU remained overshadowed by the dominant superpowers, as it sought a "third way" between them. Structural limitations played a crucial role in this dynamic: decision-making by consensus, coupled with a complex system of external representation reliant on a rotating presidency, significantly constrained the bloc's ability to act with unified strategic purpose (M. E. Smith 2004). These internal limitations, like consensus decision-making and the rotating presidency, were built into the EU's foreign policy framework and expose its inability to achieve the strong central authority Waltz describes or the stable leadership Ikenberry emphasizes.

This problem, and the search for its root causes, is hardly new. Yet the debate remains as relevant as ever, feeding into broader discussions about global poles of power and the actors

that shape them. Despite repeated assertions, most notably from French president Emmanuel Macron and others (Anderlini and Caulcutt 2023), the European Union does not convincingly stand as a third pole in the international system (Bekkevold 2023). The fundamental challenge lies in the divergent national interests of its member states, which make the union inherently susceptible to internal divisions. Even in moments of apparent unity, such as the EU's collective support for Ukraine, the reality remains that Europe lacks a truly unified defence, security, and foreign policy (Wang and Moise 2023).

This brings us to the gap this thesis seeks to address: not merely whether the European Union qualifies as a superpower, but why it falls short of that status? Because this study hypothesizes that one of the primary reasons lies in flawed decision-making procedures and institutional limitations that have hindered the development of a swift and cohesive Common Foreign and Security Policy, research frames the CFSP not only as a measure of the EU's internal policy coherence but also as a key determinant of its identity as a global actor and its effectiveness in international political competition.

The decision-making process within the European Union's CFSP is notably complex, particularly due to its reliance on unanimous decisions during voting (Gozi 2021; Szép 2023), which is a rare occurrence in today's European political landscape - CFSP remains one of the few areas where decisions are still made unanimously.

To overcome these challenges, literature extensively debates the merits of transitioning from unanimity to qualified majority voting in CFSP (Gotkowska, Kazimierska, and Szytk 2023; Carlotti 2023; Navarra and Jančová 2023; EPRS 2020; Lehne 2022). A frequent argument for QMV is its potential to foster a more efficient and timely decision-making process (Hertz and Leuffen 2011). Lehne underscores this by suggesting that unanimity can genuinely undermine the Union's capacity for unified action during major international crises. He contends that even seemingly cohesive responses, such as the EU's reaction to Russia's

invasion, were arguably facilitated by external pressure and broad consensus on the immediate threat, implying that the EU's coherence might prove fragile without such aligning factors (Lehne 2022). Proponents like Novaky suggest that QMV could even contribute to the development of a common strategic culture by encouraging member states to prioritize a shared European perspective in foreign policy challenges over purely national ones, fostering political trade-offs and debate within the Council (Nováky 2021).

However, the prospect of increased QMV use in CFSP has significant number of critics rooted in concerns about effectiveness, legitimacy, and sovereignty. Pomorska and Wessel are particularly critical, viewing QMV as an overly simplistic solution for fundamental CFSP issues like persistent inconsistency among member states. They explicitly challenge the assumption that QMV inherently leads to more efficient or speedy decisions, arguing this link requires further empirical investigation. Furthermore, they doubt whether QMV would genuinely enhance the Union's international credibility, particularly if decisions are taken without the full confidence of all 27 member states, which could even disrupt established informal consensus-building processes (Wessel and Pomorska 2021).

Schuette offers a more focused critique, arguing that QMV's practical benefits might be limited primarily to restrictive measures. He sees little compelling evidence of a discernible advantage for sensitive areas like human rights statements, which rely on declaratory weight derived from unanimous political backing, or civilian missions, where majority voting on deployments risking citizens' safety seems questionable and disconnected from the need for unanimous commitment of personnel and resources (Schuette 2019). In addition, The observation by Blockmans that CFSP largely remains within the purview of the Council and member states' governments provides a contextual backdrop for understanding the deep-seated intergovernmental nature that QMV would challenge (Blockmans 2013).

Resistance to QMV is intrinsically linked to concerns over national sovereignty and the potential shift in the balance of power within the EU. The debate surrounding QMV has been present since CFSP's inception, with smaller states historically wary that their national interests could not be adequately protected without the leverage of a veto. This tension is directly relevant to EU cohesion. As clearly articulated by Sieberson, expanding the use of QMV is widely perceived as a diminution of national sovereignty and a corresponding augmentation of the EU's supranational authority (Sieberson 2010). Mintel and von Ondarza add a crucial legal dimension, noting that pursuing a path beyond national sovereignty through QMV may encounter national constitutional limits in certain member states. While the fear that larger member states would inevitably dominate under QMV is a common objection, Mintel and von Ondarza also cite evidence from other EU policy areas where QMV is already in use, suggesting this concern might be overstated, pointing out that even larger states like Germany have been regularly outvoted over time (Mintel and Von Ondarza 2022). Relatedly, Amadio Viceré discusses the phenomenon of "coalitions of the willing," noting that while increased QMV might be seen as an alternative, informal coalitions already exist under the current unanimity rule and can incur significant costs in terms of trust and legitimacy within the formal EU framework (Viceré 2023).

To sum up, this chapter has provided a critical synthesis of both classical and contemporary literature on global power and actorness, framing the theoretical landscape within which this thesis's central question and hypothesis are situated. By grounding a policy-relevant issue, the EU's capacity for effective external action, in these theoretical debates, this review contributes to understanding the gap between the Union's aspirations and its current capabilities. It also highlights the extensive existing literature on one of the most researched solutions, thereby setting the stage for exploring alternative or combined policy approaches as a way forward.

Chapter 1: Framing the CFSP through what it promised and what it became

*“We will always be a global payer
but it is time we started being a global player too.”*

Jean-Claude Juncker 2018

Perceptions play a crucial role in international relations, and the European Union appears to benefit significantly from this reality. Although the EU presents itself as having a Common Foreign and Security Policy, a closer examination of its structure and operations reveals that it is neither truly common nor distinctly foreign, nor does it effectively address security or function as a coherent policy (Rummel and Wiedemann 1998, 53).

The scope of the CFSP is exceptionally broad, encompassing “all areas of foreign and security policy” (European Union 2012b) according to the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). Given this expansive potential, it was initially expected that the CFSP’s specific objectives would evolve over time as member states clarified their collective goals. However, the same article stipulates that CFSP procedures and rules are to be defined and implemented by the European Council and the Council of the European Union “acting unanimously, except where the Treaties provide otherwise” (European Union 2012b). There is a longstanding argument that the requirement for unanimous voting was introduced with the expectation that requiring all states to make decisions collectively would reinforce their commitment to shared goals (Gozi 2021, 7). However, this very requirement for unanimity may also explain why expectations for the development of these rules have not materialized as anticipated.

1.1 The burden of unanimity

Unlike most other EU policies, negotiations within the Common Foreign and Security Policy occur under the “shadow of the veto.” (Juncos and Pomorska 2024, 4). This reliance on unanimity makes the policy particularly susceptible to disruption. Since unanimity is the

primary decision-making procedure in the CFSP, compromise and consensus-building have emerged as fundamental norms. In this regard, the CFSP operates within a distinct institutional framework compared to many other EU policies (Eckes 2015, 537).

Disagreement has always been inherent to the CFSP, manifesting in divisions between Europeanists and Atlanticists, large and small states, and differing national foreign policy traditions. These divisions reflect genuine trade-offs in debates over the EU's global role. However, they have little correlation with the broader patterns of political conflict outside the CFSP framework (Biedenkopf, Costa, and Góra 2021, 332). Since its inception at Maastricht, there have been numerous occasions where member states either failed to reach a joint position or settled for a mere declaration. Given that decision-making must account for the preferences and concerns of all member states, such challenges are hardly unexpected. However, in recent years, the level of conflict within the EU's foreign policy framework is believed to have intensified significantly (Maurer and Wright 2021, 385).

In theory, a key objective of the CFSP is to enable the EU to present a unified stance on foreign and security matters, with the expectation that this cohesion would enhance its ability to establish and sustain a stable international security environment. The effectiveness of any foreign policy largely depends on an actor's capacity to make binding and timely decisions. However, when multiple actors are involved, the decision-making process becomes exponentially more complex (Duquette 2001, 174).

Recognizing this issue and its increasing prominence underscores a fundamental challenge within CFSP and, more broadly, the EU's operational framework: unity. The Treaty on European Union seeks to compel all member states to act collectively in foreign policy, even when they do not fully agree on the specifics. In essence, the EU aspires to present a unified stance, despite underlying national divergences. However, this creates an inherent tension, as balancing collective action with the sovereignty of individual states remains difficult

(Dijkstra and Vanhoonacker 2017). As long as the institutional framework remains unresolved, political issues will continue to be leveraged as bargaining tools over institutional arrangements. Furthermore, the veto power granted to each member state allows any one country to block common positions or actions, effectively undermining the EU's ability to project international influence before it even takes shape (Brkan 2006).

This reasoning brings us to the stage of realization that the trans governmental nature of the CFSP requires a thorough reconceptualization to better understand contestation. Disagreement has always been a core feature of the CFSP, and over time, efforts have been made to structure it in a way that fosters deliberation and cooperation, enabling member states to formulate common policies without fundamentally clashing with their national interests (M. E. Smith 2004). However, in practice, the EU's commitment to these principles has resulted in a weaker and less cohesive foreign policy. Moreover, evidence suggests that the existing institutions are failing to adequately address the challenges they face (Grevi and Morillas 2020).

1.2 Power without execution

A review of CFSP's past actions suggests that, in practice, it is not about formulating concrete policy measures but rather about responding to crises as they arise. Although CFSP is intended to address all EU security concerns, its design focuses primarily on political issues (Duke 2000). Furthermore, given that EU member states have historically maintained different security arrangements, ranging from national policies to alliances outside the EU, the concept of "security" within CFSP has remained largely symbolic. This is one of the reasons why this thesis focuses primarily on the foreign policy dimension of the CFSP. However, over time, the lack of substance in the EU's security policy has also contributed to the erosion of its foreign policy effectiveness.

A key factor behind these shortcomings lies in CFSP's operational limitations and its persistent lack of means and capability. While the Council claims to conduct a Common Foreign and Security Policy, it lacks both the resources and authority necessary to make and implement decisions effectively. This, in turn, exposes another institutional weakness: the fragmentation between different EU pillars. Since the EU lacks legal personality, it depends on various actors to carry out its decisions (Govaere 2011). These structural deficiencies have resulted in an ineffective foreign policy, at times leading to complete inaction.

One of the clearest examples of this structural incompatibility is the European Commission's cautious engagement in foreign policy within the CFSP framework since its establishment by the Maastricht Treaty. Between Maastricht and Lisbon, the Commission technically had the authority to propose foreign policy initiatives under CFSP but remained hesitant to do so unless the policies aligned with Pillar I, which covers economic, trade, and other traditional EU competencies. This reluctance stemmed from concerns that deeper involvement in Pillar II (focused on intergovernmental foreign and security policy) could blur the distinction between the EU's supranational and intergovernmental decision-making processes. In practice, this created inefficiencies, as foreign policy decisions made under CFSP (Pillar II), such as economic sanctions and diplomatic measures, still required implementation by the Commission under Pillar I (Rummel and Wiedemann 1998, 56)

The Amsterdam Treaty failed to resolve these institutional tensions, and while the Treaty of Lisbon introduced significant reforms in 2009, the intergovernmental nature of CFSP largely remained intact. Although the Commission gained a stronger voice through the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, it lost the direct ability to submit proposals to the Council in CFSP matters, a role now reserved for the High Representative. However, since the HP also serves as a Vice-President of the Commission, this dual role

continues to create procedural ambiguities and institutional overlap, complicating the EU's foreign policy coordination (Genderen 2015, 5).

1.3 One union, many voices

At the end of the day, it is important to remember that all member states view CFSP as a potentially valuable tool for advancing their national foreign policy objectives. For some, CFSP represents the only viable means of engaging in global foreign policy, while for others, it remains merely an optional instrument, used selectively depending on the issue (Hadfield 2006). This dynamic leads to a fascinating paradox that ties directly into the central conceptual question of this thesis. While CFSP was initially perceived as an opportunity for smaller EU member states to have their voices heard, few anticipated the extent to which this would shift the balance of influence. Smaller states have indeed gained a platform, but in doing so, they have acquired the power to slow down, obstruct, or even reshape the EU's broader foreign policy agenda to serve their own interests (Destradi, Plagemann, and Taş 2022).

To evaluate the success or failure of the European Union's foreign policy on the international stage and compare its strengths with those of global superpowers, we must first acknowledge the inherently complex and fluid nature of European foreign affairs. The traditional divide between domestic and foreign policy has eroded, and the very boundaries of the EU remain ambiguous.

The concepts of "success" and "failure" in EU foreign policy are frequently debated but rarely given clear definitions. Critics often assess the EU through the lens of a superpower, interpreting its perceived limitations as failures. However, EU foreign policy should not be judged solely by its ability to manage international crises. Equally significant is its role in fostering internal cohesion and stability. Rather than pursuing external dominance, the EU's

foreign policy often prioritizes preventing internal fragmentation and maintaining unity (Jørgensen 1998).

However, while acknowledging the complexity and the longstanding view that CFSP is *sui generis*, being intergovernmental and perhaps better understood as a process rather than an institution (Øhrgaard 2018, 26), this should not prevent us from assessing the success of the policy's objectives and the effectiveness of the means it employs. The reason of this Primarily is that the EU itself frames this policy and its executors as the main representatives and vehicles for projecting the bloc's foreign policy.

1.4 Is the CFSP capable of projecting the EU globally?

The European Union's foreign policy is primarily aimed at upholding and promoting its core values and interests on a global scale. A distinctive feature of this policy, particularly the Common Foreign and Security Policy, is its role in strengthening the EU's position as a unified international actor, enabling member states to exert influence collectively (Lonardo 2018, 590). However, legal scholars debate whether, despite fostering EU unity, the CFSP remains predominantly intergovernmental in nature due to its unique structural characteristics (Szép 2020, 8). This is significant because, in theory, the EU does not merely act as a representative of its member states but also pursues its own objectives in external affairs (Sjursen 2003, 38). Understanding this dynamic is crucial for assessing the EU's foreign policy and its potential to secure an influential role in global politics.

First, it is essential to recognize that the EU primarily operates as a market power, making economic restrictive measures one of its most impactful responses. It leverages access to its market as a bargaining tool to influence domestic policies in its trading partners, as well as international frameworks such as global governance and foreign policy (Meunier and Nicolaïdis 2006, 913). This demonstrates that the EU's ability to project power through the

CFSP is closely tied to its economic strategy. At the same time, however, this interconnection also constrains the EU's foreign policy efforts. Given the complex relationship between trade and geopolitical conflicts, such as the EU's sanctions in response to the Russia-Ukraine crisis, it is reasonable to assume that, over time, the political and economic pressure exerted by the EU may yield some degree of effectiveness (Ryabtsev and Ali 2022, 7). Nonetheless, sanctions remain a primary tool in the EU's foreign policy arsenal, yet their use presents ethical and strategic challenges. One major concern is that sanctions can disproportionately harm civilian populations in the targeted state, contradicting the EU's overarching commitment to global peace within the framework of its CFSP (Giumelli 2013, 509).

Reaching to the dimension about the EU's commitment to its principles leads to broader questions about its role in global politics. The EU has been criticized for attempting to "Westernize" the world, with the CFSP often viewed as a mechanism through which the bloc positions itself as a guardian of peace and security. However, this raises the question of whether such a role should be limited to the EU's own borders (Isani and Schlipphak 2017, 509). Many argue that, in its efforts to promote its fundamental values and standards, the EU operates beyond its legal authority. Consequently, some contend that enforcing order beyond its territorial limits exceeds its intended functions (González 2001, 10). However, this critique inadvertently supports the argument that the EU can be seen as a global superpower, as the ability to impose order, whether through soft or hard power, is a defining characteristic of such states (Gallarotti 2011).

Having said that, an important distinction must be made: despite certain similarities to other superpowers, the EU's governance structure, as a union of diverse member states, fundamentally sets it apart. While the EU possesses international legal personality, allowing it to represent its own interests rather than merely those of individual member states, tensions arise when these interests diverge (Ryabtsev and Ali 2022, 9). When such discrepancies occur,

the EU's internal cohesion is disrupted, threatening its ability to function as a unified international actor (Saurugger and Terpan 2015, 11). Therefore, the EU's position in foreign policy largely hinges on how its policies are perceived and accepted by member states, as well as their willingness to align with its broader strategic goals (Giumelli 2013, 41).

One can argue that this reality should compel the EU to prioritize member states' interests over acting as an independent global enforcer, a valid perspective that suggests power projection should begin from within. However, given the vast differences in national priorities, attempting to satisfy all member states risks stalling the EU's foreign policy ambitions altogether, let alone deviating from its core principles (Gross 2009).

This creates a paradox when researching the EU's foreign policy power: due to the structure and limited enforcement capacity of the CFSP, the effectiveness of each decision is already in question. However, discussing the effectiveness of these decisions is difficult, as the flawed decision-making process often makes even reaching them a challenge. If decisions are eventually made, timing becomes another critical factor to consider.

In conclusion, the contradictions embedded in the CFSP's design, between ambition and capability, unity and sovereignty, are not abstract flaws but structural limitations with tangible consequences. By tracing the gap between its original ambitions and its current operational reality, it becomes clear that institutional fragmentation, the unanimity requirement, and competing national interests have limited the EU's ability to act as a unified foreign policy actor. These constraints are not just theoretical, they manifest in real-world failures to respond effectively to international crises. The following chapter turns to specific case studies that illustrate how these internal limitations, including timing problem, have translated into external ineffectiveness.

Chapter 2: Illustrative cases of ineffectiveness

“Europe must be able to act independently precisely in the areas where Europe must act independently.”

Ursula von der Leyen 2019

The rise of populist political parties in several EU member states, coupled with the increasing politicization of the EU's foreign policy, has made it more challenging to achieve intra-European consensus over the past decade (Biedenkopf, Costa, and Góra 2021). This, in turn, frequently leads to delays in decision-making and compromises that alter the original policy intent, ultimately weakening the EU's ability to respond swiftly and effectively to global challenges (Destradi, Plagemann, and Taş 2022). Simultaneously, unanimity-driven structure grants significant influence to those who choose to exercise their veto power (Juncos and Pomorska 2024). Therefore, it is essential to examine how the politicization of European foreign policy affects the dynamics of cooperation among EU member states, with a particular focus on the procedural norms that govern this policy.

Politicization can be understood as the growing polarization of opinions, interests, or values, along with the extent to which these divisions are publicly expressed in the policymaking process (De Wilde and Zürn 2012, 140). While politicization has shaped many areas of EU policy, such as economic and monetary integration, immigration, and trade, its impact on foreign policy has been especially pronounced, marked by greater intensity and broader implications (Schimmelfennig, Leuffen, and Rittberger 2015). In our case, for a significant period, foreign and security policy seemed largely insulated from these trends, partly due to its intergovernmental and confidential nature.

The procedural distinctiveness of this policy area grants individual member states greater leverage, further reinforcing this insulation (Bickerton 2011). Compared to policies governed by the Community method, where politicization often manifests through public debate, party contestation, and parliamentary scrutiny, intergovernmental policies experience

politicization in a different way. In the latter, contestation is driven by national governments using veto power and linking unrelated policy issues to foreign policy decisions, as seen in CFSP (Costa 2019).

Because the CFSP is primarily overseen by the European Council, an institution that operates behind closed doors and without public records of deliberation, it remains difficult to trace the concrete influence of politicization on the EU's foreign policy choices. In particular, official documents seldom indicate whether a decision was stalled by the need for unanimity, or whether early resistance among member states was gradually negotiated into a consensus. Despite this opacity, broader patterns of behaviour can still be observed. This thesis, therefore, focuses on three carefully selected cases that reflect critical moments of EU external action: (2.1) the imposition of sanctions on Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, (2.2) the Union's responses to the escalation of violence between Israel and Gaza, and (2.3) its handling of democratic backsliding in neighbouring and candidate countries.

The three cases that follow were selected precisely because they reveal these tensions in different regional and geopolitical contexts. Each demonstrates how pragmatic distance from Brussels and diverging national priorities, especially among governments with populist or sovereigntist leanings, can obstruct collective action (Destradi, Plagemann, and Taş 2022; Juncos and Pomorska 2024). Together, they show that the EU's foreign policy ineffectiveness stems not only from structural limitations, but from the political choices of its own member states.

2.1 The EU sanctions against Russia

As of May 2025, The European Union has imposed seventeen package of sanctions against Russian Federation following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (European Council 2025b). These sanctions encompass a wide array of economic restrictions, including

multiple export and import bans, service limitations, and targeted measures against specific individuals. One wing of the analysts argue that these measures have significantly impacted Russia's economy, particularly by forcing the Kremlin to seek alternative, longer, and costlier supply routes to access critical Western technologies. Additionally, the sanctions have intensified existing structural weaknesses within Russia's economic framework. Among these, war-induced labour shortages have been particularly disruptive, contributing to inflationary pressures and compelling Russia's central bank to raise interest rates to record highs, subsequently discouraging private investment (Taran 2024).

However, despite their economic impact, the sanctions have failed to halt Moscow's war efforts, and we are now witnessing the fourth year of the full-scale war. High oil prices and substantial increases in military spending have largely mitigated the intended economic strain imposed by Western sanctions (Moller-Nielsen 2025). This raises the broader question of why these measures have not achieved their desired political and strategic outcomes. While the dynamics may differ in the case of other global actors, this thesis focuses on the timing and nature of the EU's decision-making process, which, based on the case studies, has been significantly shaped by growing politicization internal contestation and a lack of shared commitment to the fundamental principles upon which the EU was founded.

Intergovernmental decision-making in EU foreign policy has become particularly vulnerable to political manoeuvring, as member states increasingly challenge fundamental EU principles (Costa et al. 2024). This phenomenon is connected with the concept of soft hostage-taking, wherein a government, acting as a hostage-taker, leverages its veto power on intergovernmental decisions, strategically linking unrelated policy issues to extract concessions from other member states and EU institutions (Müller and Slominski 2025). In recent years, the EU's foreign policy decision-making process has been at the forefront of this practice, revealing the extent to which political contestation can shape high-stakes policymaking.

Soft hostage-taking is particularly relevant to this research because it reflects the strategic calculations of member states that seek to minimize political and reputational costs while ensuring that their demands are met. A pertinent example is the role played by the Hungarian government, led by the populist radical right Fidesz party, in EU policymaking from 2022 to the present. During this period, the EU faced critical foreign policy decisions related to Russia's war against Ukraine, which required unanimity. This procedural requirement provided the Hungarian government with multiple veto opportunities, which were perceived as highly credible threats by its European counterparts (Müller and Gazsi 2023).

A notable instance of this strategic manoeuvring occurred when Hungary ultimately refrained from blocking the opening of accession talks with Ukraine (Court 2023). Instead of outright opposition, Prime Minister Orbán simply exited the negotiation room at the time of the vote, thereby allowing the EU to maintain unanimity while simultaneously distancing himself from a decision he had publicly criticized as a "bad decision," clearly showing its stance on the matter (Moens, Barigazzi, and Hernández-morales 2023).

Soft hostage-taking often involves the sequential use of veto threats and delaying tactics to sustain pressure and maintain leverage in ongoing policy negotiations. This process resembles a series of veto-bargains, wherein each veto threat is merely one step in a broader sequence of strategic interactions involving threats and counter-threats (Cameron and Elmes 1994, 1).

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Hungary has repeatedly delayed or threatened to veto EU sanctions against Russia, leveraging its position within the bloc to extract concessions. Over the course of 16 sanction packages, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has consistently used its veto power, or the threat of it, to influence both the adoption and renewal of these measures. Initially, Hungary joined the EU in condemning Russia's invasion, but as

the first wave of global support for Ukraine stabilized, Budapest began asserting its own strategic interests (Euractiv 2022).

In September 2022, Hungary opposed the EU's eighth sanctions package, particularly objecting to measures affecting energy imports. Gergely Gulyás, Orbán's chief of staff, stated that Hungary could not support sanctions that included energy restrictions. This stance led to negotiations and modifications to the proposed measures, delaying their adoption as the EU sought a compromise that would secure Hungary's approval (Euronews 2022).

In 2023, Hungary continued its pattern of influencing EU sanctions against Russia by vetoing measures targeting the Russian nuclear sector. In January, Orbán declared that Hungary would oppose any EU sanctions affecting nuclear energy, specifically targeting Russian state nuclear energy company Rosatom. Hungary's stance was influenced by its plans to expand the Paks nuclear power plant with Rosatom's involvement, underscoring the strategic importance of this energy partnership (Euractiv 2023).

A similar situation arose in February 2024, when Hungary blocked the approval of the EU's 13th sanctions package. This time, Budapest took issue with the inclusion of Chinese companies on the sanctions list, arguing that more time was needed to analyse the proposals. The delay forced EU officials into further discussions before the package could move forward (Espinoza et al. for Financial Times 2024)

By October 2024, Hungary's strategy had become even more pronounced. As the EU prepared to renew its existing sanctions, Hungary made its support conditional on retaining exemptions for Russian energy supplies. Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó warned that without these exemptions, Budapest would veto the renewal. The EU ultimately preserved them, demonstrating Hungary's growing leverage in sanction negotiations (Euractiv 2024).

In January 2025, Hungary again delayed the renewal of sectoral sanctions, linking its approval to concerns over gas transit routes through Ukraine. Following Ukraine's decision to

terminate Russian gas transit affecting Central European countries, Hungary used the upcoming sanctions deadline as an opportunity to demand reassurances regarding energy supplies before lifting its objections (Liboreiro for Euronews 2025)

Most recently, in March 2025, Hungary attempted to block the EU's renewal of sanctions against over 2,000 Russian individuals and entities. Budapest insisted on removing certain names from the list, including Russian oligarch Mikhail Fridman. However, despite Hungary's objections, EU ambassadors unanimously agreed to renew the sanctions without making the requested changes (Foy, Seddon, and Moens for Financial Times 2025).

These instances illustrate a clear pattern: Hungary has continuously used its veto power to delay sanctions and extract concessions, whether related to energy exemptions, gas transit concerns, or individual sanctions. While the EU has often found compromises to move forward, Hungary's repeated resistance has consistently slowed the decision-making process. This list is by no means exhaustive but reflects a broader trend in which Budapest strategically leverages its position within the EU to secure its national interests. Hungary's repeated use of veto threats and delays in the sanctions process demonstrates how the unanimity rule enables individual member states to obstruct collective EU action, even if only by delaying it. This case illustrates the core puzzle of this thesis. Even in moments of high geopolitical urgency, the EU's foreign policy is vulnerable to internal bargaining, undermining its coherence, credibility, and global actorness.

2.2 The EU response to the Israel-Gaza conflict

At the outset of the war in Ukraine, the EU's response appeared relatively straightforward. However, as the conflict has progressed, it has become evident how complex it is to formulate an adequate foreign policy response, and in many cases, even when action was taken, its effectiveness has been questionable. Evaluating the limitations of EU foreign

policy cannot be solely based on this particular case, as each geopolitical crisis presents unique challenges in projecting EU influence, which, in turn, often highlights the fundamental issues within its decision-making processes. Another relevant example of these challenges is the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, which once again erupted in October 2023.

This is not the first time the EU has been exposed to internal divisions regarding Middle Eastern conflicts. The union has a long history of engaging constructively to create opportunities for regional peace, yet in recent years, the paralysis of the peace process and persistent obstruction by certain member states have significantly weakened its capacity to act decisively (Lecha 2024). As will be explored, there are stark differences among member states on these issues, with divisions even reaching EU institutions themselves.

Since 2005, the EU faced significant challenges in maintaining its commitment to the Middle East peace process, particularly the two-state solution. Despite repeated affirmations of support, its influence was limited as the expansion of Israeli settlements and ongoing Palestinian divisions hindered progress. The normalization of relations between Israel and Arab states further complicated the EU's role. At the same time, the EU's paralysis deepened due to internal vetoes, with countries like Hungary blocking unified action on critical issues since 2016. In an attempt to maintain a semblance of policy coherence, the EU relied on statements from individual diplomats or the High Representative (Akgül-Açıkmeşe et al. 2023). However, by late 2023, even this fragile unity was undermined by conflicting messages from EU leaders.

The renewed attacks in 2023 sparked an immediate and unequivocal condemnation from European leaders, who expressed strong solidarity with the victims. On the same day, the EU's High Representative strongly condemned the Hamas attacks and affirmed Israel's right to self-defence, while also calling for the revival of the peace process (Borrell 2023). This unified stance, which was rare in EU foreign policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was reiterated in subsequent statements and emergency meetings. However, divisions soon

surfaced. A visit to Israel by presidents of Commission and Parliament, Ursula von der Leyen and Roberta Metsola on 13 October faced criticism for its unconditional support of Israel, with detractors arguing that they had overstepped their authority by making foreign policy declarations (Pugnet and Basso 2023).

This issue is directly linked to the problems discussed in the chapters on the CFSP. Firstly, there is a prevailing sentiment within EU bodies questioning the role of the President of the European Commission in shaping the EU's foreign policy, a domain over which she does not have authority (Wax and Barigazzi for POLITICO 2023). Secondly, von der Leyen's unconditional pro-Israel stance may have prompted other European leaders to publicly distance themselves from her position. A notable example of this was the visit in November 2023 by the premiers of Spain and Belgium to Israel, Palestine, and Egypt. They emphasized the need to revive the two-state solution and protect civilian populations in Gaza, a stance that triggered a diplomatic rift within the EU (Faggionato 2023).

In addition, the question of recognizing Palestine has been a longstanding point of division within the EU. While most member states tied recognition to a negotiated settlement, Sweden broke ranks in 2014, becoming the first Western European country to officially recognize Palestine. This decision was intended to promote a more balanced peace process (Reuters 2014). Earlier recognitions by Malta, Cyprus, and several Eastern European countries had occurred prior to their EU accession and the initiation of the peace process, which made Sweden's move politically significant. This development sparked a debate on whether it marked a fragmentation of EU foreign policy or an attempt to reshape it (Aggestam and Bicchi 2019).

In May 2024, the EU was once again divided in its voting at the UN General Assembly over recognizing Palestine's eligibility for full membership. This division highlighted the continued national focus of EU countries on their foreign policies, further complicating

decision-making regarding common EU actions on the crisis and introducing new internal divisions (UN News 2024). For example, in February 2024, Hungary blocked two EU consensus statements that called for an “immediate humanitarian pause” in Israel's military operations in Rafah, Gaza. Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó acted in response to a request from Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz, demonstrating Hungary's support for Israel during the conflict. Budapest refused to endorse the call, despite pressure from other capitals, and single-handedly blocked EU plans to impose sanctions on violent Israeli settlers (Jones for Euronews 2024).

In November 2024, EU High Representative proposed suspending political dialogue with Israel as a means of pressuring the country to improve its human rights practices amid the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon (Gray for Reuters 2024). However, Germany, the Czech Republic, and several other European countries rejected this proposal, arguing for the importance of maintaining open channels of communication. Germany, in particular, emphasized that the Association Agreement with Israel provided an appropriate framework for addressing such issues, and that halting dialogue would not contribute to resolving the conflict (Zachová for Euractiv 2024).

The influence of global power dynamics, particularly the strong US support for Israel, further restricts the EU's ability to act independently (Akgül-Açıkmeşe and and Özel 2024). European policies remain entrenched in the outdated Oslo framework for a two-state solution, hindered by internal decision-making processes, challenges to international consensus, and a focus on regional stability (Del Sarto 2019). This persistent divisions and inconsistent approaches continue to limit the EU's ability to project itself as a relevant and constructive actor on the global stage (Kausch 2024). Thus, The EU's response to the Israel-Gaza conflict illustrates how divisions between member states, as well as tensions between supranational institutions and national governments, continue to fragment its foreign policy. Competing

positions on recognition, humanitarian measures, and the legitimacy of unilateral declarations expose the institutional limitations of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. These structural cleavages obstruct coherent decision-making and weaken the EU's capacity to act as a unified global actor in high-stakes geopolitical crises.

2.3 The EU and its aspirant members

When evaluating the European Union's global power in addressing crises, another important aspect of its foreign policy influence is its impact on EU membership candidate countries. Currently, nine states hold candidate status. However, despite meeting various criteria to attain this designation, they continue to face significant challenges, including democratic backsliding, human rights violations, alignment with other major powers, and economic difficulties (Panchulidze and Youngs 2024). These issues contradict the EU's core principles and necessitate a response through foreign policy mechanisms. However, both technical and political limitations, along with challenges in decision-making, weaken the EU's ability to respond swiftly and decisively.

For example, in recent years, both the international community and the European Union have expressed concerns about democratic backsliding in Georgia, which has been an EU candidate country since 2023 (European Commission 2024). The Georgian government has adopted several anti-democratic laws and engaged in human rights violations, ultimately suspending the EU accession process while accusing the EU of coercion to implement its preferred policies (Parulava for Politico 2024). This led to mass protests within the country, which were met with a violent and disproportionate police response (Human Rights Watch 2024). However, despite statements from various EU leaders and institutions expressing support for the Georgian public's pro-European aspirations (Borrell 2024; von der Leyen 2024;

Jourová 2024), the EU has been unable to take concrete measures to counter the government's anti-democratic actions.

In December 2024, amid mass protests, High Representative Kaja Kallas proposed sanctions targeting state officials involved in the repression of demonstrations. However, Hungary and Slovakia vetoed the proposal, preventing the EU from imposing sanctions on Georgian officials despite the ongoing crackdown on protesters (Liboreiro for Euronews 2024). This was not the first instance in which EU member states leveraged Georgia for their own political interests, while simultaneously enabling the Georgian government to continue its anti-democratic practices by restricting the EU's ability to act.

A similar scenario happened in the summer of 2023 when media reports, citing official sources, revealed that Hungary had pledged to withhold support for opening EU accession negotiations with Ukraine unless the European Council granted Georgia candidate status (Jozwiak for RFE/RL 2023). Viktor Orbán's political manoeuvring proved successful, as Georgia received candidate status despite clear signs of democratic backsliding. This decision further emboldened the Georgian government, reinforcing its authoritarian tendencies. Once again, Hungary exploited the EU's unanimity requirement to advance its own agenda while exacerbating anti-democratic trends in the EU's neighbourhood.

Georgia's case is particularly noteworthy, as the EU should, in theory, exert significant influence over such countries due to their political and economic ties. However, as demonstrated, the EU struggles to respond swiftly and effectively (de Waal 2024). In contrast, the United States acted decisively by imposing economic sanctions and travel bans on officials responsible for democratic backsliding and human rights violations (Lewis for Reuters 2024). Similarly, the United Kingdom took comparable measures, which bolstered protests in Georgia and reinforced the sense of support among the Georgian public (Wong for BBC 2024).

This issue extends beyond the EU's initial inaction and highlights deeper structural challenges. In December, while the EU as a whole debated its response, hampered by internal bargaining and member state vetoes, the three Baltic states broke ranks and independently imposed sanctions on 11 Georgian officials, including the Minister of Internal Affairs and several of his deputies (Liboreiro for Euronews 2024a). This was followed by travel bans from other individual member states, for example, with Germany expanding entry bans on Georgian officials involved in the crackdown (German Federal Foreign Office 2025). The EU was only able to take its first strong step at the end of January by suspending visa-free travel for diplomats and officials, a move that did not require a unanimous decision (European Council 2025a). These developments underscore the persistent challenges in EU foreign policy, not only in responding swiftly, even to countries most aligned with its values, but also in achieving a unified and coordinated response at all.

The European Union's limited ability to influence developments in candidate countries remains a persistent challenge for its enlargement policy. One contributing factor is the EU's difficulty in enforcing policies and responding effectively to democratic backsliding. Although key EU institutions and executives attempt to take action, their efforts often yield minimal tangible results (Bechev 2022). For instance, in March 2025, European lawmakers urged EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas to impose sanctions on Milorad Dodik, President of Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, due to rising regional tensions. However, concerns emerged that Hungary's Orbán, a close ally of Dodik, could obstruct these measures at the European Council level, leading to delays in decision-making and potentially blocking the sanctions altogether (Scheffer 2025).

In October 2023, Orbán ruled out the possibility of imposing EU sanctions on Serbia following clashes between ethnic Serbs and Kosovar police in northern Kosovo. This stance reinforced criticism that the EU is overly lenient toward Serbia, especially considering that it

had only imposed temporary measures against Kosovo for failing to take steps toward de-escalation since June (Szucs 2023).

Beyond responding to political and social disputes in candidate countries, internal rivalries and contestation among EU member states further constrain the Union's ability to implement and sustain policies such as enlargement. A notable example is Bulgaria's blockade of North Macedonia's EU accession talks over historical and linguistic disputes. Because Albania's accession process was linked to North Macedonia's, this veto also delayed Albania's progress until the blockade was lifted in June 2022 (Tidey for Euronews 2022). Although the issue was eventually resolved, the prolonged dispute hindered the EU's enlargement agenda, despite the European Commission having previously recommended opening accession talks with North Macedonia (Barigazzi for Politico 2020).

These examples highlight how the position of a single EU member state can significantly delay or even hinder the entire enlargement process, with years of similar political tactics and delay practices reinforcing this dynamic. This raises a broader concern: if the EU continues to require unanimity for decisions, the enlargement process could face even greater delays or potentially become unfeasible with further expansion (Dempsey 2023). Although not directly tied to the creation of EU policies, issues such as the imposition of sanctions on Russia since 2014 have exacerbated divisions among candidate states. In addition, aligning with the EU's common foreign and security policies has become an increasingly contentious issue. A candidate country that fails to consistently align with EU sanctions on certain matters may find this a major point of contention in the enlargement process (Cardwell and Moret 2023).

The EU's engagement with candidate countries illustrates how internal divisions and unanimity requirements constrain its ability to project normative power abroad, particularly in moments that demand swift, values-based responses. This supports the paper's central hypothesis: that the EU's foreign policy limitations are not merely technical or strategic, but

fundamentally structural, embedded in the tension between supranational ambitions and intergovernmental limitations, even when dealing with its closest aspirant members.

These illustrative cases highlight a persistent pattern of ineffectiveness in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. While each scenario unfolds within distinct geopolitical contexts, they share a common denominator: the capacity of individual member states to prioritize national agendas over collective European interests. Far from being isolated exceptions, these instances reflect a deeper, structural vulnerability embedded in the EU's unanimity rule. As internal contestation escalates, sustaining credible, timely, and coherent external action as a global power becomes increasingly difficult, prompting calls for changes to the existing frameworks, institutional structures, and the EU's overall approach to projecting its agenda.

Chapter 3: Strengthening the EU from within strategies for global impact

*“Europe will not be made all at once,
or according to a single plan.”*

Robert Schuman 1950

To translate internal cohesion into meaningful external influence, institutional reform becomes imperative. One such reform under debate is the introduction of qualified majority voting in the EU’s CFSP. This debate is neither novel nor underexplored. Both practitioner-based perspectives and academic analyses, ranging from quantitative evaluations to qualitative case studies, acknowledge that QMV holds the potential to increase the speed and efficiency of EU foreign policymaking. However, this shift comes with notable trade-offs, as it was highlighted in the literature review of this thesis: the risk of undermining EU unity, the dilution of national influence and representation, and the emergence of power asymmetries driven by population size and economic strength.

A widely accepted conclusion in the literature is that neither unanimity nor QMV can singularly serve as the optimal mechanism across all foreign policy situations. Instead, their utility varies depending on the nature and urgency of the international context (Fiott and Tercovich 2023a). Unanimity, while fostering symbolic and political unity when consensus is achieved, also renders the EU vulnerable to decision-making paralysis. Any single member state can block collective action, often resulting in policy stagnation and leaving the Union susceptible to external manipulation.

QMV, on the other hand, offers a way to circumvent these blockages by curbing the power of individual vetoes. It can facilitate faster, more agile responses to global challenges and reduce the influence of third parties exploiting internal divisions (Fiott and Tercovich 2023b). Nevertheless, QMV is not a panacea. It does not inherently produce more effective outcomes, nor does it ensure the mobilization of adequate resources for implementation.

Crucially, it can also erode the perceived unity of the EU, something that unanimous decisions, even when hard-won, visibly reinforce on the global stage (Navarra and Jančová 2023).

These critiques of QMV highlight the tension between the need for greater flexibility in decision-making and the protection of member state sovereignty, an issue central to this paper's argument on the EU's foreign policy limitations. Timeliness of this debate is further embodied in the formation of the "Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting," a coalition of member states including Germany and France. This initiative promotes dialogue on expanding the use of QMV within the boundaries of the existing treaty framework, signaling growing support for institutional adaptation (German Federal Foreign Office 2023).

Still, a central, and deeply political, obstacle remains. Despite the arguments in favor of QMV and the momentum behind reform, any formal change to the decision-making mechanism in CFSP requires unanimous approval by all EU member states. Given the historical record, it is unlikely that those states which have benefited from their veto power will voluntarily relinquish it. This reality makes large-scale legislative reform improbable in the short term.

Therefore, the most viable path forward lies in maximizing existing mechanisms within the current treaties and selectively introducing QMV in emergency situations. Enhancing the EU's ability to act swiftly in crises, without waiting for full consensus, is essential if it is to assert itself as a credible global actor. Without such flexibility, the EU's foreign policy will remain constrained, limiting its effectiveness in an increasingly volatile international landscape.

3.1 Alternatives in existing treaties

While unanimity remains the default rule in CFSP, the EU's legal framework already provides underused mechanisms to circumvent it. Article 31(2) TEU allows for qualified

majority voting when the European Council has established the Union's strategic objectives, offering a route to more agile foreign policy decisions without being blocked by individual member states (European Union 2016b). This provision is complemented by an “emergency brake,” which enables any member state to escalate the issue to the European Council if it deems its vital national interests to be at risk, preserving sovereignty while enabling collective action (Wessel et al. 2020). However, the persistent influence of the “Luxembourg Compromise”, a political convention allowing states to oppose QMV on the grounds of vital national interests, undermines the practical utility of these legal tools. As a result, despite the formal availability of QMV, political hesitancy and entrenched national prerogatives continue to limit its application, reinforcing the dominance of unanimity in CFSP decision-making (Wessel and Szép 2022).

Existing qualified majority voting system uses a “double majority” rule: at least 55% of member states (15 of 27), representing 65% of the EU population, must support a proposal, rising to 72% if the proposal comes from actors other than the Commission or High Representative. To prevent large states from dominating, at least four member states must oppose a proposal to block it (Bendiek 2023). While currently the general rule in most EU policy areas, this mechanism could also apply to CFSP if QMV becomes the default decision-making method.

Another underutilized mechanism worth noting is constructive abstention, provided under Article 31(1) TEU. While largely symbolic, it enables a member state to express dissent without obstructing a decision, thus helping preserve momentum in CFSP deliberations. A member state may abstain from a vote without blocking a decision, provided it refrains from taking actions contrary to the policy adopted (European Union 2017). This straightforward yet impactful approach was reinforced by the joint statement of EU foreign ministers advocating for a greater role of majority decision-making. However, this option is limited by political

dynamics, as member states may hesitate to abstain in high-stakes situations, opting instead to wield veto power for leverage (Baerbock et al. 2023).

Policy options requiring Treaty change but remaining within an intergovernmental model propose procedural innovations without altering CFSP's core structure. One such idea involves an adjusted constructive abstention mechanism, in which if two-thirds of member states agree to proceed on a policy, the EU would fully support its implementation with both budgetary and legal mechanisms. Non-participating members would not be obliged to implement the policy but would not be able to obstruct it either (Szép and Wessel 2023).

The passerelle clauses under Article 48 (7) TEU are among the most cited mechanisms for introducing more QMV into CFSP without full Treaty revision. They allow for the shift from unanimity to QMV in specific areas, except “decisions with military implications or those in the area of defence” (European Union 2012a). While their activation is procedurally challenging, the European Parliament has endorsed their use, urging a roadmap towards QMV in foreign, fiscal, and environmental policy. Their successful deployment could address delays and bargaining strategies while preserving consensus for activation (Kotanidis 2020).

Differentiated integration, under mechanisms like Article 20 TEU (enhanced cooperation) or Article 44 TEU (task delegation), enables subsets of member states to proceed together in areas where consensus cannot be achieved. This can enhance effectiveness and reduce exposure to external influence, but also raises concerns about the EU's unity and coherence. It formalizes existing coalitions, potentially weakening the Union's external perception as a unified actor (Bassot 2020).

The last category includes the most ambitious proposals: those requiring both Treaty amendments and a shift to a supranational model. Central to this vision is a greater role for the European Parliament, either through full co-decision under the ordinary legislative procedure or through a lighter arrangement in which the Parliament has consultative or consent powers

(Bendiek 2023). Another approach within this category is the delegation of certain decisions to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. By empowering the HR/VP to issue statements or implement decisions on behalf of the Union, the EU could act more swiftly and uniformly, reducing the space for obstruction or external interference (Bendiek 2023). Critics note, however, that such delegation must be counterbalanced by strong accountability mechanisms to avoid eroding legitimacy (Sus 2021).

Ultimately, a phased or hybrid approach may be the most pragmatic path forward, starting with the activation of existing tools like the passerelle clauses and constructive abstention, and gradually building support for deeper reforms. The presence of these alternatives within the current EU treaties highlights that the issue is not solely institutional or technical, the EU has long struggled with a lack of unity on its core principles among member states, and its political ambitions as a global actor are at odds with these internal divisions. Therefore, the Union must carefully navigate the balance between responsiveness, cohesion, and democratic accountability in reforming its CFSP decision-making framework. Thus, a binary decision between QMV and unanimity may no longer suffice.

3.2 Article 7 and the EU's power paradox

Despite the potential advantages and drawbacks associated with shifting from unanimity to QMV, a persistent and politically charged obstacle looms, such a reform itself must be approved unanimously by all EU member states. Historical precedent shows that states which have long exploited their veto power for strategic gain are unlikely to relinquish it voluntarily. Yet, the Treaty on European Union offers a legal instrument tailored for scenarios where a member state persistently defies the Union's foundational values: Article 7. This provision empowers the EU to suspend certain rights, most notably voting privileges in the Council, while still obliging the offending state to fulfil its membership duties. Under Article

7, one-third of EU member states, the European Parliament, or the European Commission may initiate the process (European Union 2016a). The Council, with a four-fifths majority and the European Parliament's consent, can exclude targeted state from participating in the vote and consequently, avoid potential veto (POLITICO 2018).

In practice, however, activating Article 7 to its full extent remains a difficult endeavor. It requires near-unanimous coordination, excluding the accused, making it vulnerable to political alliances among like-minded states. Hungary, for example, has proactively built a bloc of sympathetic governments resistant to censure, with Slovakia consistently aligning itself and countries like Austria, Romania, and the Czech Republic showing signs of drifting in the same direction (Landsbergis 2025). Despite these challenges, many EU officials still view Article 7 as the most viable mechanism for confronting member states that deliberately undermine shared norms. Its greatest strength lies in preventing the accused from obstructing the procedure, an increasingly rare safeguard in a climate of growing internal fragmentation (Hegedüs 2019).

Hungary, for example, has been subject to the initial phase of Article 7 proceedings since 2018. This stage, intended to uphold the European Union's fundamental values, obliges the accused state to participate in periodic hearings to justify its conduct. However, the process has remained stalled. Shielded by the unwavering support of Poland's former right-wing government, also under Article 7 scrutiny, Budapest has successfully avoided escalation beyond this preliminary phase. As a result, Hungary continues to navigate the procedure without encountering substantive consequences (Liboreiro 2024a).

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Hungary's growing obstructionism in shaping a unified EU foreign policy response, the European Parliament has intensified its calls to advance proceedings against Hungary under Article 7 (Wax 2024). Despite this pressure, the European Commission has remained reluctant to pursue what is often referred to as the "nuclear

option,” insisting that such a move will only be considered once a clear majority of member states explicitly support it (Liboreiro for Euronews 2024c). While certain governments within the bloc have endorsed and actively promoted this course of action, no substantive steps have materialized (Gijs and Moens 2024).

The option remains formally available, yet the experience so far suggests that the effectiveness of Article 7 hinges less on its legal framework than on strategic use of institutional levers and deliberate coalition-building, both of which were instrumental in securing a parliamentary majority to initiate proceedings against Hungary. However, in the absence of decisive action by the Council, Article 7 risks functioning as a symbolic gesture rather than a genuinely enforceable mechanism. While it has yet to produce concrete sanctions, its activation compelled the Council to confront rule-of-law concerns with greater seriousness (Hanelt 2024).

It is also reasonable to acknowledge that political contexts are fluid. what seemed unattainable in the past may suddenly become actionable under new circumstances. Shifts in U.S. political dynamics, for instance, have emboldened both EU institutions and national leaders across Europe to adopt a more assertive and autonomous stance, including in matters of internal governance (Walt 2025). A telling example is Friedrich Merz, leader of Germany’s victorious party in 2025 elections, who publicly committed to pushing the EU toward taking more decisive action against member states that flout shared norms, an implicit but unmistakable reference to Hungary (Nöstlinger 2025).

Ultimately, the exploration of these alternative mechanisms, whether through Article 7, enhanced use of qualified majority voting, or other procedural reforms, reveals a deeper structural paradox within the European Union. On the one hand, such tools are designed to increase the EU’s responsiveness, coherence, and credibility on the global stage, particularly in times of geopolitical urgency. On the other hand, their deployment risks undermining the very principles that define the union: equality among member states, mutual trust, and a

commitment to consensus-driven governance. The pursuit of external unity may come at the cost of internal legitimacy. As the EU navigates intensifying global challenges, from security threats to democratic backsliding within, it must reconcile this internal-external tension. The union's ability to act as a decisive geopolitical actor increasingly depends not only on institutional innovation, but also on its willingness to confront the fragilities embedded in its own foundational architecture.

Conclusion

“If Europe does not organise its own unity, decisions concerning its future will be made by others and outside of it.”

Jean Monnet 1976, 580 (translation mine)

This thesis has explored the complex position of the European Union within the evolving architecture of global power. Situated uniquely as a non-state actor wielding significant economic and normative influence, the EU presents a compelling case for understanding the limitations inherent in projecting collective power on the international stage. The central question posed was why, despite its considerable weight, the European Union often falls short of being an effective global actor. This investigation posited that the structural and procedural limitations embedded within its Common Foreign and Security Policy serve as a primary explanatory factor.

The analysis demonstrated that the architecture of the CFSP, particularly its foundational reliance on unanimous decision-making among member states, creates an fundamental tension. This tension exists between the collective ambition for a unified foreign policy and the enduring reality of national control over perceived vital interests. The findings reveal that the challenge to the EU’s global actorness is not simply one of capacity or resources, rather, it is profoundly rooted in the very procedural mechanisms designed to govern collective action, which paradoxically empower individual states to impede the collective will.

The practical consequences of these procedural limitations were consistently illuminated through case studies examining the EU’s responses to the Russia-Ukraine war, the Israel-Gaza conflict, and democratic backsliding in aspirant member countries. These instances starkly revealed how divergent national interests, often strategically leveraged through the veto or the threat of its use, lead to delayed, fragmented, and diluted policy outcomes across different spheres of external engagement – regional and global. The evidence strongly supports the thesis’s core argument: the CFSP’s decision-making procedures and institutional limitations

significantly hinder the EU's ability to act swiftly, coherently, and decisively, thereby limiting its capacity to project power and influence commensurate with the demands of effective global actorness in a complex international system.

The exploration of existing Treaty provisions, such as qualified majority voting options and constructive abstention, alongside more ambitious reform proposals, underscored the availability of legal and procedural alternatives to the unanimity. However, this analysis also decisively revealed that the primary obstacles to implementing such reforms are not technical or legal, but fundamentally political. The deeply ingrained intergovernmental nature of the CFSP and member states' persistent reluctance to relinquish control over foreign policy represent substantial barriers. This finding suggests that while procedural changes are necessary for enhancing EU effectiveness, their realization is contingent upon overcoming profound political hurdles and navigating the delicate balance between the desire for greater external impact and the imperative of maintaining internal unity and respecting member state sovereignty.

Thesis firmly argues that the European Union's struggle to attain a more decisive and coherent role on the global stage is inextricably linked to the structural and procedural limitations embedded within its Common Foreign and Security Policy. The persistent paradox between the aspiration for unified action and the reality of member state divergence, exacerbated by the unanimity rule, consistently undermines effective external engagement. While legal pathways for reform are available, their implementation hinges less on the presence of legal instruments and more on the political will of member states to prioritize collective efficacy over individual leverage. This renders the challenge fundamentally political rather than technical, underscoring the continued importance of unity, not only in strategic planning, but also in shared normative principles, including the ability to distinguish between allies and adversaries.

Viewing the EU as a classical state actor overlooks the evolving nature of global power. the EU's economic and ideological strength positions it as a potential superpower. Yet, this potential is consistently undermined by internal political divisions and a lack of unity on core principles, which weaken its capacity for decisive global action. Future research could build upon these findings by conducting more in-depth comparative analyses of specific reform mechanisms in practice, or by exploring the dynamics of member state preference formation and coalition building within the CFSP framework. Ultimately, the EU's ability to fulfill its potential as a significant global power hinges on its willingness and capacity to bridge the fundamental gap between its international aspirations and the procedural realities that currently limit its reach and influence.

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