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What accounts for the EU's actorness within its "geopolitical awakening"?: The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and effectiveness and cohesion of the European Union[*1]

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Abstract

Since mid-2010s, two concomitant processes have been going on in terms of the EU's perspective on its foreign policy: The EU's relatively proactive inclusion into some particular conflicts (and its deliberate self-exclusion in some others) on one hand and the rise of the geopolitical tone of the EU foreign policy and neighbourhood policy on the other. This recent "geopolitical turn" challenged the Union's predominant position in crisis situations as well as its broader self-representation about its own foreign policy actorness. On top of this, there has been many question marks about the EU's actorness in terms of its involvement in protracted conflicts. Despite good intentions and progressively improved capabilities, it is intriguing why the EU had been selective in the management of some territorial conflicts in its neighbourhood.

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The main argument of the paper is that current mainstream theoretical approaches of the European foreign policy, such as "normative power Europe", are overly optimistic and do not allow to put in focus certain dynamics the understanding of which are crucial to understanding the shortcomings of the EU's actorness in terms of the Israeli-Palestine conflict, where the actorness is captured throughout the paper in terms of the EU's effectiveness and coherence.

Key words: EU actorness, Israeli-Palestine Conflict, Normative Power Europe, geopolitics.

1. Introduction

In its 2016 *Global Security Strategy*, the EU has pointed out violent conflicts as a major threat to European security and stated its aim to contribute to their resolution (EEAS, 2016). Within this framework, it has incrementally extended its potential and jurisdiction for diplomatic action and civilian and military intervention in conflict zones. Nevertheless, Israeli-Palestinian conflict has hardly been one of them. This tendency to introduce a broader understanding of "security" (both geographically and conceptually) in the region, as to include "state and societal resilience, with the aim of tackling governmental, economic, societal, climate and energy fragility" (EEAS, 2016: 9) also overlapped with the waning of the EU's *normative power Europe* claim and, on the part of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the recalibration of the "geopolitics" focus. Especially after the migration flows into the EU countries as well as Russia's invasive actions in the Caucasus in the mid-2010s, the EU approach to the neighborhood highly displayed characteristics of "geopoliticization"[2] (Cadier, 2019). Indeed, the Union's increasing tendency to pursue a foreign policy perspective less influenced by a norm-based liberal ideational framework (the so-called *normative power Europe* claim) *(Manners, 2002: 241)* and more determined by an interest-based rational calculation of the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action – so-called *realpolitik- was exacerbated greatly with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For the EU, the war showed that, "*Europe is even more in danger than we thought just a few months ago" and brought the EU's "geopolitical awakening" (EEAS, 2022).

Thus, since mid-2010s, two concomitant processes have been going on in terms of the EU's perspective on the neighborhood: The EU's relatively proactive inclusion into some particular conflicts (and its deliberate self-exclusion in some others) on one hand and the rise of the geopolitical tone of the EU foreign policy and neighborhood policy on the other. This recent "geopolitical turn" challenged the Union's predominant position in crisis situations as well as the its broader self-

[2] Cadier coins the term, "geopoliticization" to denote the geopolitical framing of the EU's Eastern Partnership in public discourses by political actors especially in some member states like Poland and Czech Republic, which are geographically and historically more exposed to the Russian threat than other member states (Cadier, 2019).

representation about its own foreign policy actorness. On top of this, there has been many question marks about the EU's actorness in terms of its involvement in protracted conflicts. Despite good intentions and progressively improved capabilities, it is intriguing why the EU had been selective in the management of some territorial conflicts in its neighborhood.

The main argument of the paper is that current mainstream theoretical approaches of the European foreign policy, such as "normative power Europe", are overly optimistic and do not allow to put in focus certain dynamics the understanding of which are crucial to understanding the shortcomings of the EU's actorness in the neighborhood, where the actorness is captured throughout the paper in terms of the EU's *effectiveness* and *coherence*. When it comes to the EU's actorness in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the EU is constantly facing the dilemma of its self-definition as a humanitarian actor, and its operational conduct. Through this, the article identifies a key tension between the EU's normative commitments and its recent geopolitical take on. The paper is structured as follows: We will first delve into the conceptual debate on the EU's actorness and its conflict management capabilities. We will then move to exploring the background which led to the tension between the EU's self-claimed *normative power* and its "geopolitical awakening". Thirdly, we will empirically scrutinize the EU's foreign policy actorness regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, starting from mid-2010s up until the very last Israeli attack of 7 October 2023, by focusing on the EU's *effectiveness* and *cohesion* in relation to the EU's actorness debate. Last, but not least, we will present a concluding discussion on the implications of the caveats of the EU's foreign policy actorness on the potential geopolitical challenges coming ahead.

2. The EU's actorness as a research agenda

The first debates on the EU's actorness could be traced back to the early 1970s when the European Political Cooperation (EPC) was introduced and the discussion on whether the then Community had capability and strength to act in a civilian, normative and military capacity when the third parties are in picture was launched. In this context, the term, actorness has first been coined by Sjöstedt as the "ability to function actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system" (Sjöstedt, 1977: 16). Here, he first identified two key aspects to understanding the EU's potential role in the global arena: actor capability, which concerned structural characteristics; and actor behaviour, which include more dynamic features related to the Union's performance (Sjöstedt, 1977: 6). After Sjöstedt's study, there has been a myriad number of studies focusing on various aspects of the EU's actorness. In particular, after the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and the launch of the second pillar of the EU's institutional legal framework, i.e. the so-

called Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), studies which depicted the Union as a hybrid international actor, reflecting a number of tensions built into the roots of the Treaty have multiplied (Smith, 2013). These tensions -reflected in the international roles and status of the EU- arise from the logics expressed in institutions and policies, and the ways in which those logics interact with each other when confronted with situations in which diplomatic, economic and security concerns are entangled (Smith, 2013: 15). Within this conversation, another point of contention within the literature has been the urge to measure the EU's actorness, for which Juppille and Caporaso (1998) have proposed four criteria to explore the versatile influence of the EU's foreign-policy related institutional set-up: *Recognition, authority, autonomy* and *cohesion*. In line with Jupille and Caporoso's conception, *recognition* relates to international recognition by third parties whereas *cohesion* relates to the ability of the EU and its member states to aggregate their preferences and to produce common objectives, positions and actions on international issues (Jupille and Caporaso, 1998: 220). On the other hand, *autonomy* relates to the degree of distinctiveness and independence the EU exhibits from its internal constituents (i.e., the member states) in terms of goal formation, decision-making and policy implementation as well as its discretionary power to settle objectives, make decisions, and implement actions as a distinct international entity (Jupille and Caporoso, 1998). On the other hand, externally one should consider the structural context of the action, which is also known as "opportunity" (see Jupille and Caporaso, 1998). It is concerned with the extent to which the EU's institutional apparatus is distinct from the foreign policies of member states, even if it intermingles with domestic political institutions. A central aspect of EU autonomy is the degree of involvement of supranational EU actors in the policy formulation process and external representation of the EU. Authority to act externally.

Bretherton and Vogler (2006) in another seminal study have used the notions of *opportunity* (factors in the internal environment of ideas and events that constrain or allow action); *presence* (the EU's ability to have influence beyond its frontiers) and *capacity* (which refers to the internal context of the EU's external action) to explore the validity of the EU's actorness, expanding its scope to include the EU's internal characteristics as well as the external environment it operates in.

Mainly after the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, which had promised a more active, coherent, effective and multidimensional European foreign policy, what we see is a rather robust literature on the EU's actorness, which has mainly developed along two central strands. The first has focused on the normative and rule-based approach to European integration, which translated into the EU's norm diffusion where the EU values, policies and institutions travel across different contexts including member states, candidates, EU neighbours and other regions of the world (Börzel and Risse 2012; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). In this respect, the EU

enlargement is seen as a tool of the EU's actorness for norm diffusion through different mechanisms of rule and policy transfer, such as external incentives arising from conditionality principles, identity change out of social learning, or strategic adaptation due to lesson-drawing (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004; Checkel 2005; Webb, 2018). A more critical wave in the norm diffusion literature also emerged which focused on the spread of norms from the standpoint of the local/domestic, drawing on the interactive and inter-relational nature of norms, focusing on the contestation patterns, localisation practices, and translation strategies, which introduce another intriguing dimension to the EU's actorness debates (Acharya, 2004, 2009; Wiener, 2004, 2007, 2014).

The second strand has rather focused on the emergence of the EU as a significant foreign policy actor both in terms of addressing the conflicts in various part of the world and the development of its military tools (Bono, 2004; Kaldor et.al., 2007; Altunışık, 2008; Olsen, 2009; Hartel, 2023). A significant variant in this second group of studies has been the studies focusing on the EU's involvement in international conflicts, state-building and cases of contested statehood (Noutcheva, 2020; Bouris and Papadimitriou, 2019; Wydra, 2018). According to Bouris and Papadimitrou, the EU's involvement during the lifespan of security crises could be explored through three key stages: *conflict prevention* (the EU is involved before the conflict erupts), *conflict management* (the EU gets involved during the unfolding of the conflict) and *conflict resolution* (the EU gets involved after the cessation of hostilities) (Bouris and Papadimitrou, 2019: 278).

Mainly within this context and after the Lisbon Treaty have we witnessed the so-called "effectiveness turn" within the debates on the EU's actorness (Drieskens, 2017: 1539). Assessments of the EU's influence were made in various case studies and general research on EU foreign policy (such as Laatikainen and Smith, 2006; Smith, 2010; Bickerton, 2011). The EU's effectiveness has been compared in some studies to that of other great powers, such as the US (for example, Keukeleire and MacNaughtan, 2008), or analsed against the background of the changing world order where the EU's influence would be waning because of the shift of power towards the emerging economies (particularly China and India) (Delaere and van Schaik, 2012: 7).

As the EU's role as a global actor still continues to garner attention from scholars and practitioners and as we aim in this paper to think about the EU's actorness against the background of the Union's "geopolitical awakening", we argue that EU's actorness in an inhospitable geopolitical landscape fundamentally underlines the aspects of *coherence* (i.e. the Union's ability to speak with one voice)

and *effectiveness* (i.e. the ability to effect what others do[3]). The nature of international power constellations and the fact that the geopolitical EU is now keen on speaking the "language of power" clearly affect the EU's ability to wield influence and to practice actorness (European Parliament, 2019). In this paper, we will focus on the coherence and effectiveness of the EU in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Section 4. But, before doing that, we will explore the historical developments which paved the way to the "geopolitical Europe" in the next section.

3. Political background: Shift from "Normative Europe" to "Geopolitical Europe"

In 2013, the then president of the European Commission (EC), Barroso announced the launch of the EC's new project for "A new narrative for Europe", revolving around culture, cultural diversity and "European values", such as "human dignity, democracy, the rule of law and diversity" (Barroso, 2013). Barroso in this speech tells that since the early 1950s, these values had been the crux of the European integration and the EU's self- representation, culminating around the EU's so-called *normative power Europe* claim. Nevertheless, in December 2019, Ursula von der Leyen assumed office as the President of the EC this time with the intention of leading a "geopolitical Commission" (European Commission, 2019). This shift in the self-narrative of the EU has also been evident within the framework of the ENP narratives as put forward by the official EU documents and speeches of EU actors (Alpan, 2023). How could we make sense of this shift? Are the "normative Europe" and "geopolitical Europe" mutually exclusive? This section will aim to address this question, as to set ground for the thorough exploration of the EU's actorness in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the 2010s in the next section.

Especially starting from the 1990s, the EU significantly represented itself as a political institution approximating to the motto of "ever closer Union" mentioned in the Rome Treaty through focusing on shared European values and norms, going beyond merely being an economic cooperation. In an influential attempt to characterize the EU's special role in world affairs, Manners invented the term "normative power" (Manners, 2002). According to the "normative power" perspective, the EU's impact on the global system is ideational. It shapes global conceptions of what is "normal" based on its founding principles such as peace, liberty, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law – principles that were shaped in turn by the historical context of the EU's origin, its hybrid (international and

[3] Following Ginsberg, we associate the EU's actorness with the degree to which the behaviour of others was changed, either directly and indirectly (Ginsberg, 2001: 2).

supranational) character, and its political-legal constitution. As Rifkin famously put, "Europeans can make the world more civilised place if they have the confidence and capacity to export their ideas" (Rifkin 2004). Thus, since the late 1990s, the EU's impact on the domestic governance of the third countries (be them candidate, neighbour or third countries) as well as its role in the resolution of the regional conflicts, have mainly been assessed through the conceptual lenses of normative or transformative powerhood.

Nevertheless, especially starting from the mid-2010s, what we see in the EU foreign policy is a shift towards a more geopolitical orientation, which reflects a move away from purely normative principles and towards a more interest-driven *realpolitik*, shaped by the EU's security concerns and its desire to assert its influence in an increasingly multipolar world. Within this context, "security" has been the buzzword for the Union. For example, in its 2016 *Global Security Strategy*, the EU has singled out violent conflicts as a major threat to European security and stated its aim to contribute to their resolution.

> a multi-dimensional approach through the use of all available policies and instruments…; a multi-phased approach, acting at all stages of the conflict cycle…; a multi-level approach acting at the local, national, regional and global levels…; [and] a multi-lateral approach engaging all players present in a conflict and necessary for its resolution (EU Global Strategy, 2016: 28–29).

For the EU, this transformation coincided with a series of internal and external crises such as the migration crisis, coronavirus pandemic and the associated restrictions and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Indeed, starting from early 2010s, the sense of "urgency" in the EU increased intertwined with the feeling shared by many that the EU project came to an end not only because of deep divisions between the EU member states at instances such as migration crisis and Brexit but also it is no longer appearing as an alluring project for the countries which are not central engines of the EU integration. The coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions accelerated this trend. Brexit has become the symbol of disintegration and isolationism (Riedel, 2023: 298). The so-called "migrant crisis", has demonstrated that the degree of integration and solidarity among EU members is not as deep and complete as expected, bolstering the already existing economic and socio-political crises (Prodromidou et.al, 2019: 7). The so-called "migrant crisis", has demonstrated that the degree of integration and solidarity among EU members is not as deep and complete as expected, bolstering the already existing economic and socio-political crises (Prodromidou et.al, 2019: 7). Throughout this period, the EU's Southern Neighbourhood and broader Middle East and North Africa (MENA), have witnessed major geopolitical shifts such as the growing

influence of the Gulf states and the proliferation of regional cleavages and intra-state conflicts, as well as more volatile alliances and rivalries, which also include a range of powerful non-state actors (Lecocq, 2020: 364). In this context, the EU seemed willing to embrace a "more traditional geopolitical approach" even if it meant accepting the limits of its civilian and normative power identity on the world stage (Nitoiu and Sus, 2019: 12). Within this framework, according to Josep Borrell, "Europe must quickly learn to speak the language of power" and become "geopolitically relevant" (European Parliament, 2019).

Indeed, 24 February 2022 was a historical turning point that forced the EU to become a fully-fledged security actor in the biggest geopolitical conflict in Europe since WWII. This meant a narrative shift on the part of the EU from a "normative power Europe" to "geopolitical Europe". *For the EU, the war proved that, "*Europe is even more in danger than we thought just a few months ago" and brought the EU's "geopolitical awakening" (EEAS, 2022).

Nevertheless, this "geopolitical turn" is not peculiar to the EU. A recent poll made by the ECFR (European Council on Foreign Relations) in 21 countries found out that although Europe and United States of America are seen as more attractive and having more respectable values (or, as having more normative power) than both China and Russia, this does not translate into political alignment. For most people in most countries -including some EU countries- what we witness is an *à la carte* world in which you can mix and match your partners on different issues, rather than signing up to a set menu of allegiance to one side or the other (Garton-Ash et.al., 2023). In this increasingly geopolitical world, the EU has been self-declaredly organising its foreign policy perspective in line with geopolitical considerations, which would have a potential impact on its actorness in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which we now turn to.

4. The EU's actorness and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

4.1. Background information: Limits of the EU's actorness since the 1970S

Since the 1970s, the European Community has been issuing declarations about the Palestinian issue. This has been an ongoing trend, as the Community and later the Union have often been criticised for issuing declarations but not taking steps on the ground to implement them. The 1971 Schuman Paper is telling as the member states found a common position on basing their call on the UN Resolution 242, but differed on the approach towards the issue of refugees and Jerusalem. Venice Declaration is a turning point in 1980, as it is the first common and coherent position of the Community and is rather a pro-Palestinian stance on the issue.

The dynamic institutional development of the CFSP in the 1990s, which paved the way for a greater role of supranational EU actors in Europe's conflict resolution approach was intertwined with the EU's goal to reduce its energy dependency from the Middle East and focusing more on soft aspects of security (Müller, 2013: 26). It was mainly with the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference that the EC began to play a role in the conflict, as a provider of aid and financing the Palestinian community. While the political issues were taken over by the US, the EC took upon financial responsibility of the peace process, supporting financially several grandiose aid projects, especially regarding the setting up of the Palestinian Authority. (Youngs, 2006: 146) The EC was the financial sponsor of almost half of the total economic aid granted to the Palestinians throughout the peace process (Keukeleire and MacNaughtan, 2008: 282). By embracing the Oslo Accords two years later, the EU pledged substantial aid and support for the Palestinian National Authority, including massive investments like the Gaza airport, tragically destroyed by Israel soon after it became operational (Soler I Lecha, 2024: 121). In this respect, it could be argued that the EU in the early 1990s, particularly due to the euphoria created by the Maastricht Treaty, paid more attention to the Union's *effectiveness* in the Middle East rather than its *coherence.*

As the Barcelona Process was initiated in 1995 and EU's quest to increase partnership with the Mediterranean countries was given an impetus, the European aim of being an actor in the MEPP was also underlined. By inviting Palestine to join as a full participant, this initiative created new and unprecedented avenues for political dialogue, confidence-building and practical collaboration among Israel, Palestine and their Arab and European neighbours (Soler I Lecha, 2024: 121). Persson argues that the main objective of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership was to improve the Union's actorness in the peace process in political, economic and social-cultural terms (Persson, 2015: 119) in general, where the EU tried to lead an independent peace process from the US, thus consolidating its power in the Middle East politics. Through a European path, which emphasized the importance of supporting the democratic institutions and strengthening of the rule of law and civil society the EU was committed to engage with the region and thus the Palestinians and the Israelis as a part of the Partnership (Schlumberger, 2011: 140).

In line with the decisions of the Amsterdam Treaty and the appointment of Javier Solana as the High Representative, the EU policy towards the peace process became more solid in terms of institutionalism in the late 1990s. However, the euphoria of peace ended with the collapse of the Oslo Peace Process and the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada in 2000. Although hopes for a negotiated peace and a solution based on two-states with the creation of a Palestinian state were dashed, the EU continued to play a role as a part of multilateral mechanisms, i.e. the Quartet, and also by providing aid and support for institutional capacity building to

the Palestinian Authority. As the situation in Palestine got worse, with the intifada and the impact of the 9/11, the EU again issued a Declaration – the Sevilla Declaration in 2002, where it emphasized the significance of multilateral frameworks to find a durable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It was stated that: "The crisis in the Middle East has reached a dramatic turning point. Further escalation will render the situation uncontrollable…There is an urgent need for political action by the whole international community. The Quartet has a key role to play in starting a peace process" (The Council of the European Union, 2002).

The first time the EU went beyond issuing declarations and taking steps on the ground came when the EU Border Assistance Mission at the Rafah crossing point, code-named EUBAM Rafah, to monitor the operations of this border crossing point was established. As Israel unilaterally withdrew from Gaza in 2005, the EU took on the mission "to contribute to the opening of the crossing point and to build confidence between the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, in co-operation with the European Union's institution building efforts" (The European Union, 2010). With EUBAM Rafah, the EU changed its traditional policy of issuing declarations in reaction to developments on the ground and came to the ground with deployment of its security forces for crisis management and conflict resolution. This is a turning point in the CFSP as well as it is the first military deployment under the command of a European general. Another EU mission under the CSDP was employed in the Palestinian territories named EUPOL COPPS (Coordination Office for Palestinian Police Support), the same year. The EU defined EUPOL COPPS as an expression of the EU's continued readiness to support the Palestinian Authority in complying with its Roadmap obligations, in particular with regard to "security" and "institution building".

Although the EU role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began to increase, it was rather short lived as the 2006 legislative elections for the Palestinian Authority, which resulted with the victory of Hamas became a game changer. Both EUBAM Rafah and EUPOL COPPS were suspended. The EU foreign ministers put forward their concern "that the new Palestinian government has not committed itself to the three principles laid out by the Council and the Quartet in their statements of 30 January: nonviolence, recognition of Israel's right to exist and acceptance of existing agreements. It urged the new Palestinian government to meet and implement these three principles and to commit to President Abbas' platform of peace" (Council of the European Union, 2006). The EU indicated compliance with these three principles as a condition for future financial aid and suspended aid to Hamas-led Palestinian government after its refusal to implement these principles. As Gaza became a new zone of conflict after 2007 (i.e. the expulsion of Hamas from West Bank and the beginning of its government in Gaza), the EU went back to its traditional policy of issuing declarations. 2009 Goldstone report announced after the

Israeli Operation on Gaza -the Cast Lead- and pointing to Israeli non-compliance with international law led to concerns in the European countries but only resulted with a few declarations on the issue (The United Nations, 2009).

4.2. The two dimensions of the EU's actorness in the 2010s: Coherence and effectiveness at work?

Although it is argued that the EU gradually strengthened its actor capacity and progressively expanded its activities in conflict resolution, conflict prevention and conflict management especially after the 2009 Lisbon Treaty (see Mueller, 2013 for a good discussion), the Union continued its cautious and strategic engagement with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the 2010s.

The broader shift in EU foreign policy towards a more geopolitical orientation emphasized by the 2019 European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen, has introduced new complexities into the EU's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As previously discussed, this shift reflects a move away from a predominantly normative perspective towards a more interest-driven *realpolitik*, shaped by the EU's security concerns and its desire to assert its influence within the increasingly complex geopolitical world. In the Middle East, this shift has manifested in a more The Abraham Accords—a series of normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states brokered by the US in 2020—posed another challenge to the EU. While the accords were hailed as historic steps towards peace in the region, they side-lined the Palestinian question, further complicating the EU's position. The EU cautiously welcomed the Accords but reiterated that a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains essential for lasting peace in the Middle East.

4.2.1. Coherence

In the intergovernmental realm of the CFSP, the EU's capacity to reach sufficient convergence among national foreign policy positions is of central importance for the adoption of common policies, which is also an obligation set out in the Treaties (Wessel, 2000; Hillion, 2008). Alongside with the institutional challenges of achieving *coherence* in terms of EU foreign policy, Lisbon Treaty's claim of "one voice Europe" has mainly been constrained by the significance of divergent member state policies and interests in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The so-called "one-voice Europe" claim and the EU's *coherence* was put to test for the first time on the Palestinian issue in the 2012 voting for Palestinian "non-member observer status" in the UN General Assembly. Sixteen of the EU member

states voted in favor, while others abstained and the Czech Republic voted against the resolution. Consequently, the EU failed to vote as a single block that challenged the coherence of the EU as an actor, despite the call of the European Parliament for supporting "the High Representative in her efforts to create a credible perspective for relaunching the peace process" (The European Parliament, 2012). Consequently, the voting preferences of the member states in the UN clearly indicated that national policy priorities overweight the European ones, contrary to obligations of member states under the Lisbon Treaty.

In the 2010s, another primary reason for the EU's failure to practice *coherence* in terms of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the contestation in the EU and particularly in the European Parliament (EP) on the role and nature of Hamas (Lococq, 2020: 370). This became more outspoken when initiatives for a Palestinian unity government has been proposed in the EP in 2011 and 2014 (Lococq, 2020: 370).

4.2.2. Effectiveness

Most of the numerous academic studies agree that the EU could employ a wide variety of foreign policy tools at its disposal, yet its action remains ineffective due to many factors (Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel, 2024: 61). While the EU has "succeeded in strengthening its *effectiveness* in international affairs and in developing a common vision on resolving the Israeli-Palestine conflict, still it finds it difficult to translate its foreign policy instruments into a cohesive and effective approach" (Müller, 2012: 2).

The complex ineffectiveness of the EU is also acknowledged in Palestine and Israel by the stakeholders of the conflict. Müller's study which presents the results of the elite interviews in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Ramallah in 2016 and 2017 shows that Israeli and Palestinian elites see the EU's aim for peacebuilding can raise high hopes and expectations that the EU subsequently finds difficult to meet (Müller, 2019: 264). In particular, representatives of Israel's elite frequently contest the EU's self-representation as an actor unified by a coherent international identity and a common normative vision for peacebuilding (Müller, 2019: 259). The Israeli elites also point to the rise of far-right parties in certain members states as a factor that demonstrates a lack of internal coherence between supranational EU institutions and individual member states. As stated by an Israeli politician, with the rise of right-wing populism in EU member states "nationalism is becoming more popular and human rights are being shoved into a corner" (cited in Müller, 2019: 259). The picture is more or less the same for the Palestinian elites. For the Palestinian civil society activists, the EU appears as an "underutilized power" or even hypocritical actor that merely talks about democratic principles, human rights and the respect for

international law, whilst it then fails to take meaningful action to defend the rights of Palestinians (cited in Müller, 2019: 262).

One particular reason for the lack of EU *effectiveness* in the 2010s has been the ensuing developments of the Arab Spring, which pushed the Palestinian issue to the backburner for some time. On the one hand the EU had to respond to the Arab masses taking onto the streets calling for regime change and dignity and on the other had to respond to the emerging civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen that brought an imminent refugee crisis. The EU responded to these challenges with what was coined as 3 Ms: money, market and mobility where mobility was the most problematic to grant. Adopting a "more-for-more" approach as well, providing more resources to countries that managed to make more progress and reform, the EU's role remained rather restrained, highlighting the security risks the uprisings caused in Europe's neighborhood.

In 2013, the EU issued guidelines for Israel as the Israeli settlements became an issue of concern in the occupied Palestinian territories. The EU underlined that the aim of guidelines was to ensure the respect of EU positions and commitments in conformity with international law on the non-recognition by the EU of Israel's sovereignty over the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967. They set out the conditions, under which the Commission would implement key requirements for the award of EU support to Israeli entities or to their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967. The EU made it clear that it does not recognize the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem as a part of Israeli territory. Therefore, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council underlined the importance of limiting the application of agreements with Israel to the territory of Israel, as recognized by the EU. Hence, the failure to meet these guidelines resulted in prohibition of grants, prizes and financial instruments from the EU to the Israeli settlements in the occupied territories (The European Union, 2013). Although the guidelines were important in showing the EU commitment to a future two-state solution, with the creation of a Palestinian state in the occupied territories of West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital, they did not change much on the ground to prevent Israeli settlement activity or encourage the dialogue with the Palestinian Authority.

As the Palestinian issue was at the backburner and a two-state solution was out of sight with Gaza under Hamas and West Bank struggling with aggressive Israeli settlements the then-U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement in December 2017 came as yet another turning point in the conflict and the EU role. Trump's announcement on the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, diverging from longstanding international consensus on the city triggered international responses, with the EU among the most prominent voices opposing it. The EU's official response emphasized that the status of Jerusalem should be

determined through negotiations between Israel and Palestine, in line with United Nations Security Council resolutions. The EU reiterated its position that the city should serve as the capital for both states, Israel and a future Palestinian state. The EU's reaction was underscored by High Representative Federica Mogherini, who stated that the union would continue to "respect the international consensus" on Jerusalem's status and would "not follow the United States in its decision." This reaction underlined EU's strong belief in a rules-based international order and adherence to the United Nations' resolutions, specifically UNSC Resolution 478, which condemns unilateral actions to alter Jerusalem's status. Following 2017, the EU repeatedly condemned any unilateral declarations or actions regarding Jerusalem, calling for shared governance that respects the city's significance to all three Abrahamic faiths. Despite the condemnations, the EU was limited in its capacity to counterbalance them effectively. This revealed the EU's constraints as an *effective* foreign policy actor, particularly in a geopolitical environment increasingly dominated by US unilateralism and shifting alliances in the Middle East. Despite its opposition to Trump's policies, the EU failed to present a unified and forceful alternative vision. Internal divisions within the EU—especially between countries with closer ties to Israel (such as Hungary and Austria) and those more critical of Israeli policies (such as Ireland and Sweden)—further limited collective action.

5. Conclusion

For several decades, the EU's actorness in the international stage has been a fruitful topic for debate. One of these debates is the recurrent questioning about the European capacity to act as an international actor. Indeed, while facing many political, economic, and social challenges, the Union has not stopped stressing its desire to act as a global actor. However, many observers continue to highlight the lack of its international capacity compared to the expectations it creates in Europe and worldwide. In particular,

In a nutshell, since the 1970s, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was characterised with the limitations of the EU approach to and policies on the issue, which usually remained reactive, limited to humanitarian issues when on the ground and can hardly be translated into political roles, which has historically been championed by the US. The EU has mostly followed the US position on the issue and when not in compliance, for example with the policies of the first Trump administration, lacked tools to revise the steps or implement alternative paths to peace. The Hamas attacks on Israel on 7 October further put the EU's actorness in the Palestinian issue to test. The EU condemned the violence, called for an immediate ceasefire and emphasized the need for humanitarian access to Gaza, where the civilian population was heavily

impacted by Israeli airstrikes. Diplomatically, the EU has engaged with both Israeli and Palestinian leaders in an effort to broker ceasefires and promote dialogue. However, this humanitarian role continues to be overshadowed by the EU's limited ability to play a political role or assert influence on the parties. The most significant reason for this has been fragmentation and divergent foreign policy stances of member states vis-à-vis the conflict. For example, France, Sweden, and Ireland have historically been more vocal in their criticism of Israeli policies, especially with regard to settlements and human rights violations in the occupied territories. They have called for a stronger EU position in support of Palestinian statehood and against Israeli policies that undermine the two-state solution. For instance, Sweden was the first EU member to officially recognize the State of Palestine in 2014. In contrast, some other member states, such as Germany, Austria, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, have maintained close relations with Israel, emphasizing its right to security and opposing any policy that might hinder close relations with Israel. Germany, in particular, due to its history, has been a staunch defender of Israel in many EU institutions, often advocating for a more cautious and balanced approach to the conflict. Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia, the Visegrád Group also consistently veto stronger criticisms and condemnations by the EU of Israeli actions. This fragmentation continues to undermine the EU's credibility as a foreign policy actor, in the Palestinian issue in particular and the Middle East, in general.

The 7 October attack also split the EU institutions. Whereas European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen projected the Israeli flag on the Commission's headquarter buildings and stressed Israel's "right to defend itself-today and in the days to come", European Council President Charles Michel emphasized the need for the European Union to avoid double standards in its approach to the conflict, stressing the primacy of the international law (Konecky, 2024).

One can also argue that even if the EU acts coherently and effectively, the actors involved in the issue crowd out the EU. There are not only the regional actors who are actively involved in the ceasefire negotiations like Egypt, Qatar and Türkiye but the US, that is a game setter in the course of the conflict and overshadows any role the EU could play. The newly-elected Trump administration has the potential to challenge decades of conventional policy in the Middle East, significantly altering its long-held commitment to the two-state solution (Noll, 2024). This would come as a serious shock to the EU and its member states, which have traditionally positioned themselves alongside the United States as equal defenders of the two-state solution outlined in the Oslo Accords and will fundamentally shift the Union's claim of "actorness" in the conflict (Noll, 2024). It is true that the EU still has a leverage lies with economic

and humanitarian dimension of the conflict and it has continued for decades to provide substantial aid to Palestinian civilians affected by the conflict and has engaged with international partners to coordinate relief efforts. Nevertheless, the fact that Oliver Varhelyi, the then EU Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, right after the 7 October attack announced the suspension of development aid for Palestine, which adds up to over €1 billion for the period 2021-2024, put a bold question mark on the reliability of this aid. At a general level, the latest developments significantly highlight the persistent tension between the EU's humanitarian commitments and its geopolitical limitations, particularly when dealing with protracted and deeply entrenched conflicts like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It is also vital to take into account how the EU's struggle for "actorness" in the region is perceived by the European citizens, who are allegedly at the centre of all EU decisions. For example, according to an October public opinion poll in the Netherlands, 55 percent of the public thought that the Dutch government should be more critical of Israel, and only 6 percent said it should be more supportive of it (as cited in Konecny, 2024). Similarly, a January poll showed that 61 percent of Germans thought Israel's military action in Gaza was not justified given the many civilian victims (as cited in Konecny, 2024). Thus, the EU's actorness debate should also take into consideration how this actorness across different geographies and cases are taken by the Europeans, which would be the focus of another study.

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Özet

AB'nin "jeopolitik uyanışı" içinde aktörlüğü nasıl açıklanabilir ? İsrail-Filistin çatışması ve Avrupa Birliği'nin etkinliği ve uyumu

2010'ların ortalarından beri Avrupa Birliği'nin dış politika perspektifi ile ilgili devam eden iki süreçten bahsedilebilir. Bunlardan ilki AB'nin aktif bir şekilde bazı çatışmalara dahil olması (ve bazılarından da kendisini uzak tutması), ikincisi ise AB dış politika ve komşuluk siyasetinde artan jeopolitik vurgudur. Bu yeni "jeopolitik yönelim" AB'nin kriz durumlarındaki genel duruşunu ve dış politika aktörlüğü ile ilgili kendisi ile ilgili ortaya koyduğu tanımlamalara önemli bir meydan okumadır. Bu tartışmanın ötesinde, AB'nin uzun zamandır süregelen çatışmalarda oynadığı aktörlük ile ilgili de devam eden sorular bulunmaktadır. Tüm çabalarına ve zaman içinde iyileştirilmiş yeteneklerine rağmen AB'nin komşu bölgelerinde devam eden çatışmalara dahil olma konusunda niçin bu derece seçici olduğu merak konusu olmaya devam etmektedir. Bu makalenin temel argümanı AB dış politikası ile ilgili kullanılan teorik yaklaşımların (örneğin "normatif güç Avrupa" gibi) fazla iyimser olduğu ve AB'nin komşu bölgelerdeki aktörlüğünün belirli yönlerine odaklanmayı zorlaştırdığıdır. Bu makalede AB'nin bu bölgelerdeki aktörlüğü AB'nin etkinliği ve uyumu açısından ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, AB dış politikası, AB dış politika aktörlüğü, Filistin meselesi