

UNITY UNDER PRESSURE: THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 24 FEBRUARY 2022

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Abstract. *This article examines the dynamics of European foreign policy unity after February 24, 2022. The main question is whether the unity demonstrated after the Russian aggression against Ukraine represents a sustainable institutional consolidation or a temporary mobilization under the pressure of a crisis. The study uses a legal-institutional and political-analytical approach, examining the Common Foreign and Security Policy through five tests: aid to Ukraine, the trade pressure of the Donald Trump administration, the Israel-Gaza conflict, the crisis around Iran, and the Greenland case. The analysis shows that the EU can formulate a common position when external pressure is strong enough, but it has difficulty turning this position into an independent strategic capability. The main conclusion is that future European foreign policy should seek a model of interaction between willing states that overcome the paralyzing effect of unanimity without destroying the institutional architecture of the Union.*

Keywords: CFSP; European Union; strategic autonomy; foreign policy; European security; veto power, variable geometry.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the dynamics of cooperation within the EU in the international environment that was formed after 2022. It is characterized by an initial crisis consolidation caused by Russian aggression, but subsequently transformed into a more difficult - procedural and political - maintenance of a common position regarding security issues in the Middle East and the policy of Donald Trump.

The purpose of the analysis is to analyze the evolution of the existing institutional framework of cooperation and to outline the characteristics of possible models of future development of this cooperation.

The CFSP has an intergovernmental character; that is, each state can “press the brake” and thereby oppose the adoption of a particular decision. If, when this policy was created in the early 1990s, the Member States numbered 12, today they are 27, which means 27 potential brakes on any given decision. Among the interested public, as well as among some scholars, there are serious doubts about the potential of this policy, including its effectiveness vis-à-vis Russia (Thaler, 2020, p. 4).

The most significant circumstances that hinder the establishment of an integrated EU foreign policy can be summarised as follows:

- a) The EU is a union of states which, especially after the enlargements following the 1990s, are located in different regions. This predetermines different—whether significant or less significant—foreign-policy priorities and different approaches to security (Lonardo, 2023a, p. 33).
- b) Even when there are no substantial differences among the Member States on a specific foreign-policy issue, foreign policy and defense remain areas closely linked to state sovereignty (from the perspective of the external autonomy of the state). Therefore, the

transfer of competences to the EU is perceived as a potential limitation of that sovereignty—something that states are not readily prepared to accept.

- c) The EU cannot independently guarantee its defense security and relies to a significant extent on NATO and the United States.
- d) The EU's energy dependence and the differences in the energy needs and vulnerabilities of the Member States create divergent political incentives and hinder the formation of a unified foreign-policy position.

Therefore, the willingness of all Member States to be part of one union does not mean that there is consensus as to what the foreign policy of that union should be.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a qualitative legal-institutional and political-analytical approach. The analysis is based on the provisions of EU primary law on the CFSP, on acts and public positions of the EU institutions, as well as on relevant scientific literature on European foreign policy, strategic autonomy and transatlantic relations.

The method is comparative and case-oriented: by sequentially examining several foreign policy crises after 2022, recurring limitations in the EU's ability to act as a single strategic actor are deduced.

3. THE WAR IN UKRAINE AS A MOMENT OF CRISIS UNITY

In 1996, Schmitter pointed out that the way the EU functions is different from that of the member states, in that the EU, although it has no strategic plan, its actions emerge in an improvised manner from tactical responses to concrete and immediate problems (Schmitter, 1996, p. 2).

This characteristic is particularly visible after February 24, 2022, when Russia's attack on Ukraine placed European countries in a completely different security environment. And despite the lack of a coherent policy and strategic approach of the EU in its relations with Russia. (Lonardo, 2023b, pp. 39 ff.), the EU's response was unified (including Hungary).

This unity was the result not of a common strategic, well-thought-out idea of the EU, but of a combination of various factors that determined the political moment at the beginning of 2022:

1. The war in Ukraine was a shocking and indisputable moral case, in which the aggressor and the victim were clearly defined. This left no room for disagreement among European countries in their response.
2. A unifying factor was the common understanding by Member States of the risk posed by a Russian invasion, reinforced by fears of territorial aggression in Europe - especially for the Baltic states, Sweden, Finland, Romania, Poland.
3. Unity was not only at the EU level, but also at the transatlantic allies – the US, the UK, Turkey, Norway, etc. Thus, the transatlantic framework acted as an additional stabilizing factor for unity.
4. Last but not least, the determination of this unity, motivation and joint action would have remained at a lower level if the Ukrainian resistance had not proved so determined. The transformation of Ukraine from a victim to a defender of the European order was an additional incentive for the united position of the EU Member States.

The war in Ukraine demonstrated the need for a unified policy towards Russia, placing this security issue at the forefront, ahead of all other priorities. However, the change in the factors mentioned above also affected the initial unity.

Russia launched its military invasion of Ukraine on the assumption that the EU was a weak and dependent foreign policy actor whose unity could easily be paralyzed. This proved to be a miscalculation. The war led to the consolidation of the EU and an increase in its role in European security.

The initial manifestations of this unity are remarkable.

The EU has adopted economic, financial and trade restrictive measures, which constitute the most severe sanctions ever taken by the EU against a third country. (Council of the European Union, 2026) The EU and its Member States have also provided significant economic, humanitarian and military assistance, as well as assistance to support refugees in the EU. (European Council, 2026).

The EU's decision to use the European Peace Facility – a fund to support and finance EU and partner operations – to supply military equipment, including lethal weapons, to Ukraine represents one of the most significant changes in EU foreign policy. (Lonardo, 2023b, p. 1) The EU's supply of lethal weapons to a third country was unprecedented in EU history.

The war in Ukraine has led to greater coherence on other related issues – the energy transition, refugee policy, criminal law, relations with China, relations with African countries. Global challenges are harbingers of a conceptual shift in the understanding of the essence and character of European foreign policy, and the war in Ukraine is the tectonic event that has led to the realization of changed priorities for the future.

The main effect of the war in Ukraine in terms of energy was a sharp reduction in the EU's energy dependence on Russia. By 2022, the Russian Federation was a significant supplier of solid fossil fuels and the largest importer of oil and natural gas to the European Union. The German government's decision to halt the Nord Stream 2 project and the drastic reduction in the volume of fossil fuels imported from Russia are a harbinger of a new geopolitical relationship between the EU and Russia.

In the area of military cooperation, changes are the most difficult to come by. The positive thing about solving the problems with the EU's defense vision is that the processes have already begun – they began after the adoption of the Global Strategy in 2016, the problems with the Strategic Compass were identified, and initiatives related to the Common Security and Defense Policy have been launched. (Scazzieri, 2020, p. 2).

The 2023 ASAP Regulation, aimed at accelerating the production of ammunition and missiles in the EU, in relation to the needs of Ukraine and the depletion of European stocks, also fits into this process. In 2025, this logic was expanded through SAFE, a loan instrument of up to €150 billion for common defense procurement, and through the ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030 plan, which aims to mobilise over €800 billion to increase Europe's defense readiness.

These initiatives show that the EU is gradually building an industrial-financial framework for defense, but they do not yet create an independent European military capability. Progress cannot be rapid, as it concerns joint planning, development and acquisition of military capabilities, as well as actions to create military mobility within the EU. The EU can mainly provide the framework for cooperation in the defense industry – for example, by creating a common market and by limited funding of certain projects. However, the contracting authorities are national governments and it is they, along with the military and industry, who determine the intensity of this cooperation.

4. FROM CRISIS TO DIFFICULT UNITY

European unity after 2022, however, is unity produced by the weight of the crisis; it is not the result of strategic maturity. Therefore, changes in the factors identified above also affected the initial unity, and after the first shock it became clear that the factors limiting the CFSP—national priorities, limitations in military capabilities and energy differences—continued to exert influence.

Thus, European unity after 2022 placed old contradictions under new pressure. They are clearly visible in five cases: assistance to Ukraine, Trump's trade pressure, Israel–Gaza, the United States–Iran crisis, and Greenland.

The first test was Hungary. Then Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán turned the right of veto into a systematic instrument of pressure. He did not block bilateral assistance from Germany, France or Poland

to Ukraine, but rather the common decision without which the EUR 90 billion loan could not be issued. The veto thus ceased to be only a guarantee of national sovereignty and became a bargaining tool.

The second test was Donald Trump's trade policy. His administration confronted the EU with a choice between accommodation and reciprocity in trade relations. The trade agreement reached in July 2025 was blocked months later after new tariff threats. France insisted on a tougher response; Germany was more cautious because of the dependence of its exports on the American market; Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni described the tariffs as a "mistake", but avoided open confrontation. There was unity, but it was reactive—it appeared when external pressure from the United States required it.

The third test was Israel–Gaza. Here the rupture was within the EU itself. The European Commission found grounds to consider that Israel had violated its obligations under Article 2 of the Association Agreement and proposed a partial suspension of trade preferences. The Council, however, did not reach unanimity on a full suspension. Spain, Ireland, Belgium and Slovenia insisted on tougher measures; Germany and Italy remained more cautious. Thus the EU formulated a position that exceeded its actual capacity for action.

The fourth test was the United States–Iran war of 2026. In this crisis, the EU turned from a participant into an observer of a crisis that directly affected European security but developed beyond its control.

The background—the Iranian nuclear deal—illustrates the diplomatic weight of the EU, insofar as the EU, through the High Representative, France, Germany and the United Kingdom, participated in the elaboration of this arrangement for the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons. After the United States withdrew from the deal in 2018, the EU position remained formally united but practically indefensible, since the US withdrawal also meant the imposition of secondary sanctions on European companies trading with Iran—something the EU could not prevent. This in practice rendered the agreements reached largely meaningless.

During the crisis of 2025–2026, the foreign ministers of France, Germany and the United Kingdom, together with the EU High Representative, called for restraint, a return to diplomacy and a solution that would ensure that Iran did not acquire nuclear weapons. In March 2026 there was already a position on behalf of the EU condemning Iranian attacks and insisting on de-escalation, international law, the protection of civilians and freedom of navigation, including through the Strait of Hormuz. Taken by itself, however, this position cannot be described as complete—there was no unified position on the US intervention—or as strategic, since the EU had limited influence over the development of the crisis. The opposite, however, is not true: the crisis had a major impact on the EU, since the EU would be a serious loser from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.

The fifth test was Donald Trump's claims to Greenland. It was particularly revealing because it concerned the relations of the EU and the Member States with the United States—the traditional guarantor of European security. When the American president linked his claims to Greenland with tariff pressure on European exports, the EU reacted in a more consolidated manner: the European Parliament postponed the ratification of the trade agreement, and European leaders spoke of unity. Yet here, too, it was clear that the EU's capabilities lay in the field of soft power—statements, the delaying of agreements and countermeasures—without capabilities that could prevent unilateral action by Donald Trump.

All five cases confirm the thesis that European unity after 2022 is activated under pressure and fades when that pressure diminishes. None of the cases demonstrates proactive, institutionally sustainable consolidation; each reveals at least one of the old structural limitations: the veto of a small state (Slovakia or Hungary), trade asymmetry (the United States), historical and value-based cleavages (Israel), energy dependence (Iran) or military helplessness (Greenland).

The absence of a strategic orientation on the main security problems—Russia, the Middle East, Greenland and relations with the United States—cannot be compensated for solely by unity among European states in crisis situations. Policy must be consistent in crisis, post-crisis and non-crisis environments alike. In this sense, a strategy must include reflection not only on actions aimed at ending a

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crisis, but also on actions after it has ended: what Europe's strategic objectives are towards Russia, the Middle East and the United States; what place these actors will have in a possibly transformed security environment; and how Europe will protect its interests in that environment. At present, these questions do not have a unified European answer.

5. TRUMP 2.0 AND THE PROBLEM OF EUROPEAN DEFENSE

The disagreements between the EU and the US regarding NATO are another problematic node in the EU's foreign policy that deserves special attention. They directly affect the need for a unified foreign and security policy of the Union, since an effective foreign policy implies a combination of soft and hard power. It is the latter that remains the EU's weakest point: the Union has significant regulatory, economic and diplomatic weight, but does not possess an independent military capability commensurate with its foreign policy ambitions and potential.

In these relations, there is a lasting contradiction that has been evident since the 1950s.

On the one hand, the majority of EU member states want more autonomy for European defense, both politically and militarily. Such autonomy can be achieved through more investment, which would lead to a strengthening of the European pillar of NATO.

In practice, however, the idea of European autonomy is supported by the US with the formula “yes, but” — yes, Europe should have strategic independence and take more responsibility for its defense, but this carries the risk of duplication, competition, and ultimately weakening of NATO structures (Howorth, 2007, p. 237).

Thus, the conundrum of European defense can be summarized as follows: how can more EU not mean less NATO and how can more NATO not mean less EU?

Donald Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, while confirming the need for independent development of European defense, has added further conceptual ambiguity to this conundrum. This ambiguity relates to the different understanding of the role of NATO — whether the Alliance is primarily a defense alliance for collective defense, or a military alliance in which partners should support the leading ally in its foreign policy and military initiatives. This conceptual difference defines the Euro-Atlantic relationship in two very different ways.

Donald Trump's understanding is closer to the idea that NATO is not so much a defensive alliance for collective defense as a military alliance in which partners should support the leading member in its foreign policy and military initiatives - for example, in the case of Iran. It is significant, however, that Washington has not offered similar reciprocity regarding Ukraine, where it is precisely the European allies who have the most direct interest in support against Russian aggression.

From a formal point of view, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is not a military alliance in the sense of an alliance of states directed against a specific third state or community. NATO is an organization for collective defense, established on the basis of Art. 51 of the UN Charter. In the literature, one can also find the understanding that the original construction of NATO was precisely a military alliance (Milward, 2009, p. 104; Kissinger, 2014, pp. 403 ff.; Kissinger, 2002, p. 300). Whatever the role of NATO at the beginning and during the Cold War, at present its function is primarily defensive.

The processes of understanding the need for Europe to take on a greater role in protecting its security began immediately after the end of the Cold War with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Achieving “strategic autonomy” has been an EU goal since the launch of the European Security and Defense Policy with the Saint-Malo Declaration of 1998 (Joint Declaration on European Defense, 1998). Strategic autonomy means that the EU should achieve the ability to take responsibility for its security and foreign policy by building the necessary organizational, military and operational capabilities.

At first glance, it seems that the EU has taken the necessary steps even before 2022. These include the Permanent Structured Cooperation, the European Defense Fund, the European Peace Facility, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defense, and others. In 2022, the Strategic Compass for Security and

Defense was adopted, in 2023 — the ASAP Regulation aimed at supporting the production of ammunition (Regulation (EU) 2023/1525, 2023), and in 2024 — a new strategy for the European defense industry (European Commission & High Representative, 2024). In connection with the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Regulation establishing the Instrument for strengthening the European defense industry through joint procurement (Regulation (EU) 2023/2418, 2023) was also adopted. In 2024, the adoption of a European Defense Industrial Programme was also proposed (European Commission, 2024).

All these initiatives illustrate the high priority of defense on the European agenda. However, the fundamental problems associated with the configuration of European defense suggest that even if there is political will, these processes are likely to take more than a decade. The creation of a common defense market, joint acquisition of capabilities, interoperability and military mobility across the EU are essential prerequisites for building a common defense.

The rationale for EU defense policy is clear: more investment, joint projects and the creation of a common defense market (Varga, 2024, pp. 73–108). Positive developments in this direction are already underway, particularly in the areas of military mobility (Chihaiia, 2024, p. 3) and joint acquisition of capabilities (Andersson, 2023, p. 2).

The lack of military capabilities, the impossibility of full military mobility, fragmented national defense markets, duplication of capabilities, insufficient cooperation in the defense industry, and the lack of interoperability are among the main problems that European defense must address. Paradoxically, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 did not act as a sufficient catalyst for political will (Varga, 2024, p. 82). Political decisions for additional investments were only taken under the pressure of the events of 2022.

NATO and the EU are communities of shared values (Sloan, 2016, p. 32). At the same time, it is fair to assess that they complement each other, since the EU does not have sufficient military capabilities and NATO does not have an independent strategic vision in the European sense (Duff, 2022, p. 98). To achieve this goal, Duff proposes the creation of an additional organization — the European Security Council — as an intergovernmental instrument that would connect the EU, NATO, and associated European countries, while keeping the United States involved in European security.

In summary, EU-NATO cooperation does not imply confrontation between the two organizations, but rather the building of a European defense capacity that strengthens, not weakens, Euro-Atlantic security. However, this capacity must also be able to act independently - as a separate but functionally linked structure to Euro-Atlantic security.

6. DISCUSSION: TOWARDS A NEW INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE

From the above, it can be concluded that after 2022, the CFSP not only does not contain a satisfactory mechanism for the successful implementation of foreign policy, but in certain cases it also becomes an obstacle to foreign policy action - both of the EU as a whole and of the Member States that wish to act faster and more decisively.

The reason for this is institutional, insofar as the competences in this area are located on the two-dimensional field of “integration – intergovernmentalism”, without finding a sustainable formula between common action and national autonomy. A similar conclusion is reached by Andrew Duff (Duff, 2022, p. 95 et seq.), who sees the EU as an unfinished political construct between confederation and federation.

According to the author, foreign policy can neither be fully communitarianized nor purely national, although institutionally the CFSP tends more towards the latter. The EU's foreign policy is institutionally built on the national, with conceptual commonality also passing through the awareness of problems not only as national, but also as European. This allows in certain cases the member states to adopt the common European position, although it does not always fully coincide with their immediate national comfort. Therefore, the successful combination of “national – community” is the basis, on the one hand, of the awareness of the national interest as part of the European one, and on the other – of the possibility of independent protection of the national interest.

An essential condition for a successful foreign policy is that states have a wider range of options to resolve a specific foreign policy problem: not to be deprived of the right to act independently, but also not to be blocked when they wish to act collectively. In this sense, the EU should act as an amplifier of their strategic interests, and where unity is required, it should not undermine the very foundations of their national foreign policy.

The CFSP does not offer a clear institutional answer on how to achieve this balance. On the contrary, the current system is not only weak as a mechanism for joint foreign policy due to the veto power, but in certain cases it also weakens the individual foreign policy of the Member States.

The weaknesses to which the right of veto gives rise for collective foreign policy are widely known: delayed reactions, dilution of common positions, blocking of sanctions or assistance, the transformation of foreign policy into an instrument of domestic or bilateral pressure, and the creation of an impression of strategic indecision on the part of the EU.

Less obvious are the negative influences of the CFSP for national foreign policy.

When a timely decision must be taken on a particular problem, the EU's foreign-policy framework places states under pressure to wait for a common position rather than to develop their own policy or a coordinated position with a group of like-minded states in good time. A state may thus find itself in an uncomfortable intermediate position: it no longer acts entirely alone, yet it does not receive an effective common European framework that would amplify its action.

Another problem arises when a Member State uses its veto on one foreign policy issue to achieve entirely different political aims. This was the example of 21 September 2020, when the EU Foreign Affairs Council failed to reach a decision on imposing restrictive measures against Belarus because Cyprus blocked the sanctions, insisting that the EU simultaneously take measures against Türkiye because of its drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean.

A similar risk is the possibility that a third country may direct pressure at one or several Member States to prevent a common EU decision. Under the principle of unanimity, it is sufficient for that pressure to succeed vis-à-vis one state to block the entire common position. In this sense, the CFSP resembles a fortress with twenty-seven gates: not all gates need to be opened for the defense to be breached; one gate left unlocked is enough.

All this indicates that the most serious limitation to the operation of the CFSP remains the requirement for unanimity in decision-making.

The treaty mechanisms through which attempts have been made over the past thirty years to mitigate this restriction are cautious and difficult to implement. A partial exception is constructive abstention, which allows a member state to abstain from participating in a certain decision without blocking its adoption by the others. But in this case, the decision depends on the political willingness of the dissenting state to temporarily not interfere – for example, the dissenting leader deciding to leave the room, to “go for a coffee” so as not to block the general decision. This is more of a wishful rather than a legal guarantee.

Another substantial problem is the limited possibility for institutional upgrading of the system. Within the existing legal framework, the principle of unanimity can be overcome in two ways: through amendment of the founding treaties under Article 48 TEU, or through the use of the so-called passerelle clause under Article 31(3) TEU, which allows the European Council, acting unanimously, to determine areas of the CFSP in which the Council may adopt decisions by qualified majority.

In both cases, however, change is again premised on the unanimity of the Member States. Such unanimity is difficult to achieve, since several states oppose such reform. Even if some of them could be persuaded over time—or if governments more favourable to such change came to power in them—the political cycle in the EU constantly reproduces new sceptics.

For this reason, waiting for a pan-European “window of opportunity” for deep CFSP reform appears unrealistic. Moreover, reform is also a precondition for future enlargement, since the admission of new Member States would further aggravate the problem of achieving unanimity.

This opens the door to another alternative: new forms of interaction among willing European states outside or around the existing EU framework—a separate but functionally integrated structure (including institutions such as the Commission, the Parliament and the Court) that would allow faster political and defense action without formally destroying the institutional architecture of the Union.

Such a structure should be open both to non-EU European countries, such as the United Kingdom, Norway or Ukraine, and to member states that did not join initially but later wish to participate. It should also form the core of a global alliance of like-minded countries such as Canada, Australia, Japan, South Korea, etc.

The model should be the reverse of the CFSP model: instead of limited and blocking, it should be inclusive and non-blocking. The system should not exclude any EU Member State in advance, but the non-participation of an individual state should not become a veto over the actions of the others.

In order to be politically acceptable, such an organisation should be built on several safeguards.

First, it should have a clear organisational structure and a single representative—for example, a European foreign minister, as envisaged in the draft Constitution for Europe.

Second, participation by states should be voluntary, with the right to a limited opt-out from specific strategic initiatives. A limited opt-out does not mean that a state may at any moment freely withdraw from commitments undertaken, since this would lead to disengagement for reasons of saving money and effort. It should function as a safeguard clause for actions affecting essential national strategic interests, not as a general right of selective participation.

Third, to prevent the model from becoming an arbitrary “coalition of the willing”, a threshold should be provided: if a significant share of states declare an opt-out, the decision should not be adopted.

Fourth, the actions of the organization should be linked to a pre-defined strategic framework, clear accountability and transparent financial commitments, so that flexibility does not become a cover for the domination of the largest states.

Thus, the model creates a tool for cases where some European countries already share a common strategic goal and are ready to act, without replacing national foreign policy. The main goal is to eliminate the possibility of those who are unwilling to paralyze those who are willing.

A key issue in such a model is the relationship between the “willing” and the “unwilling” and whether this could lead to a new division. The formation of groups of countries that choose to cooperate more intensively in certain areas has always been viewed with some suspicion, although the need for a “multi-speed Europe” was already mentioned in the Tindemans Report in 1975.

These concerns are not unfounded. Such a structure could create a sense of a “first” and “second” Europe, deepen mistrust between large and small states, duplicate existing EU and NATO formats, or produce decisions with unclear democratic accountability.

The proposed model differs from the concept of “multi-speed Europe”, which belongs primarily to the integrational, rather than the intergovernmental, logic of the EU (Stubb, 1996, p. 288). This objection is justified if by different speeds one understands the classical model in which all countries move towards the same degree of integration, but at different paces.

In the field of foreign policy and security, however, it is not a question of different degrees of integration. It is a question of different capacities, readiness and agreement to act within the framework of an already accepted strategic goal. This idea is therefore closer to the model defined by Stubb as variable geometry than to the classic “multi-speed Europe”.

In the field of foreign policy, it is not about gradually joining everyone into the same integration community. The guiding principle here is the common European strategic framework, in which a different circle of countries can participate in specific foreign policy and defense actions according to their capacity, interest, and political readiness.

On the other hand, the possibility of opt-out also gives the model certain characteristics of *à la carte* integration, insofar as individual countries can choose not to participate in specific actions or commitments. However, this does not make the model a purely *à la carte* solution, because participation or non-participation develops within the framework of a previously agreed common strategic objective, and not as a free choice of unrelated policies. It is therefore more accurate to define the model as a variable geometry with an opt-out possibility, rather than as a foreign policy “Europe *à la carte*”.

That is, once European states have agreed on a “grand strategy”—for example, that Russian aggression is a threat to European security or that Europe must develop greater defense autonomy—it is not necessary that every subsequent operational decision be blockable by all. In this sense, the model represents a European system of differentiated strategic action: a common goal, but varying degrees of participation, commitment, and operational readiness.

The proposed system does not necessarily replace the CFSP. This is not necessary, because even now Europe's foreign policy action is not limited to the classic CFSP. Alongside it, there are several formats: the institutional format of the Council and the High Representative; the operational format of CSDP missions and operations; the flexible internal format of PESCO and Art. 44 TEU; the diplomatic format of E3/EU; ad hoc formats outside the EU, such as the Normandy Format and coalitions of the willing; and the broader political format of the European Political Community.

However, these formats are either too tied to unanimity or too weakly institutionalized. The creation of a new European organization would make sense precisely as a way to channel and institutionalize such practices. The existence of multiple unrelated formats is not evidence of flexibility in itself, but rather a symptom of a lack of a unified policy, and a factor in excluding countries from the decision-making process and acting.

If Europe continues to rely solely on unanimity, it risks preserving the architecture of a common voice but losing the capacity for common action. However, if it builds an institutionalized variable geometry of strategic action, it can both preserve the inclusive nature of the European project and restore its capacity for timely response.

However, the functionality of such a project is not the only criterion for assessing its feasibility. According to the constructivist reading of Leuffen, Rittberger and Schimmelfennig (Leuffen et al., 2013, pp. 198–206) of the failure of the creation of a European Defense Community in the 1950s, it stems from a clash between the European idea of supranational defense and the national understanding of the army as a symbol of independence.

The parallel with the current European dilemma is apt, as it, too, represents a clash between two visions — the “sovereignist” and the “community” one.

According to the constructivist explanation, the change in public opinion and political support for the European Defense Community cannot be understood solely through changes in national interests, the balance of power, or the positions of the industries concerned (arguments that are still debated today as central to the understanding of a unified foreign policy). These factors are important and correspond, respectively, to the intergovernmental, realist, and liberal-intergovernmental schools.

Constructivism, however, adds a deeper layer of explanation: the very understanding of national interest, of an acceptable balance of power, and of an acceptable price for integration is shaped through notions of identity. Therefore, the failure of the European Defense Community can be understood not simply as an institutional or strategic failure, but as a failure to legitimize European defense from the perspective of the identity of Western European societies. Societies create defensive structures to protect political communities with which they identify and which they perceive as “theirs.” A constructivist reading

is important for understanding the future European foreign policy and security structure. If it is presented as a replacement for the nation-state or as a covert federalization of defense, it risks repeating the identity problem of the ill-fated European Defense Community.

Another, more recent example of a misconstrued European construction is the 2004 draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe. It largely played out the conflict between the same two identity visions. In a significant part of the public debate, the draft was perceived as a symbolic step towards European statehood. The use of the term “constitution” activated identity fears — that the nation-state and sovereignty would be replaced by a supranational center. In this sense, the failure of the Constitutional Treaty was a result of the way it was politically narrated and socially perceived, rather than its content. Supporting this understanding is the fact that a significant part of this content was subsequently incorporated into the Lisbon Treaty. This happened much more unproblematically, when the most visible European identity markers in the terminology were replaced with more neutral terms.

Therefore, the new structure must satisfy two competing and intertwined identity visions - to be legitimized as part of the European project, but not as a renunciation of national sovereignty: linked to the EU and its institutions, open to European countries outside the EU, but structured in such a way that states retain the feeling that they are participating voluntarily in a common instrument to reinforce, rather than replace, their national foreign policy. Put simply, from a constructivist perspective, the success of such an organization will depend not only on whether it is functionally useful, but also on whether it is correctly narrated.

7. CONCLUSION

Foreign policy and security are areas where integration is difficult to achieve because the differences between member states go deeper than simple political preferences. They affect strategic culture, understanding of sovereignty, attitudes towards the use of force, the degree of dependence on the US, and different vulnerabilities to external crises.

The most significant obstacles to building an integrated EU foreign policy can be summarized in four groups: first, the different foreign policy priorities of the Member States; second, the sovereign nature of foreign policy and defense; third, the inability of the EU to independently guarantee its defense security; and fourth, the different degrees of energy dependence and energy vulnerability of individual Member States.

The five case studies examined confirm that European unity after 24 February 2022 is most activated under pressure and weakens when this pressure decreases or when the crisis affects the Member States in different ways. None of them shows a proactive and institutionally sustainable consolidation. Each reveal at least one of the old structural limitations of the CFSP – disagreements between states, fears of loss of sovereignty, dependence on the US, military inadequacy or energy vulnerability. This means that European unity, when it appears, often represents a temporary mobilization, not a completed strategic capability.

After February 24, 2022, the initial shock produced a strong consolidation around Ukraine and against Russia. Over time, however, this unity began to turn into a more difficult process of coordination between countries with different strategic cultures, different energy dependencies, different degrees of trust in the US, and different understandings of the EU's place in the security system.

The war in Ukraine, on the one hand, has established the CFSP as a forum and catalyst for a common response, but on the other hand, it has shown the limits of European unity. The main task facing European countries is no longer just to formulate common positions, but to find an institutional model that allows for timely common action, without erasing the differences between them and without turning the disagreement of one country into a veto on the actions of the others.

This future structure can hardly be built entirely within the framework of the CFSP, since it is based on the logic of the mandatory participation of all Member States and on the principle of unanimity. To a

Georgiev, V. (2026). Unity under pressure: The European Union's foreign policy after 24 February 2022. *Politics & Security*, 16(2), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.54658/ps.28153324.2026.16.2.pp.64-75>

large extent, Ralf Dahrendorf's definition that the European Union has been a «remarkable political success, but an equally remarkable institutional failure» can be applied to the institutional structure of the CFSP (Dahrendorf, 1979, p. 8).

Therefore, the understanding of the future European foreign policy must move beyond the two-dimensional opposition “integration – intergovernmentalism”. Differentiation is not a deviation from the European project, but its inherent characteristic and it can be traced in the most diverse manifestations of exclusive, shared, coordinating, supporting and reserved for the Member States – both in individual integration regimes such as the euro area and Schengen, in the mechanisms of enhanced cooperation and in the Permanent Structured Cooperation in the field of defense. The question is therefore how to institutionalize foreign policy in such a way as to preserve the unity of the European project without paralyzing the capacity to act.

The main conclusion of the study is that Europe's future foreign policy should be built as an institutionalized variable geometry of strategic action: a common European strategic framework, voluntary participation of willing and able states, limited opt-out in case of essential national interests and the possibility of decision-making without the paralyzing effect of unanimity. Such a model would allow the EU to preserve the inclusive nature of the European project and at the same time - to restore its ability to act in a timely manner.

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