

From Policy Integration to Intra-institutional Politicisation in the European Commission: Insights From the Global Gateway

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Abstract

Recent initiatives, such as Global Gateway, highlight the increasingly political nature of the European Commission. This, in turn, creates policy opportunities and challenges related to both how the European Commission works on the global stage and how its different services interact with each other and work internally. Thus, initiatives such as Global Gateway increase the need for policy integration across policy domains, in this case related to connectivity. This article looks at how policy integration becomes a policy ambition that is confronted with increased internal politicisation. By studying four empirical expectations in relation to how Global Gateway tests the European Commission's integrative capacity, the article unpacks the ways in which the European Commission's integrative capacity has become fundamental to ensure its effectiveness in external policies. The capacity to integrate different policies to allow different sectors and policy communities to develop joint work, including strengthened cross-directorate-general co-ordination, can enable the Commission to present itself as a credible external actor with a unified external strategy. However, this goal is questioned by resource competition, intra-institutional politicisation and the need for external flexibility.

Keywords: European Commission; Global Gateway; Internal Politicisation; Policy Integration

Introduction

The European Union's (EU) Global Gateway shows the EU's increasing geopolitical ambitions (Haroche, 2023; Held, 2023), aiming to position itself as a counterforce to other major players such as China and its Belt and Road Initiative (Duggan et al., 2025; Forough and Fünfgeld, 2025; Larsen, 2025). Different from other infrastructure-focused projects, Global Gateway proposes a multifaceted definition of connectivity ranging from digital infrastructure to improved access to healthcare and more resilient supply chains, supporting the broader sustainable development goals and a strong commitment to multi-lateral collaboration (Borrell, 2023; European Commission, 2024a). It represents a critical case study, as it is based on the geopolitical ambition to bolster the global influence of the EU by financing connectivity and infrastructure projects in various continents (Tagliapietra, 2024), requiring at the same time a significant improvement in the institutional effectiveness of the European Commission (Haroche, 2024; Jerzyniak and Herranz-Surrallés, 2024).

Internally, Global Gateway consolidates two significant trends within the European Commission. First, it evidences the relevance of integration across policy domains contributing to the Commission's external action (Barbé and Morillas, 2019; Bauer, 2008; Maltby, 2013; Ugland and Veggeland, 2004). In this context, the aim is to reinforce initiatives that sit under the common umbrella of connectivity, thus fostering a

co-ordinated response to related policy challenges. Second, Global Gateway raises the likelihood of high levels of intra-institutional politicisation, showcasing the importance of politically charged processes within the Commission. As the Commission aligns its policy responses to meet diverse and competing demands, its internal processes become highly infused with political and strategic considerations (Hackenesch et al., 2021; Rauh, 2019).

The literature on politicisation has focused on showing the external implications of an increasingly geopolitical presence of the EU and the challenges related to integration, populist pressures and geopolitical competition (Hooghe and Marks, 2012; Hutter et al., 2016). However, Global Gateway can be used as an empirical space to test how these challenges may also lead to internal changes when the Commission's connectivity ambitions create internal competition resulting from managing complex high-profile programmes. Intra-institutional politicisation manifests as directorates-general (DGs) navigate their individual mandates, balancing their distinct priorities with overarching goals related to policy integration (Geys et al., 2024; Hartlapp et al., 2013; Trein et al., 2020).

By unpacking these institutional and political developments, the current article advances the literature on the EU external policies by exploring both cross-domain policy integration and intra-institutional politicisation within the European Commission. Connecting how DGs negotiate their distinct priorities whilst aiming for policy integration, the study sheds light on the internal dynamics of the Commission and its strategic adaptations to external pressures, ultimately discussing how its external presence is conditioned by its internal integrative capacity. The empirical basis of this article draws on an extensive review of European Commission policy documents and statements related to Global Gateway and other closely connected initiatives, such as the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and Team Europe, as well as the review of Global Gateway policy analyses by entities and actors outside of the EU institutions. Additionally, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with European Commission officials across the different DGs engaged in connectivity initiatives, as well as with officials working in the European External Action Service (EEAS) and with several EU Delegations in African and Asian countries where Global Gateway initiatives have started being implemented. The following section develops the theoretical framework of the study, linking policy integration with intra-institutional politicisation and analysing how these concepts complement and condition each other in the context of EU external policies whilst arguing for four distinct empirical expectations that will guide the empirical analysis of Global Gateway.

I. Conceptual Framework: Policy Integration and Intra-institutional Politicisation

Policy integration is a key concept when aiming to unpack the European Commission's efforts to advance cross-sectoral governance mechanisms, especially as the Commission ambitions to become an effective actor in external policies (Serban, 2021a; Serban, 2021b). Policy integration has been defined as the effort to align policy goals, instruments and processes across policy domains that have been traditionally developed in a siloed manner (Vince et al., 2024). This effort aims to create tailored approaches that can address complex interconnected policy challenges (Candel and Biesbroek, 2016). In the context of the European Commission, policy integration aims to bring coherence not only in

terms of how agendas, such as trade, development and environmental policies, are planned but also in the ways in which these agendas get to be implemented, thus strengthening the EU's ability to present itself as a relevant actor on the global stage (Jordan and Lenschow, 2010).

The EU has focused its policy integration efforts on interconnected policy fields related to, for example, sustainability. In this context, the European Green Deal has been presented as a main policy integration initiative accounting not only for economic and sustainability concerns but also for the social consequences of implementing far-reaching initiatives that need to be addressed in a joint manner. Thus, policy integration becomes vital for aligning goals, instruments and processes across sectors given the EU ambition to navigate complex international arenas for which co-ordinated responses are essential (Nilsson and Nilsson, 2005; Peters, 2015). In an even more advanced vein, intra-institutional co-ordination can eventually contribute to positioning the European Commission as a leader in transnational policy integration.

Existing literature on EU policy-making highlights the main integration mechanisms that the European Commission deploys. These include joint planning across DGs, shared funding frameworks, inter-service consultations and interdepartmental task forces (Finke, 2020). The ambition of creating these mechanisms is related to policy integration and effective governance enabled by cross-departmental co-ordination and negotiation (Lenschow, 2002). Such mechanisms help the European Commission to avoid the issues related to disjointed policy, which could, in turn, undermine the outcomes of its external policies (Nugent and Rhinard, 2019).

Policy integration becomes in this context a dynamic process, which includes negotiation, adaptation and also efforts for alignment across policy domains (Kaplaner et al., 2025). Alignment efforts can lead to integrated policy-making (Nilsson and Nilsson, 2005), thus going beyond mere policy coherence efforts to enable the design of specific policies with mutual dependencies in mind whilst policy-makers navigate policy conflicts and synergies. DGs within the European Commission need not only to co-ordinate policy efforts but also to build common ground on issues related to resource allocation and policy prioritisation (Jordan and Schout, 2006). At the same time, whilst pursuing policy integration, the Commission needs to safeguard the policy expertise of its DGs, facing a complex challenge (Nugent and Rhinard, 2019). The ability of the European Commission to keep this effort balanced conditions its success and capacity to build trust and leadership, which is needed to sustain long-lasting partnerships with third countries and other international organisations (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019).

As a consequence, policy integration becomes a balancing act. DGs need to harmonise their individual policy mandates with the broader Commission's strategies to address multifaceted global issues (Bretherton and Vogler, 2005). However, policy integration within the European Commission is not without its challenges. Competing priorities amongst DGs can impede policy integration as DGs vie to access limited resources (Jordan and Schout, 2006). Furthermore, whilst DGs intend to keep their sectoral autonomy, increased competition over the same budgetary resources can lead to integration overload (Jordan and Lenschow, 2010). This budgetary and strategic competition showcases the inherent tension between policy integration as a policy mechanism aiming to improve policy outcomes and the bureaucratic constraints that DGs need to deal with whilst

aligning their policy domain interests with the broader goals of the European Commission.

Therefore, policy integration also becomes a politically complex ambition within the European Commission. Whilst aiming to achieve common policy goals, policy integration efforts may lead to heightened intra-institutional tensions (Hartlapp et al., 2014). Intra-institutional politicisation is due in this context to the co-ordination challenges related to the European Commission's internal work. Such challenges lead to frictions, disagreements and diverging priorities amongst its internal actors, such as commissioners, DGs or administrative units (Furness and Gänzle, 2016). In these cases, the Commission can become a site of internal political struggle about regulatory approaches, policy goals and priorities. Such frictions can materialise in the form of 'internal politics' (Christiansen, 2001), understood as contestation (Petri et al., 2020) and internal competition amongst the Commission's services (Herrera, 2020; Thevenin et al., 2020).

Inside the Commission, contestation can especially occur amongst DGs (Haroche, 2023) and involve how to use resources or how much attention should be devoted to specific policies (Hackenesch et al., 2021). An increased intra-institutional politicisation is more likely between DGs with competing agendas related to the policy goals which should be accomplished through policy integration. Integration efforts encourage institutional co-ordination and cohesion, but they can also drive politicisation due to how DGs aim to accomplish their individual priorities whilst working under integrated policy mandates. Originating in policy integration efforts, intra-institutional politicisation leads to a politically charged atmosphere due to how DGs navigate institutional dynamics and negotiate potential trade-offs.

Politicisation exposes policy decisions to the political interests of the different actors in the European Commission. Intra-institutional politicisation resulting from policy integration across DGs increases the importance of negotiation between DGs pushing for their own mandate. This, in turn, makes the Commission an increasingly political actor (Westlake, 2024). Schmidt (2019) evidenced how the EU response to the migration crisis of 2015 proved the increasing level of politicisation within EU decision-making processes. Such observation was motivated by how the different DGs aimed to assert their policy agendas, which were perceived as competing ones. In this sense, DG HOME, in charge of migration policy, and DG DEVCO, dealing with international aid and development co-operation, exposed opposing priorities more than once, with international development ambitions being watered down by migration control goals.

Thus, institutional bargaining becomes essential when aiming to learn about how intra-institutional politicisation evolves. As Kaplaner et al. (2025) argue, institutional negotiations and compromises within the EU institutions are crucial to enable the integration of different policy domains. Bargaining allows accommodating different policy interests requiring political compromises between DGs with competing interests (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004). Nevertheless, policy compromises may sometimes dilute the initial ambition of policies, especially when DGs with more influence get involved in the negotiation and implementation of such initiatives.

Additionally, external actors, including the other EU institutions and actors outside of the EU, may push for their own political agendas, further complicating the agreements within the Commission (Risse, 2014). Whilst, for example, DG TRADE may push for trade liberalisation, DG INTPA, which deals with international partnerships and

development, may prioritise the need to increase the amount of aid to achieve the sustainable development goals, resulting in negotiations within the Commission that may downplay ambitious development objectives in favour of international trade goals, which can also be privileged by the EU member states. In this context, the interests of EU member states can be expected to play an important role in how intra-institutional politicisation evolves in the Commission (Schmidt, 2019). When the interests of specific member states align with specific DGs involved in the negotiation and implementation of integrated policy solutions, the DGs aligned in their priorities with the member states are likely to obtain more political support and eventually more resources.

Such differences across DGs can lead to an increased level of internal division in the Commission, as DGs that have policy portfolios receiving less political support can be sidelined in the negotiations shaping policy integration efforts. Thus, the European Commission's efforts to achieve policy integration in external policies become strongly conditioned by the Commission's ability to control how these efforts might trigger intra-institutional politicisation. Whilst the Commission pushes towards achieving integration ambitions to get its DGs in closer internal alignment, these policy integration efforts can simultaneously foster bureaucratic competition as DGs aim to achieve their individual priorities.

The European Commission's integrative capacity (Cejudo and Michel, 2021; Coban and Bali, 2022) to work in an integrated manner across the different policy areas to accomplish the objectives of a common global agenda can be studied in the context of recent ambitious initiatives like the Global Gateway. Next, we develop four empirical expectations that can enable us to study the European Commission's integrative capacity, considering the mechanisms by which integration occurs, the challenges posed by intra-institutional competition and the political dynamics that shape policy integration.

Empirical Expectation 1: Strengthened Cross-DG Co-ordination Mechanisms

Based on the argument we developed so far, our first empirical expectation is that Global Gateway will increase the importance of cross-DG co-ordination mechanisms, which will help DGs across the Commission to align their sectoral policies. As discussed, this expectation is justified by the definition that the European Commission has proposed for connectivity, encompassing a wide range of policy issues. They range from sustainability concerns to digital connectivity and infrastructure development, thus requiring policy mechanisms that go beyond siloed governance structures.

As earlier scholars of policy integration emphasise, avoiding silos in order to, for example, ensure that trade agreements incorporate stronger environmental or development commitments requires the creation of explicit institutional co-ordination mechanisms (Kaplaner et al., 2025). Thus, we expect to see policy integration evidenced through joint planning, inter-service consultations, task forces established across DGs, and shared frameworks for funding and implementing connectivity initiatives (Lenschow, 2002; Wallace et al., 2015). In the case of Global Gateway, the Commission's integrative ability to work across areas such as trade, international development, climate policy and infrastructure can be argued as critical to strengthen the EU's effectiveness in its external policies. Avoiding siloed work and integrating, for example, policy goals related to trade agreements with reinforced environmental commitments are vital for an integrated EU

external strategy, dealing with climate change and sustainable development issues simultaneously through tailored integrated policy solutions (Bretherton and Vogler, 2005).

However, institutional barriers can also be expected. Whilst an increasing reliance on consultations and task forces constituted across DGs can evidence efforts for policy integration and integrated governance, the planning and implementation of Global Gateway initiatives can also lead to institutional complexity and competition. This is the focus of our next empirical expectation showing how reinforced interaction between the different actors across DGs in the European Commission can lead to resource competition and confrontation.

Empirical Expectation 2: Resource Competition Among DGs

A second empirical expectation concerns resource competition. Competing over common resources can impact on the European Commission's integrative capacity, and challenge the planning and implementation of external policies. In this sense, Global Gateway can be expected to lead to competition between DGs not only in terms of funding but also in relation to staffing and overall political influence. Cross-sectoral strategies, which are implemented with ambitions leading to policy integration efforts, can increase competition between DGs working on interconnected issues.

This empirical expectation is supported by arguments such as those of Bretherton and Vogler (2005) unpacking the challenges of policy integration, an argument that invites a careful consideration of how limited resources play out in external action, where the issue of resource competition can become even more important. Different individual policy mandates can exacerbate tensions and lead to competition rather than policy integration in the EU's global strategies like Global Gateway. For example, DG TRADE working on international trade issues, DG HOME dealing with security issues, and DG INTPA dealing with development and partnerships can reinforce each other's work and also compete over political influence, with aid, security and development as three intertwined policy areas. This competition is indeed envisaged in the literature on bureaucratic systems, and it comes to the fore mostly in large organisations, as it is the case of the European Commission, where different entities (DGs) push to gain support for their own policy ideas (Borrás and Jacobsson, 2004).

In the context of Global Gateway, the competition is likely to increase due to the interdependence between several global challenges linked to connectivity, a policy objective that can only be achieved if all the concerned policy areas have access to the required financial and human resources. The DGs in charge of these policies may find themselves fighting over the same limited budgetary resources and political attention. Historically, it has been the case that the DG in charge of international aid and development (previously DG DEVCO and now DG INTPA) has found itself competing with DG TRADE over political and economic resources (Carbone, 2007; Furness and Gänzle, 2016). This competition has been linked not only to financial resources but also to limited political capital or political attention span. External policy DGs have in this context competed over political attention so as to be able to influence the general direction of the EU global presence.

Differences in political influence between DGs can fragment policies, preventing policy integration, as those DGs with more political capital can become more successful in securing the accomplishment of their agendas (Lenschow, 2002). This form of confrontation or competition is particularly relevant in the context of ambitious proposals like Global Gateway given the intention to integrate a wide range of policy areas, from physical connectivity to goals related to digital, health, trade, development and climate policies. The ability of a DG to secure resources is often contingent upon its political influence within the Commission (Balint et al., 2008; Bauer and Ege, 2012; Kassim et al., 2013). DGs with more influence, such as DG TRADE, may be better positioned when competing over funding for their respective priorities, whilst others may struggle to push for their individual agendas.

Thus, resource competition can be expected to play an important role in conditioning the integrative ability of the European Commission in the context of Global Gateway. This empirical expectation will help us to unpack the importance of a balanced distribution of resources between all the DGs that are included under the same policy integration efforts.

Empirical Expectation 3: Increased Intra-institutional Politicisation

The third empirical expectation concerns intra-institutional politicisation within the European Commission in the context of Global Gateway. Politicisation can be expected to increase whilst various DGs need to negotiate over limited resources and find acceptable trade-offs that can reconcile their sectoral priorities with broader EU policy integration goals. Intra-institutional politicisation can arguably become central to increasing the integrative capacity of the Commission, because conflicting priorities can impede integrated external policies. In the context of Global Gateway, the goals of different DGs such as DG TRADE, DG INTPA and DG MOVE (in charge of mobility and transport) may not always be in full alignment, and they may at times compete to influence policy outcomes considering their own policy portfolios.

Our empirical expectation is grounded in recent research highlighting that when specific policies become more salient and contested, institutional negotiations inside the Commission intensify (Hackenesch et al., 2021). These negotiations lead the DGs to strongly defend their policy mandates (Lavenex and Kunz, 2008; Nugent, 2001; Nugent and Saurugger, 2002), making intra-institutional politicisation a structural feature of external policy-making rather than an episodic deviation (Barbé and Morillas, 2019). Moreover, evidence on EU external action suggests that such inter-service tensions frequently shape compromises more strongly than the initial policy integration ambitions (Balfour et al., 2016; Hadfield and Lightfoot, 2021). Thus, politicisation may facilitate agreement and institutional bargaining by bringing diverging interests to the table, but it may also lower the level of ambition needed when aiming for policy integration. Weak compromises or watered-down policies may decrease the likelihood of integrating policies (Hoeglinger, 2016; Risse, 2014; Schimmelfennig et al., 2015). Weak compromises are particularly relevant in the context of Global Gateway, which seeks to deal simultaneously with policy areas like trade, mobility and development that can have potentially conflicting goals.

This empirical expectation aims to unpack how intra-institutional politicisation may limit the Commission's ability to develop and implement integrated external policies, analysing how and if it is possible to avoid that the initial level of ambition gets diluted in global initiatives like Global Gateway. At the same time, this empirical expectation allows us to look at how DGs engage in institutional negotiations in order to reconcile their specific interests with the broader EU ambitions under Global Gateway, potentially leading to a consolidated presence of the European Commission as an external actor.

Empirical Expectation 4: The Commission's Need for External Flexibility

The final expectation is that Global Gateway will reflect the Commission's need for external flexibility whilst aiming to consolidate internally its policy integration efforts. Arguably, if the Commission is to see its global presence strengthened, it needs to present a unified external strategy that allows adaptation to external pressures. External flexibility becomes crucial in the relations with third actors, enabling the EU's external action and helping the Commission to become responsive to a changing global landscape and to the evolving priorities of the EU partners (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019).

Specifically, this expectation aims to help us unpack how, whilst aiming to integrate its policies related to connectivity, the Commission keeps its approach flexible to account for the different perceptions and priorities of its partners. In this sense, the Commission can be expected to aim for a balance between competing internal priorities and external demands from both the EU member states and other international stakeholders. To address these demands, the Commission needs to be agile enough to deal with pressing policy issues whilst not sidelining the long-term ambitions of EU external action (Hadfield and Lightfoot, 2021).

In this context, the European Commission's integrative capacity (Biesbroek, 2021; Howlett et al., 2017; McConnell, 2010; Vince, 2015) has become fundamental to ensure its effectiveness as a global actor. The capacity to integrate different policies to allow different sectors and policy communities to develop joint work enables the Commission to present itself as a credible external actor with a unified external strategy. However, this goal is questioned by resource competition, intra-institutional politicisation and the need for external flexibility. The empirical expectations outlined here, including strengthened cross-DG co-ordination, increased resource competition, intra-institutional politicisation and the need for more external flexibility, provide a framework for analysing the European Commission's integrative capacity to deal with the complexities of its external presence. By analysing these empirical expectations through case studies such as Global Gateway, we can unpack how the European Commission deals with ambitions related to external policy integration whilst navigating its internal challenges. We delve into this empirical analysis in the next section.

II. Empirical Analysis – Policy Integration in the Context of Global Gateway

As mentioned in the [Introduction](#), the empirical part is based on the analysis of related primary sources (policy documents) and secondary sources (policy analyses), as well as 20 semi-structured interviews. Given the small size of Global Gateway teams in many DGs, to protect anonymity, interviewees are quoted as policy officials working in a

Commission DG (Appendix A shows the institutional details). The same applies to those policy officials that work or have recently worked in EU Delegations and the EEAS. Below, we present the summary of our findings across the four dimensions related to our empirical expectations.

Cross-DG Co-ordination Mechanisms

Both the document analysis and the interviews have highlighted the mechanisms that the Commission has created and strengthened in the context of Global Gateway to address the long-standing challenge of fragmented governance in EU external action. Overlapping mandates and institutional silos have been historically shown as having undermined institutional co-ordination, thus preventing the move towards more integrated policies. In this context, Global Gateway has been portrayed as a critical test of the Commission's capacity to co-ordinate effectively the pursuit of integrated policy objectives, accounting for a wide range of connectivity issues (Interviewee 4, European Commission, May 2024; Interviewee 11, European Commission, September 2024).

The structural efforts to enhance cross-DG co-ordination include the use of recently established financial mechanisms, the creation and strengthening of institutional spaces for strategic decision-making and planning, and the use of multi-stakeholder frameworks to ensure effective and impactful implementation. Regarding the dedicated financial mechanisms, the use of NDICI and the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) (European Commission, 2021a) supports the pooling of resources and harmonisation of EU institutions' actions under a common policy agenda (Bilal, 2022; Buhigas Schubert and Costa, 2023). These instruments aim to allow the Commission to move beyond geographical divisions in its initiatives and provide greater budgetary flexibility to address complex policy challenges that require integrated approaches. The Global Gateway Board has been established for strategic oversight to ensure policy alignment and decision-making across DGs, other relevant EU institutional actors and member states (European Commission, 2021b; European Commission, 2022). Additionally, the Steering Group, which brings together representatives from various Commission DGs involved in Global Gateway's planning and implementation, has been strengthened under the leadership of the Commission's Presidency and the Secretariat-General (Interviewee 2, European Commission, May 2024).

Moving beyond financial planning and strategic oversight, the Team Europe approach has been consolidated for implementation purposes as a blueprint allowing multi-stakeholder collaboration (Teevan and Domingo, 2022). Initially conceived during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is a promising model for enhancing co-ordination by pooling resources and aligning implementation strategies across EU institutions and member states. The aim is to reduce duplication and improve policy integration. Interviewee 5, a senior European Commission official (June 2024), praised the approach but cautioned that its success hinges on overcoming entrenched institutional cultures: 'Team Europe has potential, but it requires a mindset shift within the Commission to prioritise collective goals over individual DG agendas'. This was echoed by Interviewee 15, a senior official in the European Commission (October 2024), showing that whilst the approach has improved co-ordination in some areas, it remains a work in progress (Bilal, 2022; Teevan and Domingo, 2022).

Despite the structural innovations related to the three dimensions (financial instruments, oversight and implementation mechanisms), interviews with European Commission officials reveal persistent challenges in achieving meaningful co-ordination. Interviewee 1, a senior official in the European Commission (May 2024), explained that ‘the Global Gateway Board provides a platform for strategic discussions, but its effectiveness is limited by the lack of a finetuned decision-making process among DGs. Institutional rivalries can impede progress, particularly when resources are contested’. This aspect was confirmed by Interviewee 20 (European Commission, October 2024), who pointed out that ‘the Board’s composition and mandate are not fully defined, limiting its ability to enforce decisions’. This vision aligns with observations that the Steering Committee and other co-ordination bodies lack the authority to resolve disputes effectively, echoing also critiques that point to the absence of a coherent governance model for overseeing Global Gateway’s diverse portfolio of initiatives (Teevan and Bilal, 2023).

Moreover, the implementation of Global Gateway projects in partner countries has further exposed the complexity of cross-DG co-ordination. Interviewee 6, based in an EU Delegation (June 2024), noted that ‘while there have been efforts to align DGs activities, the lack of clear operational guidelines often results in fragmented project delivery’. As expected, one area in which these co-ordination challenges become particularly evident is related to the pursuit of geopolitical and development goals. This tension is present between DGs like INTPA, which prioritises long-term development outcomes (Serban, 2022), and DG TRADE, which emphasises securing EU economic interests. Interviewee 3, a policy official working in the European Commission (May 2024), remarked, ‘trade and development operate on different timelines and objectives, making it difficult to create a shared approach under Global Gateway even when implementing projects under the same broad policy narrative’. This sentiment is also reflected in a range of policy documents, underscoring the structural difficulty of reconciling the divergent institutional priorities born out of the Global Gateway’s policy objectives (Furness and Keijzer, 2022; Olivié and O’Shea, 2023).

Thus, whilst Global Gateway represents a bold attempt to strengthen cross-DG co-ordination within the European Commission, and its mechanisms, such as NDICI and Team Europe, provide a framework for aligning institutional actions, significant challenges remain. Insights from interviews confirm that policy integration requires not only structural reforms but also a cultural shift within the Commission, which can enable more institutional bargaining and reinforced institutional negotiation mechanisms. Addressing these issues will be critical to ensuring that Global Gateway fulfils its potential as an integrated and impactful global initiative.

Resource Competition Among DGs

The previous section has already showcased the persistent challenges of cross-DG co-ordination, even though new mechanisms for dialogue across DGs have been introduced. These challenges invite a careful consideration of the resulting implications concerning how Global Gateway might also lead to resource competition amongst the involved DGs. Created with the intention to narrow down the gap between development and geopolitical objectives (European Commission, 2023), Global Gateway has been implemented by relying mostly on pre-existing financial instruments such as NDICI.

Consequently, its ambition to repurpose these instruments has inadvertently increased the resource competition between the different DGs. This competition is related to both overlapping mandates and opposing policy objectives, particularly between those DGs that deal with development concerns, like DG INTPA, and those focused on other aspects of connectivity.

Limited additional funding for Global Gateway exacerbates the struggle for resources. Our interviewees stated that by relying on the reallocation of pre-existing budgets rather than introducing new funds, Global Gateway has created an environment where DGs must fiercely negotiate for their share of financial and operational resources (an aspect mentioned across the 20 interviews). This challenge was echoed when, for instance, Interviewee 8 (EU Delegation, June 2024) highlighted that ‘Global Gateway leverages existing instruments, thus forcing DGs to provide detailed justification for their projects to both DG INTPA and the relevant Delegations. They compete with each other for a very limited pool of resources, creating inevitable friction’. Similarly, Interviewee 13, from the EEAS (September 2024), focused on showing how competing priorities, like the often-divergent security or trade-related objectives and the long-term development goals, may lead to disputes over resource allocation. An illustrative example of this competition can be given by looking at how the Global Gateway has ambitiously fostered connectivity projects in Africa and Asia, using, for example, the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor to link Europe and Central Asia or the fibre-optic backbone across Central, Eastern and Southern Africa (European Commission, 2024b). Whilst DG INTPA has focused on infrastructure development with the aim to counter poverty and support sustainable growth (connecting schools, hospitals and other public institutions), other DGs have questioned how these projects can promote European strategic and economic interests. These tensions have strongly limited the execution and implementation of Global Gateway initiatives. Despite its strategic importance, the Board has had a hard time when trying to reconcile competing priorities, thus further evidencing the complexity of intra-commission dynamics (an aspect mentioned across the 20 interviews).

Interviews also showcased how resource competition can affect regional approaches. Officials working in EU Delegations, such as Interviewee 9 (June 2024), explained that ‘DGs often plan projects accounting only for their own policy silos, and this leads to fragmented implementation on the ground’. For example, the construction of a National Control Centre for Energy Infrastructure in Mozambique or the development of solar and wind power energy in Bangladesh (European Commission, 2024c) shows that, in principle, both renewable energy and digital connectivity projects are part of the Global Gateway planning. However, in terms of implementation, whilst DG INTPA has prioritised renewable energy projects to meet sustainability goals, the DG Energy has pushed for digital connectivity projects that align more closely with European energy autonomy interests. These divergences can potentially complicate the delivery of projects that need to fully integrate diverse connectivity objectives.

In this context, the narrative of resource competition is not new to the Commission’s institutional structure but has been intensified by the Global Gateway’s ambitious scope. The integration of financial instruments under NDICI was intended to streamline processes, but power struggles persist. As Interviewee 2 (European Commission, May 2024) concluded, ‘Global Gateway’s integrated narrative highlights that there is another side of the coin. It is indeed the case that it enables a range of collaborative frameworks,

but it also makes more visible the institutional rivalries which already existed in the Commission'. Despite these issues, Global Gateway promises to further develop initiatives aimed at mitigating resource competition. The Team Europe approach is one of the key initiatives in this sense, aiming to provide a space for dialogue and alignment between member states and EU institutions, which can help to fulfil shared objectives, building on the successful experience of managing the COVID-19 crisis. Moreover, Interviewee 17 (European Commission, October 2024) noted that 'Team Europe has helped to build coherence in the resource allocation process, but its reach has depended and will continue to heavily depend on the willingness of DGs to compromise'. Additionally, this engagement has remained uneven and has included a lack of mechanisms for enforcing co-operation and resolving disputes.

Resource competition and collaboration appear to co-exist under Global Gateway, thus building a complex picture of the Commission's internal dynamics. Whilst Global Gateway aims to bring together DGs and connect them through a common strategic vision, the reality of limited resources and overlapping mandates creates significant barriers. The reliance on pre-existing financial frameworks, though pragmatic, has amplified tensions, making resource competition a defining feature of Global Gateway's implementation. As the Global Gateway initiatives progress, addressing these structural challenges will be critical to realising its full potential and implementing integrated policy initiatives.

Whilst Global Gateway relies heavily on pre-existing EU financial instruments such as NDICI, an essential part of its design is indeed to catalyse private-sector and investment-bank financing. Recent Commission announcements emphasise this aspiration: in April 2025, the EU concluded a €291 million guarantee to de-risk private investments (European Commission, 2025a). In October 2025, Commissioner Sikela launched a Global Gateway Investment Hub intended to provide a co-ordinated entry point for companies and improve the accessibility of EU support (European Commission, 2025b). At the 2025 Global Gateway Forum, the Commission also announced three guarantee agreements with European Development Finance Institutions to further leverage private capital (European Commission, 2025c).

These initiatives aim to make Global Gateway projects increasingly self-sustaining, reducing exclusive reliance on EU budgetary resources and, in principle, limiting competition for funding amongst DGs. However, current evidence suggests that private-sector mobilisation remains tentative rather than consolidated: many announced guarantee schemes are still in early stages, and the Investment Hub has been described as 'an initiative still in the making' with unclear co-ordination modalities across development and financial actors (Bilal, 2025). Moreover, a considerable share of Global Gateway investments is directed towards politically and economically fragile countries, which may reduce investors' willingness to commit (Wolf and Poli, 2024). This has led important projects such as the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor to rely increasingly on Chinese funding rather than Global Gateway, putting the EU at a competitive disadvantage (Euractiv, 2025).

Increased Intra-institutional Politicisation

Building on our discussion on resource competition, we need to look at how by incentivising policy integration to achieve connectivity goals, Global Gateway has driven

an increased politicisation inside the Commission. More importantly, we also need to analyse who in the Commission is pushing the Global Gateway and which DGs and actors in the Commission are in the politicisation game.

Our interviewees have highlighted the policy and geographical complexity of Global Gateway with projects ranging from digital policy to health and education. DGs concerned with connectivity include DG CONNECT (the DG in charge of communications, networks, content and technology), DG CLIMA (in charge of the Commission's policy against climate change), DG Energy (in charge of energy policy), DG MOVE (mobility and transport), DG SANTE (health policy) and DG EAC (education policy). Besides the DGs working on policy areas related to the Commission's definition of connectivity including technology, climate action, energy, mobility, health and education, interviewees have identified the DGs for external policies whose influence has been crucial for the launch and the implementation of Global Gateway initiatives. Here, DG INTPA for international partnerships is the leading DG within the Commission, ensuring that the Global Gateway proposals come to fruition. DG INTPA has also been identified as the internal actor pushing for policy integration and a common narrative around how the different policy areas should reinforce each other to deliver on the promises of broader connectivity (Interviewee 7, European Commission, June 2024). In addition, DG TRADE has strategically contributed to the integration ambitions of the Global Gateway, accounting for the EU's interests related to economic security, whilst DG ENEST (Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood) and DG MENA (Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf) have seen projects proposed in their respective regions but have played less of a central role in managing Global Gateway initiatives. Bringing together the EU development objectives with its geopolitical and economic goals, Global Gateway has created an institutional environment infused with competition and negotiation amongst the DGs, all needing to justify to what part of the EU connectivity definition their interventions can contribute (Interviewee 12, European Commission, June 2024).

Such politicisation is due to deeper tensions over priorities and mandates as evidenced in the interviews with officials. One example showing the increased level of politicisation within the European Commission is related to the renaming of DG DEVCO as DG INTPA. The move from an institutional name exclusively based on development to one based on international partnerships illustrates the intention to present the Commission as making a clear change from a paradigm based on the traditional donor–recipient relationships to a policy approach based on partnerships, thus enabling a stronger presence of geopolitical aspirations and private-sector engagement. However, this shift has involved its own controversies. Interviewee 10, a senior official in the European Commission (September 2024), remarked, 'there is an increasing pressure to fully align development projects with strategic interests, which in turn creates contradictions when it comes to keeping the credibility as a development actor'. This perception is echoed when highlighting how Global Gateway's framing as a geopolitical project has amplified internal debates over the balance between development and foreign policy priorities (Buhigas Schubert and Costa, 2023; Olivié and O'Shea, 2023).

High-profile narratives, such as positioning Global Gateway as a counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative, have heightened intra-institutional politicisation. This narrative has fuelled competing interpretations of Global Gateway's purpose within the Commission. DG TRADE officials, for instance, view Global Gateway as a tool to

strengthen Europe's economic interests globally, whilst DG INTPA emphasises its role in fostering development and horizontal partnerships across different regions. Interviewee 7 (European Commission, June 2024) observed that 'the different narratives can sometimes lead to delays in processes of decision-making because DGs need to negotiate and find joint policy priorities'.

Moreover, the interviews revealed how politicisation affects project-level decisions, thus also leading to challenges when interacting with partner countries. Interviewee 8, working in an EU Delegation (June 2024), noted that 'projects sometimes become spaces of confronting DGs priorities. A single initiative might have multiple and sometimes contradicting objectives, which dilutes its focus and the effectiveness of its implementation'. For example, the EU has signed a hydropower project in Rwanda, aiming to provide clean energy and support the country's development goals. However, this project risks displacing at least 4500 people, impacting their lands, crops and fruit trees. In addition, the EU has signed an agreement with Rwanda to extract raw materials. Whilst this initiative aims to support infrastructure growth, it has been criticised for potentially fuelling conflicts in the region and thus threatening long-term development goals (Eurodad, 2024). This observation highlights how overlapping mandates amongst DGs exacerbate tensions and undermine policy integration when moving from planning to implementing policy initiatives (Furness and Keijzer, 2022; Teevan and Domingo, 2022), and also the demanding role of the EU Delegations on the ground and thus the EEAS who have needed to explain and negotiate the importance of the EU's vision on connectivity with the EU counterparts (Interviewee 13, EEAS, September 2024).

In addition to inter-DG tensions, Global Gateway is evidencing the growing politicisation at the European Commission leadership level. The Global Gateway Steering Committee includes the European Commission president and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, together with the commissioners from key DGs. This committee has developed into an institutional space for negotiating different interests. In this context, Interviewee 12 (European Commission, September 2024) showed that institutional contradictions can be seen as 'a balancing act between political stands and technical considerations'. Such institutional negotiations have fuelled criticisms that Global Gateway's governance mechanisms lack the needed transparency and accountability, whilst increasing intra-institutional competition (Bilal, 2022).

Therefore, Global Gateway initiatives reveal the complex interplay of institutional mandates, leadership dynamics and political priorities within the European Commission. Whilst politicisation poses significant challenges to Global Gateway's implementation, it also reflects the Commission's growing ambition to position itself as a global actor acting through integrated policies to deliver on its promises. Balancing these competing forces will be critical to ensuring that Global Gateway delivers on its promises without undermining the Commission's credibility nor its policy integration ambitions.

The Commission's Need for External Flexibility

Global Gateway has been created with the ambition to implement initiatives that can help the European Commission to support its coherence as an international actor. Given its focus, Global Gateway also highlights the need for the Commission to increase its external flexibility. Flexibility is needed in order to create meaningful dialogues with the EU

partners in topics related to connectivity around the world. For example, in Latin America, Global Gateway projects envisage addressing a wide range of topics including infrastructure gaps, promoting sustainability and countering external geopolitical influences (Serban, 2025).

However, interviews have highlighted that the Commission's ability to adapt depends on its structural and internal decision-making processes. The reliance on existing financial frameworks, such as NDICI and EFSD+, exemplifies the Commission's pragmatic approach to mobilising resources. Yet this reliance also conditions its ability to design tailored responses to emerging challenges. The absence of substantial new funding for Global Gateway means that the Commission needs to repurpose existing resources, potentially creating challenges in an already complex financial environment (Teevan and Domingo, 2022). Interviewee 18 (European Commission, October 2024) explained, 'our flexibility is constrained by the budgetary frameworks and pre-approved allocations like the MFF [Multi-annual Financial Framework]. This can make it difficult to address urgent needs or seize emerging opportunities'.

The challenges to external flexibility are also exemplified by the implementation of several Global Gateway initiatives showing the implications of budgetary rigidity. Interviewee 16, working in an EU Delegation (October 2024), observed that 'local contexts need tailored approaches, but our budgetary frameworks do not fully allow the adaptation to local needs'. This challenge is compounded by the involvement of multiple stakeholders, including private-sector actors, member states and local governments, each with their own priorities and expectations.

Despite the constraints, Global Gateway demonstrates efforts to enhance external flexibility. The use of instruments like EFSD+ helps to include private investment, which can foster partnerships that align with both EU and local priorities. In this sense, the focus of the European Commission on 'strategic autonomy' has the intention to consider both the benefits of economic interdependence and the need to mitigate risks so as to fully address the interests of a range of EU actors including the private sector (Eickhoff, 2023; Rizzi and Varvelli, 2023). However, as showcased by our interviewees, this does not come without inherent challenges. Interviewee 14, from the European Commission (September 2024), remarked, 'while EFSD+ provides a useful framework, its effectiveness depends on how well we coordinate with local partners and adapt to their needs'. This partially contradicts the vision that the EFSD+ is still at an early stage but is already showing a 'catalytic effect' in mobilising additional finance, claiming that its integration into NDICI has improved coherence and streamlined modalities (European Commission, 2024d).

However, the Commission also repeatedly framed EFSD+ as only one financing tool within the broader Global Gateway architecture (European Commission, n.d.). This implies that its ability to deliver is expected to be complemented by other instruments and actors: NDICI grants and guarantees, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and bilateral loan agreements (European Investment Bank, 2023). In other words, EFSD+ is core but not self-standing. If it struggles to meet partners' needs, Global Gateway can rely on this wider ecosystem of financial actors and instruments to absorb pressure, mobilise additional resources and adjust financing modalities. The challenge is therefore not the absence of alternatives, but rather whether these parallel instruments can compensate for EFSD+ limitations quickly enough to meet the expectations Global Gateway has raised.

Another crucial aspect of external flexibility is the ability to integrate diverse policy portfolios. By focusing its efforts on connectivity projects, Global Gateway needs a balanced approach between development goals related to, for example, poverty alleviation, and geopolitical intentions like the need to deal with the increasing Chinese influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. Interviewee 19, from the EEAS (October 2024), noted that ‘this act needs a delicate balancing to ensure the effectiveness of individual projects’ without forgetting the local needs. Others point to the challenge of reconciling these objectives, emphasising the risk of diluting Global Gateway’s impact by trying to serve too many purposes simultaneously (Olivie and O’Shea, 2023; Teevan and Bilal, 2023).

When analysing external flexibility, Global Gateway illustrates the European Commission’s aspiration to reinforce its credibility as a global partner in a complex environment. Whilst financial instruments like the EFSD+ can help by increasing adaptability, structural constraints together with opposing priorities may limit the Commission’s success when trying to fully realise the potential of integrated policies. Addressing these limitations will be crucial to ensuring that Global Gateway not only aligns with EU strategic interests but also delivers tangible benefits to its partner countries.

III. Implications of the Empirical Findings and Concluding Remarks

We explored cross-policy integration and the European Commission’s integrative capacity in the context of Global Gateway. Our empirical analysis has shown the opportunities and challenges of the internal dynamics within the Commission, analysing also the nexus with external challenges.

The European Commission’s integrative capacity has been presented through our four empirical expectations. In this sense, we looked at the connection between cross-DG co-ordination mechanisms, resource competition amongst DGs, increased intra-institutional politicisation and the need for external flexibility in the context of Global Gateway. This analysis has allowed us to unpack the mechanisms by which policy integration occurs, the challenges posed by intra-institutional competition and the political dynamics that shape policy integration. More importantly, it has enabled us to contrast how ambitious initiatives such as Global Gateway consolidate both the relevance of integration across policy domains to respond in a co-ordinated manner to global challenges (Bauer, 2008; Maltby, 2013; Ugland and Veggeland, 2004) and intra-institutional politicisation, showcasing how the European Commission’s work is increasingly politicised (Rauh, 2019).

The European Commission’s ambitions to achieve policy integration have been shown to require not only structural reforms, such as the introduction of new mechanisms for cross-DG co-ordination, but also a cultural shift within the Commission to allow and support institutional bargaining and reinforced institutional negotiation mechanisms (Kaplaner et al., 2025). In a connected vein, both resource competition and collaboration have been evidenced under Global Gateway. On one side, Global Gateway aims to bring together DGs and connect them through a common policy narrative around the importance of connectivity, but on the other side, the limited pool of resources and competing policy mandates and thus increased politicisation have led to raising internal competition, limiting Global Gateway initiatives in achieving their full potential of policy integration. To this, we can add the challenges of external flexibility conditioning the credibility of the European Commission as a global partner.

Policy integration appears in this context as strongly conditioned by the institutional setting in which common policy objectives need to be accomplished (Geys et al., 2024; Hartlapp et al., 2013). Whilst the advantages of a higher level of integrative capacity might appear as clear for policy-makers at different levels, the structures within which the implementation of integrated initiatives happens can enable or limit the reach of policy integration. Global Gateway will remain a case in point evidencing the European Commission's ability to move beyond building a common policy narrative to consolidate the EU presence on the global stage through the implementation of integrated policy initiatives. This can only be achieved through the joint work being done by the different European Commission's DGs and Services together with the other EU actors.

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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Appendix A: Global Gateway Interviews

Interview number	Institutional Role	Date
1	Senior policy officer in the European Commission	May 2024
2	Policy officer in the European Commission	May 2024
3	Policy officer in the European Commission	May 2024
4	Policy officer in the European Commission	May 2024
5	Senior policy officer in the European Commission	June 2024
6	Policy officer in an EU Delegation	June 2024
7	Policy officer in the European Commission	June 2024
8	Policy officer in an EU Delegation	June 2024
9	Policy officer in an EU Delegation	June 2024
10	Senior policy officer in the European Commission	September 2024
11	Policy officer in the European Commission	September 2024
12	Policy officer in the European Commission	September 2024
13	Policy officer in the EEAS	September 2024
14	Policy officer in the European Commission	September 2024
15	Senior policy officer in the European Commission	October 2024
16	Policy officer in an EU Delegation	October 2024
17	Policy officer in the European Commission	October 2024
18	Policy officer in the European Commission	October 2024
19	Policy officer in the EEAS	October 2024
20	Policy officer in the European Commission	October 2024