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Final dissertation

The challenge, and  
difficulties, of a more  
integrated EU foreign policy

A case study of the different approaches  
towards Israel in the Foreign Affairs  
Council

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## List of abbreviations

- EU: European Union
- FAC: Foreign Affairs Council
- CFSP: Common Foreign and Security Policy
- CSDP: Common Security and Defence Policy
- V4: Visegrad Group
- NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization
- EEAS: European External Action Service
- EPC: European Political Cooperation
- TEU: Treaty of the European Union
- HR: High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy
- ECSC: European Coal and Steel Community
- EEC: European Economic Community
- EDC: European Defence Community
- ENP: European Neighbourhood Policy
- UfM: Union for the Mediterranean
- EIB: European Investment Bank
- UN: United Nations
- USA: United States of America
- UK: United Kingdom
- HU: Hungary
- PL: Poland
- CZ: Czech Republic
- SK: Slovakia
- UAE: United Arab Emirates

## 1. Introduction

I remember my parents telling me about the sense of relief and happiness they, along with millions of Europeans, felt when they witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. It was a new start for peace and cooperation among European countries, leaving behind years of confrontation and instability. Nowadays, after more than thirty years, the world's attention is on the war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation proving to the international community, and particularly to Western societies, how fragile and volatile security is along, with the difficulty of building lasting peace in international relations (Samokhvalov, 2015). Unfortunately, one cannot claim that today's world is safer than the one at the end of the Cold War.

Indeed, the risks surrounding global peace, stability and prosperity are changing as society evolves. Non-conventional threats are emerging such as economic recessions, pandemics, cyberterrorism, natural disasters caused by global warming, management and access to natural resources and energy, etc (Jones, 2021). This new reality shows a complex international scenario in which the different geopolitical powers compete to safeguard its national interests.

The thoughts exposed in Francis Fukuyama's book *The End of History* and the liberal order in a broader sense, which triumphed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, are not illustrative of today's world and its dynamics of power (Lake, Martin, & Risse, 2021). This situation particularly affects Europe and harms its weight in world politics, however, with the gradual process of European integration and the creation of the European Union (EU), several institutions have been established and enjoy a significant level of supranational and intergovernmental mechanisms with the ultimate aim of safeguarding the common interests and security of all citizens (Kirkegaard, 2021).

Within the EU there is a constant tension between supranationalism (in favour of more integration) and intergovernmentalism (against more integration). According to the intergovernmental scheme, sovereignty has to be directly managed by member states and not by the EU institutions. It is the goal of this paper to demonstrate that further EU integration through a revision of the treaties could provide the common foreign policy

with better tools and more competences to be able to deal with present and future challenges and threats in a satisfactory way. However, there are various obstacles that impede or slow down the integration process, which are perfectly represented in the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). However, EU heads of state and government are once again discussing how to deal with a new European integration process due to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the need to unite in this crisis. Thus, the scope of this paper is constantly changing and evolving at the moment of this writing.

The structure of the paper proceeds in the following manner. In the first place, it sets the goals and provides three main research questions to be answered. In the next section, it contextualizes the state of the art and what is already known about the topic. Later, it provides an explanation of the following theoretical approaches to the study of European foreign policy: realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

The empirical part is made of an assessment of the main actors and processes in EU foreign policy towards the Middle East and Israel. The EU foreign policy towards the Middle East and Israel is an illustrative case study of the main difficulties related to the attempt to augment the integration among member states on this fundamental policy. Finally, it provides a comprehensive analysis of the two opposing blocs in the FAC with regard to Israel (on the one hand the Visegrad Group countries, and on the other hand the states critical of Israel). Ultimately, the thesis will argue that EU foreign policy needs to expand its supranational mechanisms in order to have a strong and united voice to better defend its interests and security in today's multipolar world. Otherwise, the EU might face international irrelevance and struggle for political, economic, technological, and military independence.

## 1.1 Objectives and research questions

The goal of this dissertation is to acknowledge why it is so vital that the EU keeps accelerating its integration process, especially concerning foreign policy, as well as to explain the difficulties that supranational mechanism will face in this regard by some member states.

The purpose is to demonstrate why by having a more consistent and united foreign policy, the EU will be able to better defend its interests and values outside and inside its borders. In order to do so, the paper will analyse the relation that the EU has towards the state of Israel and the different approaches that member states of the European Union have with the Jewish country. This divisions will ultimately be present in the FAC.

The aim is to provide the reader with a comprehensive overview of the application of European integration theory to the domain of European foreign policy. More specifically, the case study will seek to answer the following question: Why is it so important that the EU keeps advancing its integration process by widening supranational mechanisms? In addition, which are the obstacles that European integration faces in the FAC? Lastly, why would the EU's foreign policy towards Israel be more fruitful if the EU managed to speak with one voice, i.e., have a more cohesive and united foreign policy?

## 1.2 State of the art

The main reason for the existence of the EU is to avoid war, foster cooperation and multilateralism, and defend European values such as democracy, rule of law and separation of powers (Parsons, 2002). As Harvard's professor, Peter A. Hall, concludes, "the European Union is one of the most distinctive political creations of the late twentieth century—a vehicle for supranational cooperation just short of a political federation but more robust than an international regime" (Hall, 2016).

One of the main features which distinguishes the European Union to other international organizations is its high level of supranational procedures, which are delegated by member states throughout several treaties which bind them together (Mnatsakanyan, 2020). The latest treaty update is the Lisbon Treaty, and it is "a shortcut to the treaties upon which the EU has been based since 2009" (Ziller, 2019). Therefore, we can regard the EU as the most successful and effective international organization due to its integration process, which began by integrating the economic and trade fields (Richard & Hamme, 2013).

The book *Redefining European Economic Integration* highlights how the EU has become

more resilient and stronger thanks to this economic integration (Adamski, 2018). Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that, although the relevance of the EU surpasses the influence of a mere international organization which seeks economic cooperation and harmonization, the political integration process is yet far from being supranational, and member states are reluctant to give up competences, particularly in foreign policy.

As a result, the economic strength of the EU, which is governed by the first pillar of the EU and thus functions under supranational mechanisms, has historically been the most successful foreign policy tool. As Federiga Bindi illustrates in her book *The Foreign Policy of the European Union: Assessing Europe's Role in the World*, after the failure of the European Defence Community, whose aims were to somehow integrate European security and foreign policy, European leaders decided to centre the integration process on economic matters and the creation of a free trade area and a customs union (Bindi, 2010).

Although the political and security aspects of foreign policy were excluded in the Treaty of Rome, there were a number of foreign policy competences which were to be done by the Commission: common external trade tariff; possibility of third countries to join the EEC; common commercial policy; the creation of the European Fund for Development; etc (Bindi, 2010).

Moreover, the book *European Political Cooperation: Towards a Foreign Policy for Western Europe*, explains the relevance that had Pompidou's ideas of completion of the common market, deepening of the Community and enlargement to include new countries like the UK (Allen, Rummel, & Wessels, 1982) on foreign policy. The European Political Cooperation established for the first-time regular meetings of the foreign affairs ministers of the member states and institutionalized the principle of consultation of all major questions of foreign policy (Bindi, 2010).

For some European politicians the role of the EU's foreign policy was crucial since the beginning, as it is the case of Walter Hallstein, first president of the Commission and a visionary of European integration: "One reason for creating the European Community [was] to enable Europe to play its full part in world affairs. . . [It is] vital for the Community to be able to speak with one voice and to act as one in economic relations with the rest of the world" (Loth, Wallace, & Wessels, 1998).

Nonetheless, concerning foreign policy intergovernmentalism remains the rule, and the EU has not yet achieved Hallstein's goal of "speaking with one voice" (apart from economic and trade sectors). So, why after decades of integration the EU has not been able to integrate its foreign policy fully or partially? The main problem is the lack of willingness from member states to widen supranational mechanisms in this field.

The unanimity vote requirement of intergovernmentalism, which affects the Foreign Affairs Council, limits decision making and the scope of action (veto power). It is at this point when the integration process stops, and the only way of enlarging supranational mechanisms is by reviewing and drafting new treaties (Berglős, Burkart, Friebel, & Paltseva, 2009). Integration must be achieved through political consensus by the 27 member states, an arduous task.

The Treaty of Maastricht gave birth to the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which is becoming more and more relevant in the international arena, however, it is under the control of member states and intergovernmental mechanism. Foreign policy is one of the areas in which the member states of the EU are more reluctant to yield power to supranational institutions like the European Commission because of the special role that foreign policy represents to nation states in terms of sovereignty and political independence (Verola, 2010).

On the one hand, Stefan Lehne argues that, although the reforms included in the Lisbon Treaty have improved EU's foreign policy, "the EU's overall international position has weakened in the ten years since the treaty's signing" (Lehne, 2017). The reason is that EU's foreign policy is mainly based on soft power like sanctions, legal solutions to conflicts, multilateralism, diplomacy, etc, all of which are very valuable but do not have a clear influence on today's international situation. The EU also needs hard power aspects (European army), an institutional rearrangement, and a clear leadership. Thus, the EU "lacks the political unity necessary to act as a single global power" (Nye, 1992), thus harming the EU's interests and strength vis-à-vis other geopolitical powers such as the USA, China, Russia, India, and Iran.

At the moment, we can identify two main blocs in the EU with different ideas of where are the limits of integration. On the one hand, there is a group of member states, led by



Germany and France, which advocate advancing the integration process, also in foreign policy. French President Emmanuel Macron has even appealed in some political speeches not only to French citizens but also to European citizens, hence demonstrating his pro-European narrative and his willingness to stimulate European integration (García & Oleart, 2021). In one speech Mr. Macron even stressed that “Europe’s horizon and future passes through a stronger common foreign policy” (Macron, 2017). This group of more pro-European integration states is also the most critical of certain Israeli policies, especially those affecting the Palestinians (Israeli settlements in the West Bank, capital status of Jerusalem, borders, refugee rights).

On the other hand, the V4 countries, which includes Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic, are preventing the European integration process from moving forward by using its veto power in the European Council. In the book *Postfunctionalism, Identity and the Visegrad Group*, M. Braun explains why this group of countries are reluctant to advance European integration and delegate more competences to the EU. He highlights that the economic crisis of 2008, the EU’s asylum policy, and the V4 domestic situation has led to a sense of Euroscepticism and the cooling between European institutions and national governments (Braun, 2019). Additionally, this group of Central European countries are the biggest supporters of Israel in the EU and are against any kind of criticism of the Jewish state. Their pro-Israeli orientation breaks the consensus in the FAC.

Therefore, this bachelor’s dissertation aims to increase knowledge about the challenges and difficulties of having a more integrated European foreign policy, through the case study of EU foreign policy towards Israel.

### 1.3 Theoretical framework

Realism has been the main theory used by academics and policy makers to understand and assess world politics and still serves as a solid theoretical explanation to many international events. However, realism has a very strong and rigid understating of what power and security means. The anarchic characteristic of the international system, realist

argue, would lead to states as accumulating as much power as possible and always pursue its national interest.

K. N. Waltz defended in his *Theory of International Politics* that this anarchic element of the international system obliges states to act in a selfish way by safeguarding its own interests (Waltz, 1979), however, the EU is certainly an entity which, in some areas, puts aside the individual interests of member states and defends the common interests of the community.

Moreover, other theories such as J. J. Mearsheimer's offensive realism, where he argues that the greater a state's military advantage over others the greater is its security (Mearsheimer, Structural Realism, 2006), cannot explain a political entity, such as the EU, where member states pool their forces and capabilities to jointly defend themselves against international threats and dangers. The level of cooperation attained by member states cannot be related to the maximization of power defended by Mearsheimer.

Even though it offers important insights on reasons for the EU member states reluctance to renounce a part of their sovereignty and manage their foreign policy through supranational mechanism, the realist approach does not seem to be the most adequate to understand the difficulties of EU foreign policy.

Firstly, the motives and ideology behind the origin of the European Union are not in line with a maximalist conception of power. The development of the EU shows that, at times, states are willing to concede some sovereignty to a supranational entity. Secondly, the EU transcends the realist understanding of sovereignty, as it is an international organization formed by different nation-states with the goal of cooperating and integrating in order to have a better future in common and avoid conflicts (Swisa, 2013).

In contrast to realism, liberalism does provide a better approach to the matter discussed in this paper. The liberal ideas of economic cooperation, creation of international organizations and the establishment of democratic regimes are quite in line with the core values of the EU (Doyle, 2005). As a matter of fact, the EU officially aims to build peace, promote democracy and freedom worldwide, foster international cooperation and solidarity, embrace free and fair trade, etc (European Union, n.d.).

In Joseph S. Nye's article *What New World Order?* he explains why the liberal order triumphed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the vital importance of the USA as the leading power, multilateralism, and democracy (Nye, 1992). Nonetheless, today's world is less democratic and free, and new terms like "illiberal democracies" are emerging to define new styles of democracy which are not based on liberal values (Plattner, 2019). Some EU countries like Poland or Hungary have been recently regarded as illiberal democracies, thus stressing the incapability of liberalism to explain the EU's foreign policy.

The Democratic Peace Theory and other liberal assumption may had been too optimistic with the idea of spreading Western ideas and policies to other places of the world (Mearsheimer, 2019). For this reason, the liberal framework that predicts a limitation of sovereignty in favour of mechanism of integration and cooperation does not allow to fully comprehend the limitations that integration is facing these days in the EU.

An example of this is G John Inkenberry's work, *The End of Liberal International Order?*, where he assumes that the era of Northamerican liberal hegemony has come to an end and this has been translated in a weakening of Western States, including the EU (Ikenberry, 2018). Liberalism is the theory that best explains the most successful phases of the European integration process, however, it seems less able to explain the moments of slowdowns of integration among member states.

Constructivism is especially interested in explaining how social constructions can alter international politics and the role played by narratives and discourses in shaping states' interests (Swisa, 2013). Although there can be aspects of today's EU that could be explained by realism or liberalism, constructivism seems to be more adequate. Constructivist critical theories better address identity issues, which are particularly relevant in Europe and the Middle East.

As Rosemary Hollis defends in her article *Europe in the Middle East*, "the contemporary identity of the EU has been, and continues to be, defined in relation to neighbouring regions, as well as in juxtaposition to the USA" (Hollis, 2016). Thus, the analysis of the evolution of narratives and discourses within the EU allows us to have a better understanding of its foreign policy by analysing the specific case study of Israel.

Constructivist theory allows for a much precise and critical analysis of international reality, thus, taking into account elements that realism and liberalism mostly ignore, such as the effect that Muslim and Jewish communities have on EU member states, which can ultimately influence common EU and national foreign policy towards the region and Israel (Hollis, 2016).

In this same line, the article *The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory* reflects that in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the world it is more relevant to know the situation in which an event is taking place, rather than “the distribution of material power or the structure of authority” (Hopf, 1998). Consequently, Hopf states that in order to understand the situation “one will need to know about the culture, norms, institutions, procedures, rules and social practices that constitute the actors and the structure alike” (Hopf, 1998).

Ultimately, the constructivist approach is the most valid for explaining a case study related to the foreign policy of an international organisation such as the EU. This is because both realism and liberalism are unable to explain some phenomena of EU foreign policy, while constructivism is concerned with elements such as ideas, consciousness, culture and ideology, which have a direct effect on military, economic and political power, and thus affect foreign policy (Lawson, 2016).

#### 1.4 Methodology

The methodology will be based on qualitative research analysis rather than the quantitative one. Qualitative methods are better equipped to provide detailed analysis of single case studies, in this case the EU foreign policy towards Israel. The reason lays on the fact that for qualitative research words and narratives play a major role in contrast to numbers (Bryman, 2012).

The reason for choosing the individual EU foreign policy towards Israel to illustrate the difficulties and challenges of having a more integrated EU foreign policy is due to the advantages provided by the technique of the case study. In addition, the case study is often

used in qualitative data research (Bryman, 2012). The case study methodology is expected to capture the complexity of a single case and translate its conclusions to a broader reality. According to Rolf Johansson's *Case Study Methodology*, every case should "be a complex functioning unit", "be investigated in its natural context with a multitude of methods, and "be contemporary" (Johansson, 2007).

As Alexander George and Andrew Bennet argue in the book *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, this technique "allows a researcher to achieve high levels of conceptual validity and to measure the indicators that best represent the theoretical concepts the researcher intends to measure" (George & Bennet, 2004). Case studies are better in deriving hypothesis since the researcher can observe new valid variables and, thus, incorporate them to its argument (George & Bennet, 2004). Furthermore, the case study "examines the operation of casual mechanisms in individual cases in detail, helping to synthesize a complex reality through a more concrete example" (George & Bennet, 2004).

Moreover, by basing the analysis on constructivist theory, the narratives and discourses used by the different actors of international politics acquire special importance (O'Donnell, 2012). Therefore, the methodology will be based on the analysis of different documents, directives, and policy guidelines of official organizations (EU's institutions, Israeli government, national governments of member states), moreover, it will analyse press releases and speeches of politicians and officials involved in the issue. In addition, the analysis of digital content such as tweets, statements, interviews, publications, etc. will also play an important role.

The reason for focusing on EU foreign policy towards Israel as a case study is because it perfectly exemplifies the divisions in the EU Foreign Affairs Council. Furthermore, the particular relationship that European states have towards Israel, and more broadly towards the Middle East region and the Arab-Israeli conflict, illustrates impeccably why it is more important than ever for the EU to have a more consistent and stronger foreign policy to safeguard international stability, prosperity and EU's interests.

## 2. Characteristics and functioning of EU's Foreign Policy

It is essential that the reader understands the actors, institutions, and policy-making mechanisms on which EU's foreign policy is based. To do so, this chapter will explain the characteristics and functions of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC); and the European External Action Service (EEAS), with the aim of providing a comprehensive institutional context to help explain the case study towards Israel.

After the Maastricht Treaty, the European Political Cooperation (EPC) was replaced by the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). For the first time in history, the EU would have an institutionalization of foreign policy and security. All member states, except Denmark (however, after the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Denmark will hold a referendum to opt-in the CFSP) (Olsen & Pilegaard, 2006), incorporate the CFSP into their legal system due to the principle of *acquis communautaire* (Missiroli, 2003).

Thus, the 27 member states of the EU jointly cooperate in foreign affairs, however, this new institutionalization of the EU's foreign policy remains intergovernmental. Likewise, all member states are guaranteed the same rights and obligations in relation to the different EU treaties, acting under the same legal umbrella.

Article 24 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) defines the boundaries and procedures of the CFSP: "The Union's competence in matters of common foreign and security policy shall cover all areas of foreign policy and all questions relating to the Union's security, including the progressive framing of a common defence policy that might lead to a common defence" (Official Journal of the European Union, 2012).

Moreover, article 24 (3) reaffirms that "Member States shall support the Union's external and security policy actively and unreservedly in a spirit of loyalty and mutual solidarity and shall comply with the Union's action in this area. The Member States shall work together to enhance and develop their mutual political solidarity. They shall refrain from any action which is contrary to the interests of the Union or likely to impair its effectiveness as a cohesive force in international relations" (Official Journal of the

European Union, 2012).

Notwithstanding, declaration 13 grants member states that the CFSP “do not affect their responsibilities for the formulation and conduct of their foreign policy nor of their national representation in third countries and international organizations.” Moreover, declaration 14 says that the CFSP “will not affect the existing legal basis, responsibilities, and powers of each Member State in relation to the formulation and conduct of its foreign policy, its national diplomatic service, relations with third countries and participation in international organizations, including a Member State’s membership of the Security Council of the United Nations”. These statements reaffirm the prevalence of member states' national policies over that of the EU, which is directly controlled by heads of state and government.

Professor Michael E. Smith approaches EU’s foreign policy as a multi-level governance, which is based on a complex political institutionalization, where member states remain the main actor, but there are other institutions involved, like the Commission or the Parliament (Smith, 2004). In this institutional composition, the most significant institution concerning foreign policy is the European Council, which is “in charge on defining the general guidelines, acting on the basis of unanimity” (Bindi, 2010).

The European Council stands at the top of this multi-level governance of the EU’s CFSP, as defended by Youri Devuyt in his work *The European Council and the CFSP after the Lisbon Treaty* (Devuyt, 2012). The main reason to this is that, although the Lisbon Treaty eliminated the pillar system, “the separate intergovernmental character of the CFSP (including the CSDP) was maintained” (Devuyt, 2012), and reinforced the role of the European Council. Member states lack the political will to improve European foreign policy, for example by extending the decisions that can be taken with a qualified majority (Leech, 2002).

The European Council is represented by the heads of government and state of the member states, which meet on a regular basis in an intergovernmental conference. One of the strengths of the European Council is that, when agreed upon all member states, “its declarations and diplomatic meetings have a visibility and a resonance which could not be attained at another level” since they represent the interest and position of 27 sovereign

states (Schoutete & Wallace, 2002).

Another relevant intergovernmental institution is the FAC, which is responsible for the EU's external action, which includes foreign policy, defence and security, trade, development cooperation and humanitarian aid (European Council). Furthermore, the FAC ensures the unity, consistency and effectiveness of the EU's external action and defines and implements the EU's foreign and security policy, based on guidelines set by the Council (European Council).

The FAC is made up of EU member state ministers responsible for foreign affairs, defence, and development. It is relevant to mention that "foreign ministers have lost ground in Europe since the real players in this area are today prime ministers and presidents" (Lehne, 2017). This phenomenon makes it even more difficult to reach consensual foreign policy decisions, as presidents and prime ministers tend to polarise and use this area of government in a partisan manner, to the detriment of the foreign ministry, which is specialised in managing foreign affairs and has a high degree of expertise.

On the other hand, the most supranational institution concerning foreign policy would be the EEAS, which serves as the European Union's diplomatic service and works to attain the EU's foreign goals established by the FAC (Jørgensen, 2015). The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Vice-President of the European Commission, heads the EEAS and acts as the main representative of the EU in third countries and organizations, as if it was a pseudo foreign affairs minister.

The High Representative has a particularity since it encompasses roles and functions which are at the same time intergovernmental and supranational. As the *London School of Economic* affirms in one article that the HR is "double-hatted" since it creates conflicting institutional loyalties and reflects the general weakness of EU foreign and security policy, its lack of coherence" (Ondarza & Scheler, 2017). Moreover, the high representative is simply not quite high enough to engage with U.S. President Donald Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping, or Russian President Vladimir Putin. Therefore, the entire EU foreign policy apparatus remains somewhat detached from the real decision-making level" (Lehne, 2017).



It can be concluded that the greatest weakness of EU policy is its lack of cohesiveness, due in part to the difficulty for all EU member states to agree unanimously on the FAC. The very institutional construction of European foreign policy prevents it from having a single voice in international relations. This makes it more difficult for the EU to defend its interests and security vis-à-vis other powers. Thus, the EU's degree of autonomy in foreign affairs is ultimately limited to the willingness of its member states to further cooperate and integrate in this field (Richard & Hamme, 2013).

In contrast, the EU plays a crucial role when it comes to soft-power, multilateralism, and mediator in international conflicts. Moreover, the economic aspect of the EU is the most successful tool of its foreign policy because in this field the EU does talk with one voice. In addition, another strength is related to the fact that the integration process never stops, and member states could agree to relaunch the process, especially after the Russian aggression to Ukraine, which has shown the geopolitical weakness of the EU.

All the different actors, institutions and mechanisms of EU foreign policy discussed above will be presented in the case study on Israel. Moreover, the following empirical part illustrates more clearly the strengths and weaknesses of EU foreign policy, thus helping to answer the research questions.

### 3. EU's foreign policy towards Israel

This section will analyse the specific case study of the EU's approach towards Israel with the goal of illustrating the challenge, and difficulties, of having a more integrated foreign policy by answering the different research questions. The first step will be to define the historical and current context under which relations between the EU and the state of Israel have been developing. Next, the focus will be on analysing the two opposing blocs regarding what EU policy towards Israel should look like: the Visegrad group on the one hand, and a group of member states more critical of some Israeli policies on the other. However, it is first necessary to understand the EU's vision and strategy towards the Middle East, as the broader context of the region will determine the type of relationship the EU has with Israel.

### 3.1 The EU and the Middle East: strategy, vision, and position

The Middle East is the most strategic and relevant region for the EU. Moreover, the EU's foreign policy in the Middle East exemplifies its major shortcomings and problems, which are fundamentally related to the lack of integration and supranational tools. According to official documents of the EU, it states that "the policy of the European Union towards the North African and Middle Eastern countries seeks to encourage political and economic reform in each individual country in due respect for its specific features and regional cooperation among the countries of the region themselves and with the EU" (European External Action Service, 2016).

These paramount goals are closely related to the 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the 2008 Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which will be addressed in the following chapter. Again, the importance of the EU's soft power is reflected, with special emphasis on cooperation, multilateralism, protection of human rights, good neighbourhood policy, etc. However, as author Stefania Panebianco argues, in recent years the EU's ethical dimension towards the Middle East has gradually been replaced by a more pragmatic global vision, and this is partly due to the need to secure the EU's external borders (Panebianco, 2010).

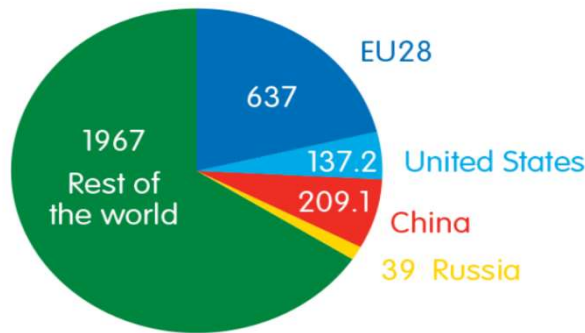
As a result, this idea of soft power is defined by the European Commission as a way of "persuasion and support for transformation- in the Middle Eastern countries- which is not about of imposing specific models from outside" (Ferrero-Waldner, 2006). Thus, the EU's objective is not to impose its liberal model on the region, or to force states to change certain policies, so the real power of attraction and change that the EU can have in the Middle East depends more on the interest of the countries in the region to cooperate than on the EU's power to export norms and values (Panebianco, 2010).

However, EU foreign policy towards the Middle East is far from being a success. Its limitations, due to member states' unwillingness to extend qualified majority voting, the EU's interests and position are marginalised from any kind of international decision-making. Moreover, this is even more significant if the region we are referring to is your neighbour and one of the main exporters of natural resources, essential for the European economy. Consequently, instability in the region does not benefit the EU (refugee crisis,

terrorism, trade wars).

Senior analyst of the *International Crisis Group*, Laure Foucher, perfectly illustrates the incongruities and problems of the EU’s Middle East policy. On the one hand, Foucher argues, that the EU is largest trading partner of the Middle East (see figure 1); its second largest aid provider to the region, after the USA (see figure 2); and the actor most strongly and directly affected by regional crises (Foucher, 2021). However, “the emergence of more assertive policy from the countries of the Visegrad Group (Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) also increasingly undermines Europe’s capacity to act as a united front” (Foucher, 2021), proving that the main problem and obstacle of a coherent and unified EU’s foreign policy is its lack of integration.

MENA trade in goods and services, 2014-2017 (\$USbn)



Sources: European Commission; World Bank; IMF; UN Comtrade



Figure 1 MENA trade in goods and services, 2014-2017

Bilateral aid to the MENA region, 2014-2017 (\$USm)



\*European Commission, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK

Sources: European Commission; USAID; OECD



Figure 2 Bilateral aid to MENA region, 2014-2017

Other scholars such as Dalia Ghanem, resident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, believes that the EU does not have a common vision in the Middle East and justify this by arguing that member states give more importance to their national foreign policy and interests in the region rather than a common European position that brings together the interests of all countries and has greater negotiating strength.

Therefore, she states that “the lack of integration among EU member states hinders a complementary approach that would allow for the adoption of a common discourse, position, and direction” (Yazbeck, 2017). Furthermore, to be able to defend your interests in this region is not enough with international development cooperation policies, but there is also a need for hard power, especially in military and security terms.

Consequently, we can appreciate a powerless EU foreign policy in the Middle East region. However, things may change due to the re-emergence of war in Europe, which is favouring a closer understanding between the Visegrad countries and the pro-integration countries in relation to the path European integration should follow in the near future. As defended by Rachel Myrick, common threats- in this case Russian expansionism and energetic dependence- tend to unite opposing views with the aim of overcoming the problem (Myrick, 2021). We are about to witness major changes in the EU’s foreign policy and the integration process.

In addition, “this fragmentation and stagnation of the integration process is also present in the EU’s relationship with Israel” (Foucher, 2021), in which there are two opposing blocs on how the relationship with Israel should be: one more permissive of Israeli policy towards the conflict and the Palestinians (Visegrad Group) and another more critical of Israel, arguing that, at times, some Palestinian rights are not granted by the Israeli government. There will be a specific chapter reviewing the different points of view that exist in the FAC concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, at a time when several Arab states in the region are normalising their relations with Israel, such as the UAE, Morocco, Sudan, Bahrain, etc.

#### 4. EU-Israel relations

The aim of the empirical research is not to analyse the historical relationship between the two, however, it is advisable to review the most important treaties and agreements linking Israel and the EU and the actual situation of the relationship. The ties between the Jewish community and Europe traces back centuries, reflecting the special bond and influence between the two. But it cannot be overlooked that for centuries Jews were persecuted,

discriminated against, and even exterminated in the liberal, democratic and Israel-friendly Europe that is today's EU (Diner, 2003).

#### 4.1 Historical background and major agreements

Israel and the EU are partly a product of the Second World War. The Holocaust and the destruction of Europe will profoundly impact Zionists and the founding fathers of the European Communities. These events will translate into a sense of guilt and a moral duty from the European political elite, especially in Western Germany, to help Israel in its statecraft (Edelheit, 2000). The first EU country to recognize Israel was Poland, followed by Hungary, Romania, Finland, and Bulgaria (Jewish Virtual Library, n.d.).

Four years later, in 1952, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was created, becoming the seed of the integration process and today's EU. This has meant that almost from the outset, both the EU and Israel have had economic, cultural, historical, and political relations that last to this day. The first institution approaching Israel was the European Community in the 1950's because, as it occurred with other countries like Spain, Egypt, or Yugoslavia, third Mediterranean countries were considered a strategic partner for European stability and prosperity (Panebianco, 2010).

In the 90's, Europe's relation with Israel significantly improved, due in part to the peace agreements signed with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), and its economic growth. Moreover, it is important to remember that Israel is a nuclear power and, thus, it is a key strategic military partner in the Levant. In 1994 the European Council celebrated and supported the peace agreement signed by the kingdom of Jordan and Israel. Besides, the agreed declaration stated: "the European Council considers Israel, on account of its high level of economic development, should enjoy special status in its relations with the EU on the basis of reciprocity and common interest" (Council, 1994).

This declaration gave Israel a privileged position, notably in trade and technological negotiations and cooperation with the EU bloc. As a result, "the EU is Israel's biggest trade partner, accounting for 29,3% of its trade in goods in 2020; 34,4% of Israel's imports

came from the EU; and 21,9% of the country's exports went to the EU (European Commission, 2020). On the other hand, Israel is EU's 24<sup>th</sup> major trade partner (European Commission, 2020).

Under the new EU-Israel partnership, directed by the ENP, "aimed to move beyond cooperation to a significant degree of integration, including through a stake in the EU's Internal Market, and the possibility for Israel to participate progressively in key aspects of EU policies and programmes" (Delegation of the European Commission to the State of Israel, 2007). Once again, in the economic and trade field the EU is a powerful negotiator with a clear and strong position, as it occurs with Israel, but lacks those mechanism in other relevant areas like foreign policy.

Additionally, the agreement included political cooperation, European assistance to Israel, infrastructure, and investment support from the European Investment Bank (EIB), deepening trade and cooperation in the fields of education, environment, industry, science, etc. (Delegation of the European Commission to the State of Israel, 2007). Furthermore, Israel and the EU actively cooperate in counter terrorism (Nobel, 2008).

## 4.2 Current state of EU-Israel relations

As the article written by Benjamin Haddad in the magazine *Foreign Policy* suggests, EU-Israel relation have recently changed in a positive way, enhancing cooperation and diplomatic dialogue. However, during the early 2000's the European public opinion did not have a positive image of Israel, and a survey carried out by the European Commission in 2003 revealed that for European citizens Israel was a "threat to peace", among other countries like Iran (Beaumont, 2003).

However, the EU and Israel also have some differences concerning border delimitations with Palestine (the EU supports the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine), Israeli settlements in the West Bank and human rights violations (Martins, 2016). Bruno O. Martins, senior researcher at the Peace Research Institute Oslo, conceptualizes the main frictions between Israel and the EU. In first place, there is a difference in threat perception

(Martins, 2016), Israel is a much more securitized than the EU.

In fact, it is Israel's highly securitized ethos the most critical element of friction with the EU. The main reason is that "the EU fundamentally is a peace project while Israel deals with military conflicts, some of which have attracted EU criticism regarding the justification and proportionality of Israel's force employment" (Martins, 2016). Nonetheless, in the last escalation of violence not all member states agreed to openly criticize some Israeli actions. Additionally, the EU has openly condemned some Israeli policies and activities like settlements in the West Bank, military operations with civilian casualties, the blockade to Gaza.

In the last escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas, which is listed as a terrorist organization by the EU, High Representative Borrell condemned "rocked attacks by Hamas and other terrorist groups" (Borrell, Josep, 2021). Moreover, he also supported Israel's right to self-defence, at the same time he asked for dialogue and the immediate cease of hostilities (Borrell, Josep, 2021). Moreover, this latest escalation of violence materialised the differences between the two opposing blocs in the FAC over what kind of external relationship the EU should have with Israel. On the one hand, the V4 (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) has a clearly pro-Israeli position and are the ones breaking the consensus in the FAC in order to formulate a more cohesive and united foreign policy towards Israel. On the other hand, the countries critical of Israel (Luxembourg, Ireland, Belgium, and Sweden, among others) are those that demand a greater commitment to Palestinian rights from the Jewish state and want the EU to play a key role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

We observe that the EU-Israel relations have both positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, the EU has a notable economic and technological partnership with Israel. Moreover, EU's soft power policies from the ENP, and the special status that Israel has, have been translated in a significant increase of cultural exchanges, tourism, research and even the participation of Israel in European sports federations or entertainment festival like Eurovision (Wellings & Kalman, 2019).

On the other hand, the EU and Israel clash over some of Israel's policies in the West Bank and Gaza, while at the same time being critical of Israel's securitization. Thus, Israel's

policy towards the Palestinians largely determines the relationship between the EU and Israel. However, in recent years this relationship has deteriorated, especially due to former prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policy of coexistence and defence of the status quo in the conflict (Plessix, 2011).

Notwithstanding, the 2021 elections left a very different political landscape, achieving two things: ending twelve years of Netanyahu's government and policies (which in the last years distance Israel from EU institutions and leaders), and creating an unprecedented coalition government that brings together Jewish religious, right-wing, left-wing, and pan-Arab parties. Naftali Bennet (prime minister) and Yair Lapid (foreign minister and second turn prime minister) lead a coalition government that appear to be much closer to the EU.

Foreign minister, the centrist Yair Lapid, stated that he aims to strengthen coalitions with those countries defending liberal values and has never hidden its closeness to the EU. Thus, this new vision shifted from the one Netanyahu has been cultivating in his last years of government with the Visegrad countries, which were the main ally of Israel in the EU and the FAC (Berman, 2021). Moreover, both Lapid and EU officials defend a two-state solution, a fact which has been well heard in Brussels as the EU could become a major mediator in the negotiations.

In conclusion, the EU's policy in Israel is closely marked by ties and disagreements between the two sides. What is clear is that, as is the case at the regional level with EU policy towards the Middle East, the fragmentation of the FAC slows down policies, does not allow for a common EU voice and produces unnecessary duplication by having both national and EU policies. The next step is to analyse the position of the two main blocs in the FAC. Next section will examine individually the two opposing blocs on both foreign affairs towards Israel and greater integration (supranationalism).



## 5. The fragmentation within the FAC

In June 2021, German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, defended that the “EU should abolish the right of individual member states to veto foreign policy measures as the twenty-seven nation bloc could not allow itself to be held hostage” (Escritt, 2021). This statement contrasts with the views on integration of the V4 countries leaders’, which clearly prefer a Europe of sovereign nation states. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Poland’s ruling Law and Justice party signed a declaration, together with fourteen other populist and Eurosceptic parties, opposing the EU’s political direction.

The declaration stated: “the EU is becoming more and more a tool of radical forces that would like to carry out a cultural, religious transformation and ultimately a nationless construction of Europe, aiming to create a European Superstate” (Baume, 2021). By doing so, the Visegrad countries sought to undermine the European integration process and presented their idea of a Europe of sovereign nation states in which the integration process is perceived as a threat for the survival of European nations.

As a result, for the Visegrad Group the integration process should not go beyond the economic and commercial spheres (Kallis, 2018). Notwithstanding, Russia’s aggression against Ukraine could alter this reality and foster European integration in strategic fields such as energy, defence, and foreign policy. Uwe Wunderlich wrote an article for the *London School of Economics* where he argues that there is a correlation between military conflicts and status quo changes and the advancement of European integration.

Proof of this is that European integration emerged after the Second World War, the end of the Cold War brought drastic political change in the Europe and the consequent eastward enlargement of the EU, and in some ways this latest escalation between Russia and the West could be a “tipping point for European integration” (Wunderlich, 2022), even the most reluctant states to advance the integration process (Visegrad Group) may change their policy and allow progress towards more supranational mechanisms and avoidance to use the veto. It has thus been demonstrated how the differences between the two visions, intergovernmental and supranational, impede the advancement of European integration in foreign policy as the requirement of unanimity is extremely difficult to

achieve. Moreover, this fact is perfectly embodied in the kind of relationship both blocs want with Israel, and the latest episode of these disagreements occurred in 2021, when Gaza and Israel engaged in a new violent escalation.

The EU foreign affairs ministers met in what was called an “informal meeting of the FAC” in order to discuss the situation in Israel and Palestine and reach a common position on the issue, which would give the EU a solid and united international position. However, the goal of “speaking with one voice” was not achieved in this occasion either. The reason was Hungary’s veto to the joint statement proposed by the FAC. In a press release after the meeting, High Representative and Vice-President Josep Borrell, referred to the veto exercised by Hungary:

“I think it is better to recognise that there has been one country- that did not agree on the common declaration-, the same country that also made it difficult to agree on a European position recently in the United Nations Security Council. I am sure you can easily guess; it is Hungary” (Borrell, 2021).

The disagreements between some member states critical of Israel and the supranational European institutions (European Commission) with the Visegrad Group are perfectly visible and recognisable. This fragmentation of the FAC harms the common position of the EU as an international actor in such a relevant issue as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Moreover, these disagreements also affect to the relation the EU holds with Israel because there is no consensus. EU governance professor from the Central European University, U. Puetter, stated in an interview that “consensus in EU politics has become an end in itself”, emphasizing that this is clearly manifest in the FAC (Puetter, 2014). The next chapter will explain the reasons why the Visegrad Group has a much greater understanding and closeness to Israel and the effects this has on European foreign policy towards the Jewish state.

## 5.1 The Visegrad Group and its approach towards Israel

In 1991 the Visegrad Group was founded by Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia (Slovakia joins as an independent country in 1993) with the aim of “disassociate themselves from the former Eastern bloc and get priority boarding for EU and NATO membership” (Kazharski, 2021). Today, however, the Visegrad Group seems to be more distant than ever from its EU colleagues in Brussels, because of normative divergences over migration, national identity, security, and multiculturalism among other matters (Kazharski, 2021). Several judgments have already been handed down against Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic for failing to comply with their obligations under EU law (Bifulco & Nato, 2020). In addition, sanction proceedings are underway against Poland and Hungary, due to their illiberal drift, which could lead to the suspension of voting rights in the European institutions, including in the European Council and the FAC (Rankin, 2022). These divergences between the Visegrad Group and other EU members are also present in the relationship and view of Israel.

The factor that triggered the rapprochement between the Visegrad Group and Israel was, among other matters, the migration crisis of 2014 and the rise of Islamic terrorism in Europe (Koš & Séville, 2020). In 2016 the Visegrad countries successfully vetoed the implementation of a relocation scheme for migrants within the EU (Koš & Séville, 2020). Thus, Visegrad countries started to align with Israel since both developed shared views and values on international relations and foreign policy (Dyduch, 2018). Moreover, there is an ideological proximity, albeit with nuances, between the Visegrad Group governments and the second Netanyahu government (2009-2021), both of which are conservative, nationalist and are characterised by a realist approach to international relations (Sternhell, 2019). For Israel, the relationship with this group of countries is key to defending its interests and position in the EU.

On the one hand, these shared values and interests are centred on the idea of security as a normative priority. Israel has managed to persuade the Visegrad Group that threats against Israel are also threats against Europe, in which the importance of the security of the nation is paramount (Dyduch, 2018). Israel’s struggle for independence, security and survival has translated into empathy on the part of the Visegrad Group, which suffered Soviet domination for over forty years (Dyduch, 2018).

Therefore, “the existence of independent nation states may not be a given fact, but are entities that need to be continuously defended” (Dyduch, 2018). This has led to the adoption of realistic approaches by the V4 and Israel in terms of security, defence, and foreign policy, in which power relations and hard power are more relevant than rules and soft power. Consequently, this shared vision of international politics, the sacred value of nationhood, and the fundamental role of security in the domestic and foreign politics of each of the Visegrad countries and Israel have produced an ideological and pragmatic rapprochement between the two.

Furthermore, the five countries have carried out a process of securitisation, which is based on shifting the public discourse by framing issues of public concern as security related concerns. Some policy areas which are examples of the securitisation process include migration, national identity, trade exchange, the judiciary system, etc (Dyduch, 2018). This is reflected in the fact that for public opinion in the Visegrad Group countries the greatest threats to Europe are terrorism (CZ: 20%, HU: 26%, PL: 18%, SK: 20%) and immigration (CZ: 26%, HU: 18%, PL: 10%, SK: 12%) (Dyduch, 2018).

For the V4 Israel is a vital partner on migration and security issues because it is perceived as a guarantor of security and stability in the Middle East, where it plays a key role in containing migration to Europe. In 2017, for the first time in history, Israel was invited to the summit of the Visegrad Group in Budapest. At that meeting, Netanyahu wanted to send a message to the EU. Netanyahu’s speech referred to “the threat posed by the rise of militant Islam and terrorism to both the Middle East and Europe”. He also defended “Israel role as the only Western country in the Middle East which is able to limit and fight from the region, within the region, this great danger to all of us”, and stressed that Israel is the only country in the region where Christians are safe (Netanyahu, 2017).

Moreover, Israeli prime minister stated that “it is time to have a reassessment in Europe about the relations with Israel” and concluded his intervention by informing that the next Visegrad Group summit would be in Jerusalem, a gesture with great symbolic and political repercussions, not surprisingly, the Visegrad Group aligns with the US in recognising Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel despite its failure to respect UN resolutions and international law. Furthermore, in 2018 Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania blocked EU censure of US embassy move to Jerusalem, once again impeding

the EU to have one voice in international relation and thus damaging its image and foreign affairs effectiveness and cohesiveness (Fulbright, 2018).

Viktor Orban's response to Netanyahu focused on three aspects: first, he wanted to emphasise Israel's important work for Europe's security. Secondly, he encourages the EU to have a better relation with Israel and foster cooperation. Lastly, he suggested that if the EU is not willing to cooperate with Israel "it is punishing itself" and that "the Israeli-EU cooperation should return to the field of common sense" (Orban, 2017). Moreover, he stressed that "the Visegrad Four shares the Israeli view that external border defence is key" and that the "free movement of people without controls raises the risk of terror" (Orban, 2017).

On the other hand, this political rapprochement has been complemented by a willingness to increase economic, military, and technological cooperation. The Visegrad Group is particularly interested in Israeli gas fields as an alternative energy source to Russia (Molnár, 2019). It is estimated that the import of Israeli gas to Central Europe could begin in 2024, although efforts are being made to shorten the timeframe due to the energy crisis in Europe, which particularly affects the Visegrad countries.

In 2018 the Visegrad countries, Israel and the International Visegrad Fund signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on Training Cooperation in the Field of Innovation", which aims to exchange technology, investment, and knowledge among the signatories (Molnár, 2019). The Visegrad Group is interested in acquiring Israeli military technology and carry out military training together (Ogrodnik & Wojnarowicz, 2017). Some examples include the purchase of rockets and missile defence systems by Poland in 2016 or cooperation between the Polish and Israeli aerospace industries on unmanned aircraft and electronic warfare systems (Dyduch, 2018).

Concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Visegrad countries have always advocated the two-state solution and the right of Israel to live in security and peaceful coexistence with all its neighbours, including Palestinians. This approach is also shared by EU institutions and all its member states, however, Visegrad countries have taken certain decisions or policies which indirectly distance them from the EU's general position (Dyduch, 2018). For example, in 2015 both the Czech and the Hungarian parliaments

declined the proposal of the European Commission to label all goods from Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (Rettman, 2015).

In an address to the Knesset (Israeli parliament), Czech president Milos Zeman reaffirmed his willingness to move the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, although Czech prime minister refused to do so. Zeman stated: “We Europeans... I speak about the EU, in fact, are sometimes hesitating. We sometimes are cowards. It is very impolite, isn't it? But I am afraid it is frank. And that's why it is necessary all the time the solidarity with Israel. Because [if we] betray Israel, we betray ourselves”, referring to the fact that no EU member state is considering recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Zeman, 2018).

Hungarian minister of foreign affairs and trade, Péter Szijjártó, explained why Hungary did not support the common declaration after the escalation of May 2021 between Israel and Hamas in Gaza: “I have a general problem with these European statements on Israel. They are usually pretty biased, pretty much unbalanced. They do not put into consideration the security concerns of Israel and Israeli people [...] the efforts Israelis make to have a stable and secure Middle East” (Szijjártó, 2021). These statements reflect the fragmentation within the FAC over the Israel-Gaza conflict, with Hungary perceiving that the EU blames Israel for the escalation of violence and does not sufficiently support the Jewish state.

The result is the fragmentation of the FAC, which causes that the EU's role in the conflict is undermined by a lack of consensus. While some states argue over what measures and policies the EU can take in the conflict to resolve it, the Visegrad Group defends Israel's position and even votes against or abstains it in the United Nations General Assembly when the conflict has been reviewed (Dyduch, 2018). Thus, Israel has approached the Visegrad Group with the aim of breaking consensus within the EU and avoiding criticism of some of its policies, as it is aware that without unanimity the EU does not have the power to make any joint declarations, establish sanctions or denounce certain activities (Molnár, 2019).

## 5.2 Critical countries and its approach towards Israel

The other group in the FAC that differs from the views of the Visegrad Group are labelled as countries critical of Israel and encompasses most of the remaining member states, although there is not always full consensus among them. The most critical of Israel within the FAC are Luxembourg, Belgium, Ireland and Sweden (Herszenhorn & Momtaz, 2021). These countries also coincide with the EU's general approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and could be considered more pro-European and pro-integration than the Visegrad Group. Likewise, the critical countries are characterised by a clear defence of Palestinian rights, denunciation of illegal Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, active defence of the two-state solution, resumption of the peace process via the Quartet of the Middle East and defence of international law and UN resolutions (Herszenhorn & Momtaz, 2021).

After the 2021 escalation, foreign affairs minister of the EU condemned the aggression of Hamas and defended Israel right to self defense, however, they demanded Israel to comply with international law and human rights. Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's foreign affairs minister, has defined Netanyahu's policy on Palestinians as a new form of "colonization" and has urged France to lead the path to recognize the state of Palestine as a measure to relaunch the peace process (Asselborn, 2021). Irish foreign affairs and defence minister, Simon Coveney, stated at the United Nations that "we cannot return to the flouting of international law, with the expansion of illegal settlements into occupied Palestinian territory"; "we cannot return to forced evictions of Palestinians from their homes in East Jerusalem and other parts of the West Bank"; "we cannot return to demolition of Palestinian property, settler violence and intimidation" (Coveney, 2021).

Critics advocate relaunching the peace process, something the Visegrad Group countries are not interested in as Israel's current policy is to maintain the status quo in the conflict. In an interview to *Reuters*, Maltese foreign minister Evarist Bartolo stressed that "as a minimum the EU can try to get a ceasefire, then provide humanitarian aid, and then see what can be done to restart the Middle East peace process to address the root causes of the violence", to which he added that "the EU cannot let the extremists on both sides feed off each other and set the agenda" (Bartolo, 2021).

French foreign minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, suggested that the peace process should be relunched via the Middle East Quartet, which is a mediation group in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict formed by the USA, Russia, EU and UN (Musu, 2010). However, the role that the EU can play within the Middle East Quartet is very limited as there is no common position within the EU itself, something that the US and Russia need not to worry about. Nowadays, the EU is voiceless concerning the conflict, and this harms EU's interests, security and international reputation and position as a key geopolitical actor.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stressed that “the two-state solution is the only solution capable of addressing the legitimate aspirations of both the Israelis and the Palestinians to security, independence, recognition and dignity”, while reiterating that France is a friend of both Israel and Palestine (France Diplomacy, 2021). Moreover, France condemns the annexation of part of the West Bank, the Israeli settlement policy and considers that Jerusalem should be the capital of both Israel and the future state of Palestine. Given France's weight internationally and within the EU, many member states hope that France will take the initiative to revive the peace process and build the necessary consensus within the FAC for EU foreign policy to be effective and more integrated.

Cypriot foreign minister Nikos Christodoulides described the situation of the FAC every time there is a crisis between Israel and Palestine: “The European Union should have, right now, a leading role (in defusing the crisis). It doesn't have that role, either because of differences in approach by member states or because there is no strategic approach from Brussels” (Christodoulides, 2021).

Thus, it seems difficult for the critical states and the Visegrad Group to reach any kind of understanding on what the EU's foreign policy towards Israel should look like. The EU's goal to be a relevant actor in the Middle East and the peace process is frustrated by the impossibility of reaching unanimous agreements in the FAC. However, the problem with European foreign policy is not the difference of opinion within the FAC, as it is difficult for all 27 member states to always agree, but the lack of supranational mechanisms that facilitate decision-making by simple or qualified majority rather than unanimity.



## 6. Conclusion

The actual political world order is changing. New centres of power are emerging, such as China or India, and other old powers like Russia are not willing to reduce their status and are escalating regional conflicts, as it is occurring in Ukraine, to impose their interests. It can be argued that contemporary international relations are becoming much more polarized. At the same time democracies are losing international relevance and a lack of confidence is characterising their own societies (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014).

The balance of power is shifting from the West to the East (Abbasi, Qumber, & Minhas, 2018). This has resulted in the weakening of the USA and Europe as geopolitical powers. Europeans are in a very uncomfortable position in several fields including energy, migration, and security. Moreover, they suffer international irrelevance, and citizens' discontent (Weber, 2019).

On the one hand, the main positive aspect of the EU is that it is the second largest and wealthiest economy in the world, thus making it a strong financial and trade bloc in world economy (Regling, 2016). The economic integration process of the European Union has been proved to be a success and has reinforced Europe's role as an international economic (Scharpf, 1997). Economic cooperation within the EU has led to a more integrated Union itself culminating with the monetary union (Ferrer & Ruiz, 2019). Furthermore, European soft power has proven to be very useful and effective, such as soft diplomacy, the imposition of economic sanctions, mediation in international conflicts where the great powers have no interest, etc.

On the other hand, the EU lacks a full political integration. Member states of the EU, represented by national governments, still hold some crucial competences, like foreign policy, border control or taxation, therefore leaving the EU in a bizarre status, a hybrid political authority, in between an international organization and a new form of federation of European nation states. EU's 'sui generis' and unique institutional design affect both member states and 'third states', hence proving that the EU is virtually required to hold a say in international politics on behalf of the common interests of the European people (Wessel, 2013).

As demonstrated and exemplified by the case study on EU foreign policy towards Israel, the lack of integration in this field translates into a tactical, strategic, and operational disadvantage on the part of the EU in contrast to the foreign policy of other competing geopolitical blocs. Therefore, the splitting of the FAC weakens the EU's position and reputation as a leading international actor, the EU, thus, risks being ignored and manipulated by other powers so that a consensus is not reached in the EU to expand supranational mechanisms in the field of foreign and defence policy.

The Russia-Ukraine war has exposed the EU's weaknesses, especially in defence, foreign policy, and energy, and reopened the debate on possible changes to the EU treaties. Foreign policy is a fundamental tool for any state, and although the EU is not a conventional state, it needs more than ever a strong, united and integrated foreign policy, where member states can disagree with each other in the FAC, but where at the same time the necessary actions and policies can be carried out quickly and effectively thanks to new supranational mechanisms.

Changes within the EU and the FAC will be forthcoming. Viktor Orban's re-election may be an obstacle to achieving the desired consensus among the EU-27, although the Russian threat may bring about a rapprochement and reconciliation between the Visegrad Group and the European institutions and the rest of the member states. It has been proven that it is in times of crisis that the integration process re-emerges, in order to successfully face present and future challenges (Castells, 2021). Moreover, the focus now is on the French presidential elections, where Europeanist Macron and Eurosceptic Le Pen face each other in the second round. The outcome of these elections is of key European importance as it will influence the future of the EU integration process.

On the one hand, the limitations of this thesis are related to the lack of space and time. There is a great deal of information on the topic of study, and the focus can be on different periods in the EU-Israel relationship. In addition, due to space limitations, we have selected those interventions, documents and bibliography that were most representative, although we have ignored other information that may also be of interest to the research.

On the other hand, future lines of research will have to take into account all developments, changes and modifications in the EU in the wake of the Russian invasion of Europe and

the consequences of this event concerning EU integration in the field of foreign affairs. Furthermore, Israel's new government has different characteristics from Netanyahu's. Nevertheless, due to its short time in power, it has not been possible to fully assess the impact of its relationship with the EU. It will be of particular interest to see what centrist Yair Lapid's policies will be like when he takes office as prime minister in 2023. Finally, it will have to be assessed whether the new geopolitical situation in Europe brings the Visegrad countries closer to the EU, thus facilitating the consensus needed to reformulate the European treaties and advance the integration process.

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