



EUROPEAN POLICY ANALYSIS

Informal Groupings in EU Foreign Policy: A Sustainable Arrangement?

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Summary

In the last decade, the EU's foreign policy practices have grown increasingly complex. The Lisbon Treaty sought to further centralise member states' foreign policies at the EU level, particularly through the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission, as well as through the establishment of the European External Action Service. And yet, on several occasions informal groups of member states steered EU foreign policy post-Lisbon. These informal dynamics of cooperation among EU member states reflect the extent of fragmentation in EU foreign policy governance despite the centralisation envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty.

To contribute to the understanding of such dynamics, this policy analysis offers an overview of the types, functioning and implications of informal groupings in EU foreign policy post-Lisbon. Since most of the multiple crises the EU faced in the post-Lisbon era occurred – or are intimately interlinked to – Europe's eastern and southern neighbourhood, the overview was conducted with special consideration to these regional settings.

The phenomenon of informal and temporary groupings is a response to the need for efficiency in the face of geopolitical complexities. However, given the scant degree of accountability and temporary nature of these groupings, it is not a sustainable mode of governance for an EU that aims to be a more meaningful actor.

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1 Introduction

More than 10 years have passed since the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty (December 2009). The institutional modifications it introduced are now consolidated and have been well-tested in the field. After decades of progressive Europeanisation, the Lisbon Treaty sought to further centralise member states' foreign policies at the EU level, particularly through the new High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the European Commission, as well as through the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS). Yet, on several occasions, informal groups of member states steered EU foreign policy post-Lisbon.¹ Crucially, they did so by operating outside the EU institutional framework while remaining loosely connected to it.² Such 'patchwork patterns of cooperation'³ reflect the extent of fragmentation in EU foreign policy despite the centralisation envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty. Nonetheless, the occurrence of informal groupings in EU foreign policy remains largely uncharted territory. Moreover, scholars hold conflicting views over the implications of informal groupings on EU foreign policy governance post-Lisbon.⁴

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Against this backdrop, this paper examines these distinctive patterns of interaction and their implications for EU foreign policy governance, through a broad conceptualisation of EU foreign policy including both the supranational sectors (e.g. EU Enlargement policy; EU Neighbourhood policy) and the intergovernmental sectors of

this policy domain (i.e. common foreign and security policy). By doing so, it aims at offering relevant insights into the institutional practices characterising EU foreign policy broadly defined in the post-Lisbon era.

The paper starts by providing an overview over the main types of informal groupings in EU foreign policy. After having outlined the qualifying differences between formal and informal groupings in EU foreign policy governance, it differentiates between informal groupings occurring within the EU formal institutional framework and informal groupings occurring outside the EU formal institutional framework, but often remaining anchored to it. The analysis then concentrates on the functioning of informal groupings occurring outside the EU framework.

The article continues with a focus on informal groupings established in EU foreign policy towards its eastern and southern neighbourhood. In fact, while subsets of EU member states increasingly cooperated in EU foreign policy during the unfolding of EU multiple crises over the past decade,⁵ most of such crises related to the EU approach to these regional settings. The paper then analyses the implications of these distinctive patterns of interaction for EU foreign policy governance, with special consideration to small and middle-sized member states, such as Sweden. Finally, it draws conclusions from the analysis presented.

This original perspective on EU foreign policy post-Lisbon is based on a triangulation of sources drawn from existing research on informal groupings and on EU foreign policy, as well as from an analysis of official documents. In particular, the analysis relies on information collected through EU official online repositories

¹ Lehne, S. (2012) 'The big three in EU foreign policy', Carnegie Europe. July 5. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2012/07/05/big-three-in-eu-foreign-policy-pub-48759>.

² Aggestam, L. and Bicchi, F. (2019) 'New Directions in EU Foreign Policy Governance: Cross-loading, Leadership and Informal Groupings', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57(3): 515-532.

³ Balfour, R. (2015) 'Europe's Patchwork Foreign Policy Needs More Than a Few New Stitches', *Policy Brief*, Vol. 2 No. 6. The German Marshall Fund of the United States, July.

⁴ Carbone, M. (2013) 'Between EU actorness and aid effectiveness: The logics of EU aid to Sub-Saharan Africa', *International Relations*, 27(3): 341-355; Delreux, T. and Keukeleire, S. (2017) 'Informal division of labour in EU foreign policy-making', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24(10): 1471-1490.

⁵ DeVore, M. R. (2012) 'Organizing international armaments cooperation: institutional design and path dependencies in Europe', *European Security*, 21(3): 432-458; Mawdsley, J. (2011) 'Towards a Merger of the European Defence and Security Markets?' In Bailes, A. and Depauw, S. (eds.) *The EU defence market* (Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute), 11-20.

and, when available, national internet databases. In addition to this, it devotes special attention to grey literature and newspapers.

2 The Types

2.1 Formal and Informal Groupings

The Lisbon Treaty enshrines a series of formal mechanisms that allow groups of member states to advance their engagement to integrated efforts when the rest of them are not willing to do so, including in EU foreign policy. Such mechanisms are enhanced co-operation (TEU, Art. 20); permanent structured co-operation (TEU, Art. 42 and 46); and the implementation of a specific task by a group of member states (TEU, Art. 42 and 44).⁶ On the contrary, informal groupings are not established through mechanism explicitly envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty. They originate from informal patterns of interaction among EU member states and, occasionally, institutions. In this sense, these groupings are manifestations of informal governance processes in the EU.⁷

Certainly, informal groupings of member states are not a new phenomenon in EU foreign policy. There is ample evidence that informal groupings occurred in EU/EC⁸ foreign policy at least since the establishment of the European Political Cooperation – i.e. 1970s.⁹ In the past, these groupings were generally conceived as attempts to solve the shortcomings of the collective logic upon which the EC/EU foreign policy was based, and the ensuing lack of unified leadership.¹⁰ With the reshaping of the figure of the High Representative

and the creation of the EEAS, the Lisbon Treaty should have filled this leadership vacuum.¹¹ Therefore, one would have expected informal groupings to disappear from the EU scene. Nevertheless, because of the qualifying features of EU foreign policy governance, they persisted in the post-Lisbon era.

"Despite the Lisbon Treaty's modifications, the EU's foreign policy is still pre-eminently based on intergovernmental practices."

Despite the Lisbon Treaty's modifications, the EU's foreign policy is still pre-eminently based on intergovernmental practices. Consequently, there is a tension between EU member states' delegation of significant formal leadership functions to the EU level, including through the Lisbon Treaty's reshaping of the High Representative's post and the informal strategies they devise to maintain control over EU foreign policy governance.¹² In the context of multiple foreign policy crises and of the rise of a constraining dissensus¹³ on EU politics among member states' publics, such a tension triggered horizontal, informal dynamics of cooperation between member states, among which was the establishment of informal groupings.¹⁴

Indeed, informal groupings continue to represent an extremely vast and complex institutional

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the functioning of EU foreign policy under the Lisbon Treaty, see Amadio Viceré, M. G. (2018) *The High Representative and EU Foreign Policy Integration. A Comparative Study of Kosovo and Ukraine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

⁷ Keukeleire, S. and Neuhold, C. (2012) 'Informal Governance and Networks in EU Foreign Policy' in Christiansen, T. and Neuhold, C. (eds.) *International Handbook on Informal Governance* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing).

⁸ European Union/European Community.

⁹ Hill, C. (2011) 'The big three and the High Representative: Dilemmas of leadership inside and outside the EU', in Blavoukos, S. and Bourantonis, D. (eds.) *The EU Presence in International Organizations* (London and New York: Routledge).

¹⁰ Hill, C. (2004) 'Renationalizing or Regrouping? EU Foreign Policy Since 11 September 2001', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 42(2): 143-163.

¹¹ Amadio Viceré, M. G., Tercovich, G. and Carta, C. (2020) 'The post-Lisbon high representatives: an introduction', *European Security*, 29(3): 259-274.

¹² Aggestam, L. and Johansson, M. (2017) 'The Leadership Paradox in EU Foreign Policy', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(6): 1203-1220.

¹³ Hooghe, L. and Marks, G. (2009) 'A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus', *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1): 1-23.

¹⁴ Aggestam, L. and Bicchi, F. (2019) 'New Directions in EU Foreign Policy Governance: Cross-loading, Leadership and Informal Groupings', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 57(3): 515-532.

phenomenon in EU foreign policy post-Lisbon.¹⁵ Reaching a final, encompassing balance of these practices in EU foreign policy is therefore beyond the purpose of this analysis. Still, an overview of the main types of the most relevant informal groupings occurring in EU foreign policy post-Lisbon can impose order on what we already know about them.

2.2 Informal Groupings Within and Outside the EU Institutional Framework

In general terms, informal groupings consist of member states that are both keen and capable of committing their energies and resources in a specific foreign policy dossier. The qualifying features of these informal groupings vary extensively. Existing studies show that they can be classified according to several dimensions. Among others, these include member states' size, their like-mindedness, the subject they deal with, the exclusiveness of their composition, and their durability.

Nonetheless, for the purpose of this analysis, the most important dimension to be considered is the institutional embeddedness of these groupings, that is to say their link to the EU institutional framework.¹⁶ In this regard, we can distinguish between informal groupings occurring within the EU institutional framework and informal groupings occurring outside the EU institutional framework, but remaining loosely connected to it.¹⁷

In the first case, informal dynamics of cooperation among member states occur within the EU institutional system, especially within the intergovernmental forums (i.e. European Council and Council of the EU), whereby subsets of member states integrate their efforts to address specific foreign policy issues. In the second case,

these dynamics unfold outside the formal EU framework, taking the form of groupings of member states steering EU foreign policy, often by participating in international settings alongside non-EU countries.

"The past years offer numerous examples of informal groupings of member states operating within the EU foreign policy framework."

The past years offer numerous examples of informal groupings of member states operating within the EU foreign policy framework. This should not come as a surprise. In federal unions,¹⁸ such as in the United States of America, it is a common practice for federated states to form *ad hoc* coalitions and pool their resources to pursue specific interests. Similarly, within the EU institutional framework, a restricted group of EU member states can coordinate their energies and resources to attain specific foreign policy objectives. By doing so, this group of member states can influence, support and even hinder, the elaboration and implementation of certain EU policies. For instance, the Visegrad Group, composed of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, was particularly active in the migration dossier. Among other activities, this group opposed the refugees' relocation quotas, up to the point of filing a lawsuit against this system soon afterwards.¹⁹

Another informal grouping operating in the migration sector within the EU framework was

¹⁵ For relevant examples in this regard, see: Laatikainen, K. (2015) 'The EU Delegation in New York: A Debut of High Political Drama', in Spence, D. and Bátora, J. (eds.) *The European External Action Service. European Diplomacy Post-Westphalia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 195–218.

¹⁶ Delreux, T. and Keukeleire, S. (2017) 'Informal division of labour in EU foreign policy-making', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24(10): 1471–1490.

¹⁷ Müller, P. (2016) 'EU foreign policy: no major breakthrough despite multiple crises', *Journal of European Integration*, 38(3): 359–374.

¹⁸ Fabbrini, S. (2015) *Which European Union? Europe after the Euro crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

¹⁹ Zachová, A., Zgut, E., Zbytniewska, K., Strzalkowski, M. and Gabrizova, Z. (2018) 'Visegrad nations united against mandatory relocation quotas'. Euractiv, 23 July. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/visegrad-nations-united-against-mandatory-relocation-quotas/>.

established by Italy, Malta, France and Germany in 2019.²⁰ This informal group of member states publicly committed to a predictable temporary solidarity mechanism in order to ensure the disembarkation of asylum seekers and migrants in the Mediterranean, as well as to contribute to their swift resettlement by engaging in the relocation mechanism coordinated by the European Commission. Notably, such public commitment followed a year during which disembarkations and relocations from Italy and Malta had not been implemented by all member states, but only through *ad hoc*, voluntary arrangements.²¹

The Nordic-Baltic cooperation within the EU also increased sharply in the security and defence domain after the Ukrainian crisis, the UK's decision to leave the EU, and the uncertainties deriving from Donald Trump's election as US president.²² EU development policies and practices, in turn, have been shaped by the Nordic EU member states – i.e. Denmark, Finland, and Sweden – who devised a considerable agenda-setting power on several occasions.²³

[...] this type of informal grouping can provide relevant insights into national governments' interactions within the EU and into EU inter-institutional dynamics."

Indeed, the occurrence and functioning of this type of informal grouping can provide relevant insights into national governments' interactions

within the EU and into EU inter-institutional dynamics. However, informal groupings occurring and conducting their activities outside the EU institutional framework while remaining loosely connected to it are more relevant from an analytical point of view. As a matter of fact, these informal groupings all interact with third parties (i.e., non-EU states and international organisations) within international settings, such as directorate formats (e.g., Group on Informal Dialogue on the Balkans Quint), international contact groups (e.g., International Contact Group on Venezuela), and/or international forums and organisations (e.g., G7; G20; United Nations Security Council). Crucially, however, they do so without necessarily receiving a formal mandate from EU institutions and/from the other member states.

This phenomenon is unprecedented and has never occurred in other federal unions (e.g., the US). Such a specific aspect makes it necessary to delve into the functioning of informal groupings occurring outside the EU institutional framework, as well as into their implications for EU foreign policy governance.

3 The Functioning

3.1 Informal Groupings Outside the EU Institutional Framework

Informal groupings occurring outside the EU institutional framework can conduct their activities in different ways. On some occasions, the interaction between the informal group of EU member states and third actors takes place alongside EU institutions, as it happened in the E3/EU nuclear negotiations with Iran.²⁴ On

²⁰ Carrera, S. and Cortinovis, R. (2019) 'The Malta declaration on SAR and relocation: A predictable EU solidarity mechanism?', CEPS Policy Insights, No. 2019-14, October. https://www.ceps.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/PI2019_14_SCRC_Malta-Declaration-1.pdf.

²¹ Carrera, S. and Cortinovis, R. (2019a) 'Search and rescue, disembarkation and relocation arrangements in the Mediterranean. Sailing away from responsibility?', CEPS Paper in Liberty and Security in Europe, No. 2019-10, June. https://www.ceps.eu/download/publication/?id=23329&pdf=LSE2019-10_ReSoma_Sailing-Away-from-Responsibility.pdf.

²² Kuusik, P. and Raik, K. (2018) 'The Nordic-Baltic Region in the EU: A Loose Club of Friends', SIEPS European Policy Analysis, 2018:10epa, October. https://sieps.se/globalassets/publikationer/2018/2018_10epa.pdf?

²³ Elgström, O. (2016) 'Norm advocacy networks: Nordic and Like-Minded Countries in EU gender and development policy', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52(2): 224-240; Orbie, J. and Lightfoot, S. (2016) 'Development. Shallow Europeanization?' in Hadfield A., Manners I. and Whitman, R. (eds.) *Foreign Policies of EU Member States* (London: Routledge).

²⁴ Bassiri Tabrizi, A. and Kienzle, B. (2020) 'The High Representative and directoires in European foreign policy: the case of the nuclear negotiations with Iran', *European Security*, 29(3): 320-336.

others, EU institutions are completely absent, and the informal group steers EU policy within the international setting, as in the case of the Normandy Format.

One may as well argue in this regard that, within those international settings, member states are acting in their capacity of nation states. Indeed, member states have not devolved their sovereignty in these matters to Brussels. Since the Lisbon Treaty maintained the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy, national governments retain their control over this policy realm (see Declarations 13 and 14 concerning the common foreign and security policy²⁵). Nonetheless, member states also committed to coordinating their foreign policies.

This general logic, which structures the functioning of EU foreign policy, emerges clearly from the Lisbon Treaty's provisions. In principle, it should be the High Representative to represent the EU in international organisations for matters related to common foreign and security policy (TEU, Art. 27.2).²⁶ Furthermore, 'before undertaking any action on the international scene or entering into any commitment that may affect the Union's interests, each Member State shall consult the others within the European Council or the Council', and 'coordinate their activities within the Council' with the High Representative and other member states (TEU, Art. 32). As for member states participating in international organisations or conferences where not all the member states are present, their representatives should consult other member states' representatives within the European Council and the Council; they should inform other member states and the High Representative of any subject of common interest; and coordinate their activities with them in subjects of common interest in order to uphold the EU positions in these international settings (TEU, Art. 32 and 34)

And yet, in the post-Lisbon era, reality did not seem to fall under these categories, at least not completely. Over the past decade, EU governance has been characterised by the European Council's pre-eminence over the High Representative in decision-making processes. Until member states reached a common position within the European Council, the High Representative had to 'remain silent as a matter of legal principle'.²⁷ Therefore, when member states believed in the need to devise a collective effort, or at least did not oppose it, the High Representative could significantly influence EU foreign policy post-Lisbon.

"When stalemates occurred within the European Council, however, it was the informal groups of member states that frequently determined the EU's general approach."

On these occasions, informal groups of member states participating in international formats and contact groups, contributed to EU efforts in coordination with EU institutions. When stalemates occurred within the European Council, however, it was the informal groups of member states that frequently determined the EU's general approach. While doing so, these groups often informed the European Council of their activities *ex-post*, rather than discussing their initiatives with other member states beforehand. At the same time, they used the High Representative and EU structures as administrative supports, while benefitting from EU resources.

This said, it would be inappropriate to argue that the final aim of informal groupings is to overpower and replace EU institutions and the rest of the

²⁵ Official Journal of the European Union (2012) 'Declarations annexed to the final act of the intergovernmental conference which adopted the Treaty of Lisbon, signed on 13 December 2007'. 26 October. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_5&format=PDF; Official Journal of the European Union (2012) 'Declarations annexed to the final act of the intergovernmental conference which adopted the Treaty of Lisbon, signed on 13 December 2007'. 26 October. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:2bf140bf-a3f8-4ab2-b506-fd71826e6da6.0023.02/DOC_5&format=PDF.

²⁶ For the sake of completeness, it should be noted, without prejudices to the powers of the High Representative, the President of the European Council too can 'ensure the external representation of the Union on issues concerning its common foreign and security policy' (TEU, Art. 15(6)2).

²⁷ Thym, D. (2011) 'The Intergovernmental Constitution of the EU's Foreign, Security and Defence Executive', *European Constitutional Law Review*, 7(3): 453-480, p. 456.

member states. Rather, member states participating in informal groupings generally commit additional time and effort to sustain EU policies towards specific foreign policy issues, on top of those already devised by other member states and the EU as a whole.²⁸

[...] the members of the informal groupings can access the wide range of EU resources."

On the one hand, they often serve as settings for coordinating the efforts and resources of the member states composing the group. In particular, they may support the preparation, elaboration and evaluation of relevant EU policies within a specific dossier. On the other hand, by coordinating their activities with EU institutions and the rest of the member states, the members of the informal groupings can access the wide range of EU resources. The latter include not only EU instruments and financial assets, but also member states' personnel and diplomatic networks.²⁹ Added to this, disputes among the members of these groupings and the rest of the EU member states would inevitably hinder their authority *vis-à-vis* third parties.

Within this context, it is possible to identify a series of relevant informal groupings occurring outside the EU framework and dealing with policies targeting the EU neighbourhood in the post-Lisbon era. In the next sections, I will offer an overview of the types and functioning of the most relevant informal groupings occurring outside the EU formal institutional framework but shaping EU foreign policy towards Europe's Eastern and the Southern neighbourhood. These will be informal

groupings whose qualifying features have been stable for a period of time long enough to allow for an examination that would lead to generalisable findings. Therefore, the analysis will focus only on the role of informal groupings within formalised settings of international cooperation.

3.2 Looking Towards the East

The Ukrainian crisis offers two relevant examples of how informal groupings existing outside the EU framework, but remaining connected to it, can shape EU foreign policy. After the beginning of the protests in Kiev, the violent repression of civilians and the annexation of Crimea, member states could not find an agreement on the strategies to adopt towards Ukraine.

Normandy Format. Within the Normandy Format, an informal group of two member states – Germany and France – steered the EU response to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, by cooperating with Russia and Ukraine while maintaining a constant connection with the EU broader foreign policy framework. This Format, which was launched in July 2013 shortly after the Russian annexation of Crimea, aimed at ensuring a peaceful resolution of the Ukrainian conflict through the Minsk Process. Notably, France and Germany did not receive a formal mandate from EU institutions to shape the EU's response to the destabilisation of Ukraine. Still, the informal group they composed remained tightly connected to EU institutions, especially the European Council, throughout such negotiations.³⁰

CESEC. The Central East South Europe Gas Connectivity High Level Group (CESEC) represents the second example.³¹ On this occasion, however, a consensus existed within the European

²⁸ Keukeleire, S. (2006) 'EU Core Groups. Specialization and Division of Labour in EU Foreign Policy', CEPS, Working Document No. 252; Sepos, A. (2010) 'Foreign and security policies: "trilateral" Europe?' in Dyson, K. and Sepos, A. (eds.), *Which Europe? The Politics of Differentiated Integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 308-321.

²⁹ Hill, C. (2011) 'The big three and the High Representative: Dilemmas of leadership inside and outside the EU' in Blavoukos, S. and Bourantonis, D. (eds.) *The EU Presence in International Organizations* (London and New York: Routledge).

³⁰ Amadio Vicéré, M. G. (2018) *The High Representative and EU Foreign Policy Integration. A Comparative Study of Kosovo and Ukraine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

³¹ European Commission (2015) 'Joint Press Statement by Ministers and Representatives of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia and the European Commission', 9 February. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_15_4281.

Council over EU support for Ukraine's reforms in the energy sector.³² Within this consensus, the European Commission and an informal group of member states – composed of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia – established the CESEC in February 2015. In the energy sector, particularly in the Ukrainian case, these member states integrated their efforts in coordination with EU institutions. While doing so, they interacted with third actors. Such actors included nine contracting parties of the Energy Community, among which was Ukraine.³³

The Quint. EU foreign policy towards the Western Balkans witnesses the occurrence of other two informal groupings steering the EU approach to its neighbourhood. The first informal group predated the Lisbon Treaty. Ever since the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, France, Germany, Italy and the UK – alongside the US – coordinated their efforts towards this region, within an international contact group: The Quint.³⁴

In the post-Lisbon era, the informal group of member states participating in the Quint essentially shaped the EU approach to the Western Balkans. Although divisions among member states within the European Council persisted over Kosovo's recognition, they all agreed on the need to stabilise the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo by linking their accession into the EU to the normalisation of their relationship.³⁵ Within this general consensus, the members of the Quint were at the forefront of the EU approach on Kosovo,

supporting High Representative's Catherine Ashton's brokering of the talks between Belgrade and Pristina.

The Berlin Process. At the same time, within the Berlin Process, an informal grouping of member states, composed of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia and the UK, cooperated, alongside EU representatives, with the Western Balkans countries interested in joining the EU. The Berlin Process was established in summer 2014 upon an initiative of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel right after the European Commission's declaration that there would be no further EU enlargement for the 2014–2019 period.³⁶

"The establishment of the Berlin Process can be ascribed to the enlargement fatigue the EU had been experiencing for years."

The establishment of the Berlin Process can be ascribed to the enlargement fatigue the EU had been experiencing for years.³⁷ Such fatigue, in turn, originated from a series of factors, among which were as follows: an introverted attitude of the EU in light of the eurozone crisis; the long-lasting divisions among member states over the accession of new countries (e.g. Kosovo's recognition); and the more recent divisions stemming from the geopolitical tensions in the Eastern neighbourhood due to the Ukrainian crisis. Against this backdrop, the aim of the Berlin Process was to revitalise the European

³² European Council (2014) 'Conclusions'. Brussels, 24 October. <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-169-2014-INIT/en/pdf>.

³³ European Commission (2020) 'Central and South Eastern Europe energy connectivity'. 1 October. https://ec.europa.eu/energy/topics/infrastructure/high-level-groups/central-and-south-eastern-europe-energy-connectivity_en.

³⁴ Gegout, C. (2002) 'The Quint: Acknowledging the Existence of a Big Four-US Directoire at the Heart of the European Union's Foreign Policy Decision-Making Process', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2): 331-344.

³⁵ Amadio Viceré, M. G. (2016) 'The roles of the President of the European Council and the High Representative in leading EU foreign policy on Kosovo', *Journal of European Integration*, 38(5): 557-570.

³⁶ European Western Balkans (2014) 'Reform speed decides timing of EU accession'. European Western Balkans, 26 August. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2014/08/26/merkel-reform-speeddecides-timing-of-eu-accession/>.

³⁷ EU Business (2014) 'Juncker to halt enlargement as EU Commission head'. Strasbourg, 14 July. [https://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29#:~:text=\(STRASBOURG\)%20%2D%20The%20European%20Union,up%20to%20a%20confirmation%20vote](https://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29#:~:text=(STRASBOURG)%20%2D%20The%20European%20Union,up%20to%20a%20confirmation%20vote).

integration of the Western Balkans. Crucially, not only did such a process formally include EU institutions, but it also took place through the overt support of the European Commission.³⁸

3.3 Looking Towards the South

EU foreign policy towards the Southern neighbourhood offers at least three other relevant examples of informal groupings shaping the EU's approach to conflict and crises by interacting with third actors within international contact groups. Two of them can be found in the Libyan case.

Friends of Libya Group. An informal group of EU member states cooperated with third actors within the Friends of Libya Group during the first phases of the Libyan conflict. This group, composed of Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden, participated in the Friends of Libya Group together with the EU High Representative. The Friends of Libya Group was established in March 2011, against the backdrop of constant divisions among EU member states within the European Council on strategies to adopt towards the Libyan crisis.³⁹ Its composition was quite extensive. In fact, the Group consisted of 28 member countries, 16 observer countries, and 6 international organisations (i.e., Arab League; EU; Gulf Cooperation Council; NATO; Organisation for Islamic Cooperation; United Nations).

Initially, the Friends of Libya Group's main aim was to support the Libyan National Transitional Council throughout the conflict leading to the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi.⁴⁰ Within this setting, the above-mentioned informal group of EU member states and EU institutions cooperated especially with the US and members of the Arab League towards this common end. After Gaddafi's

fall in the autumn of the same year, the Group was turned into a forum for coordinating the activities of donors to Libya, particularly the European support to the post-Gaddafi governments.⁴¹

The International Contact Group on Libya.

The second relevant example in the Libyan case is an informal group of member states composed of France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK. This informal group has been conducting its activities within the International Contact Group on Libya alongside EU institutions ever since 2014. The International Contact Group on Libya was initially established by the African Union to coordinate international efforts aimed at promoting peace and reconciliation in Libya.⁴² Within this Contact Group, EU member states have been interacting with delegates from the African Union, the Arab League, the United Nations and Northern African Countries to address Libya's instability and the issues stemming from it. Among others, such issues included terrorism and migration.

"In fact, these member states often succeeded in defining a general direction for other member states to follow [...]"

Most importantly, while participating in this Contact Group the informal group of EU member states influenced EU foreign policy towards Libya.⁴³ In fact, these member states often succeeded in defining a general direction for other member states to follow by coordinating their efforts with other countries and international actors within the Contact Group on Libya beforehand. In particular, they did so through continuous consultations and information sharing, by hosting international

³⁸ Marciacq, F. The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty, Sarajevo, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Dialogue Southeast Europe, 2017, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/sarajevo/13948.pdf>.

³⁹ Koenig, N. (2014) 'Between conflict management and role conflict: The EU in the Libyan crisis', *European Security*, 23(3): 250-269.

⁴⁰ UK Government (2011) 'London Conference on Libya'. 29 March. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/london-conference-on-libya>.

⁴¹ Mezran, K. and Varvelli, A. (eds.) (2017) *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis* (Milan: LediPublishing).

⁴² African Union (AU) (2014) 'The African Union concerned by the Upsurge of Violence in Libya'. Adis Ababa, 22 October. <https://archives.au.int/handle/123456789/6215>.

⁴³ Mezran, K. and Varvelli, A. (2017) 'Libyan Crisis: International Actors at Play' in Mezran, K. and Varvelli, A. (eds.) *Foreign Actors in Libya's Crisis* (Milano: Ledizioni Ledi Publishing), 13-23.

gatherings,⁴⁴ and by releasing joint statements on relevant issues in the Libyan dossier.⁴⁵

The Friends of Syria Group. The Syrian crisis witnesses the establishment of another informal grouping of EU member states occurring in EU foreign policy towards Europe's southern neighbourhood, the Friends of Syria Group. This Group was established in 2012, upon a French initiative, after Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution enshrining a peace plan for Syria.⁴⁶ Together with the High Representative and the EEAS, France, Germany, Italy and the UK interacted with other members of the Friends of Syria Group. Among others, these included more than 60 countries and international organisations, such as the UN, the League of Arab States, the EU, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab Maghreb Union

and the Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States.⁴⁷ While member states' divisions prevented the EU from exerting influence during the Syrian war, these member states steered EU response to its humanitarian implications in coordination with the other members of the Friends of Syria Group.⁴⁸

4 The Implications

An assessment of the phenomenon of informal groupings and of their implications can be conducted through two main criteria. These criteria correspond to basic dilemmas of collective action stemming from the pre-eminence of intergovernmental features within EU foreign policy governance post-Lisbon. Such dilemmas can be identified as the main pitfalls of the foreign and security policy domain in the post-Lisbon era, namely, its effectiveness and its accountability.

Table 1 Groupings of member states within and outside the EU's institutional framework.

	Within EU institutional framework	Outside/loosely connected to EU institutional framework
Formal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhanced co-operation (TEU, Art. 20) Permanent structured co-operation (TEU, Art. 42 and 46) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Execution of a specific task by a group of member states (TEU, Art. 42 and 44)
Informal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visegrad Group Temporary Solidarity Mechanism for Asylum-Seekers and Migrants Nordic-Baltic Cooperation in Security and Defence Nordic EU Member States within the Development Sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Normandy Format Central East South Europe Gas Connectivity High Level Group Group on Informal Dialogue on the Balkans Quint Berlin Process Friends of Libya Group International Contact Group on Libya Friends of Syria Group

⁴⁴ Al Jazeera (2015) 'Foreign ministers in Rome push for Libya unity deal', 14 December. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/14/foreign-ministers-in-rome-push-for-libya-unity-deal>.

⁴⁵ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale (2016) 'Joint statement on Libya by the Governments of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, the UK and the United States'. 7 June. https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/2016/07/dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-libia_9.html.

⁴⁶ United Nations Security Council (UNSC) (2012) 'Security Council Fails to Adopt Draft Resolution on Syria as Russian Federation, China Veto Text Supporting Arab League's Proposed Peace Plan'. New York, 4 February. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/sc10536.doc.htm>.

⁴⁷ Friends of Syria Group (FSG) (2012a) 'Group of Friends of the Syrian People: 1st Conference'. Tunis, 24 February. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48418?lang=en>.

⁴⁸ French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (2019) 'Syria – Humanitarian assistance – France's participation in the Brussels III Conference'. Paris, 12–14 March. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/article/syria-humanitarian-assistance-france-s-participation-in-the-brussels-iii>; Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (2014) 'Syria: Humanitarian conference in Rome on 3 February, announces Bonino'. Rome, 13 January. https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/approfondimenti/20140113_siriacofumanitaria.html.

4.1 EU foreign policy effectiveness

Scholars claim that the EU institutional structure cannot work in an efficient way when immediate costs of intervening to address specific foreign policy issues are not equally distributed among national governments. Indeed, EU intergovernmental negotiations in the foreign policy sector generally consist of hard bargaining among member states about the distribution of the gains deriving from the adoption of specific policies.⁴⁹ At the same time, however, in highly divisive policy dossiers where member states generally have conflicting preferences,⁵⁰ governments often prefer that other governments pay the financial and adjustment costs deriving from EU policies – or lack thereof. On the one hand, these situations might lead to policy deadlocks within the European Council. On the other, bigger member states – generally France, Germany and, in the past, the UK – might exert their pre-eminence over other member state, particularly the small and medium-sized countries who generally bear scant bargaining power.

The EU foreign policy towards Europe's Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods in the post-Lisbon era clearly illustrates these dynamics. As anticipated above, member states often held diverging preferences about the EU collective response to the multiple crises and conflicts occurred within these regional settings. Given their geopolitical location, southern EU member states were keener on stabilising the Middle Eastern and Northern African region and tempering the negative spill overs stemming from the difficult political transition that followed the 2010–2011 Arab uprising. Eastern and Northern European countries, in turn, were more intent on allocating their resources and efforts to the post-Soviet space and the Western Balkans. Inevitably, these divisions had considerable consequences for the effectiveness of EU foreign policy towards these regional settings.

In fact, not only EU foreign policy decision-making processes are based on the principle of unanimity, but EU foreign policy implementation is mostly carried out through the pooling and coordination of national decentralised resources.

"[...] it is very likely that the formation of specific informal groupings will reflect compromises among member states' preferences that are more cost-effective than any other possible solutions."

Against this backdrop, the occurrence of informal groupings may have positive implications for EU foreign policy effectiveness. By reducing and circumventing policy deadlocks within EU intergovernmental forums, informal groupings may render EU foreign policy's decision-making processes quicker and increase the likelihood that member states will devote their resources to the achievement of EU's objectives in international politics.⁵¹ In fact, since member states have a prominent role in EU foreign policy and are purposive actors, it is very likely that the formation of specific informal groupings will reflect compromises among member states' preferences that are more cost-effective than any other possible solutions.⁵²

The establishment of the Normandy Format in the Ukrainian case clearly illustrates these dynamics. At the time, member states held diverging preferences over Moscow's stance in the post-Soviet space. While some of them would have liked a firm EU response to Russia's destabilisation of Eastern Europe, others feared that an EU intervention would have led to an escalation of the conflict with Moscow. Yet they all agreed on the need to stabilise

⁴⁹ Moravcsik, A. (1998) *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht* (Abingdon: Routledge).

⁵⁰ See Walton, R. E. and McKersie, R. B. (1965) *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations: An Analysis of a Social Interaction System* (New York: McGraw-Hill).

⁵¹ Héritier, A. (1997) 'Policy-making by subterfuge: interest accommodation, innovation and substitute democratic legitimisation in Europe – perspective from distinctive policy areas', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 4(2): 171-189.

⁵² Moravcsik, A. and Schimmelfennig, F. (2018) 'Liberal Intergovernmentalism' in Wiener, A. Börzel, T. A. and Risse, T. (eds.) *European Integration Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ukraine.⁵³ Addressing the Russian activities in Eastern Ukraine via the Normandy Format, through a synchronisation of the EU sanctions against Russia with the implementation of the Minsk Process, represented a suitable compromise between such factions.

Considering the above, small and middle-sized EU member states, such as Sweden, may benefit more than others from the occurrence of informal groupings in EU foreign policy governance. By establishing and/or participating in informal groupings, these member states can pursue their strategic preferences while benefitting from the EU's general resources and legitimacy *vis-à-vis* international actors. In particular, they may pursue foreign policy objectives that they consider relevant even if the rest of the member states do not share the same consideration.

As a matter of fact, informal groupings generally develop when a restricted number of member states has the interest, expertise and capabilities to address specific foreign policy issues, while other member states lack interest, but do accept that others would take the lead in a specific foreign policy dossier.⁵⁴

Nordic countries, for instance, have traditionally pursued an approach of 'international solidarism' aimed at overcoming the global North-South divide. By acting as norm advocates within the United Nations and the African Union, these small member states essentially influenced larger member states and EU foreign policy towards Africa more in general.⁵⁵ Within this context, it is also relevant to note that the positive spill overs of the activities carried out by informal groupings involving small and/or middle-sized countries may increase the effectiveness of EU foreign policy as a

whole. For example, as it happened with the above-mentioned informal group of Nordic countries, those member states may indirectly contribute to the implementation of the principles and values the EU committed to promote in international politics, *as per* TEU, Art. 3.5.

4.2 EU foreign policy accountability

A necessary condition for polities to be democratically legitimate is that those 'responsible' for devising such policies can be 'publicly held to account'.⁵⁶ Given that the EU is a compound polity,⁵⁷ identifying who responsible political actors are might not be as straightforward as in the case of national entities. Added to this, not only is the role of the European Parliament mostly excluded from EU foreign policy-making processes, but its marginality at the EU level is generally aggravated by the limited role played by national parliaments in domestic foreign policy-making processes. Crucially, these dynamics have led to an overall absence of public opinion from decisions on how to respond to the multiple foreign policy crises that occurred in Europe's neighbourhood in the post-Lisbon era. Such absence was particularly evident in the EU response to the Libyan crisis, which was essentially led by national governments – especially France and the UK – without a significant control by the European Parliament.⁵⁸

"[...] informal groupings lack mechanisms for ensuring accountability [...]"

Bearing this in mind, it is reasonable to argue that since informal groupings lack mechanisms for ensuring accountability, they are likely to decrease the already limited general accountability of EU

⁵³ Amadio Viceré, M. G. (2020) 'Looking towards the East: The High Representative's role in EU foreign policy on Kosovo and Ukraine', *European Security*, 29(3): 337-358.

⁵⁴ Delreux, T. and Keukeleire, S. (2017) 'Informal division of labour in EU foreign policy-making', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 24(10): 1471-1490.

⁵⁵ Olsen, G. R. (2013) The European Union's Africa Policy: The Result of Nordicization or Europeanization? *Journal of European Integration*, 35(4): 409-424.

⁵⁶ Rittberger, B., Schwarzenbeck, H. and Zangl, B. (2017) 'Where Does the Buck Stop? Explaining Public Responsibility Attributions in Complex International Institutions', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 55(4): 909-924, p. 909.

⁵⁷ Fabbrini, S. (2011) *Compound Democracies: Why the United States and Europe Are Becoming Similar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁵⁸ Fabbrini, S. (2014) 'The European Union and the Libyan crisis', *International Politics*, 51(2): 177-195.

foreign policy.⁵⁹ Indeed, it is particularly difficult to attribute political responsibility for policies of sectors that are characterised by the occurrence of such groupings. In fact, while these policies are decided only by the member states participating in the relevant groupings, they have externalities also on those that are excluded from them. This is even the more so for small and middle-sized member states. The latter are more likely to find themselves facing the implications of decisions made by other, larger member states. Given that they generally have fewer resources than larger member states, they are less capable of joining informal groupings.⁶⁰

"The case of Kosovo can provide crucial insights on the implications of these institutional practices for Sweden."

The case of Kosovo can provide crucial insights on the implications of these institutional practices for Sweden. While Sweden is a traditional supporter of enlargement,⁶¹ Stockholm is also worried about Serbia's reluctance to give up its special relationship with Russia.⁶² Among other factors, such reluctance might eventually hinder the EU-brokered talks between Belgrade and Pristina, which are tied to the accession of both Kosovo and Serbia to the EU. Nonetheless, Sweden is neither part of the Quint nor a member of the Berlin Process.

To sum up, the occurrence of informal groupings in EU foreign policy post-Lisbon clearly points to an increasing complexity, if not fragmentation, of its governance. Informal groupings seem to respond to the EU's need for more efficient

policies in an increasingly complex geopolitical scenario. Nonetheless, these distinctive patterns of interaction among member states cannot be considered as a panacea for the EU foreign policy's pre-eminently intergovernmental logic, and the ensuing absence of an efficient apparatus for supporting EU activities in international politics. Indeed, given the voluntary nature of member states' commitments to pursue specific foreign policy objectives, these groupings may be dissolved at any time. Furthermore, such a potential increase of effectiveness comes at a price of a decrease of the general accountability of EU foreign policy. Considering all these aspects, the persistence of informal groupings, as well as the establishment of new ones, in the post-Lisbon era inevitably raise the issue of the need to reform the institutional architecture structuring the functioning of EU foreign policy. Notably, in fact, these groupings proliferated in the post-Lisbon era despite the Lisbon Treaty's attempts to streamline, and centralise, its institutional apparatus, and thus to support a more united and powerful EU in the world.

5 Conclusions

In the last decade, the EU's foreign policy practices have grown increasingly complex. In particular, member states often engaged in patterns of interaction that seemed to contradict the delegation of leadership functions to EU actors, formally envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty in the foreign policy domain. To contribute to the understanding of such patterns of interaction, this paper offered an overview of the types, functioning and implications of informal groupings in EU foreign policy post-Lisbon. Since most of the multiple crises the EU faced in the post-Lisbon era occurred – or are intimately interlinked to – Europe's eastern

⁵⁹ Christiansen, T., Follesdal, A. and Piattoni, S. (2003). 'Informal Governance in the European Union: An Introduction', in Christiansen, T. and Piattoni, S. (eds.), *Informal Governance in the European Union* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar).

⁶⁰ Keukeleire, S. (2006) 'EU Core Groups. Specialization and Division of Labour in EU Foreign Policy', CEPS, Working Document No. 252.

⁶¹ Burazer, N. (2018) 'Strömqvist: Sweden supports EU enlargement, rule of law a priority', in European Western Balkans, 26 April. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2018/04/26/ewb-interview-stromquist-sweden-supports-eu-enlarge-ment-rule-law-priority/>; Filipovic, G. and Savic, M. (2018) 'EU Membership Won't Change Serbian Russian Ties, Vucic Says', in Bloomberg, 21 February. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-21/eu-membership-won-t-change-serbia-s-ties-with-russia-vucic-says>.

⁶² Amadio Viceré, M. G. (2019) 'The Future Is Back. EU, Russia and the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute', in IAI Papers, no. 19/19. Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali, September. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip1919.pdf>

and southern neighbourhood, the overview was conducted with special consideration to these regional settings.

As for the types and functioning of informal groupings, the analysis pointed towards the need to differentiate between informal groupings occurring within the EU foreign policy framework and informal groupings occurring outside such a framework but remaining closely connected to it. Member states' interactions within the EU foreign policy framework over the past decade offer several examples of informal groupings of member states coordinating and pooling their efforts and resources to attain specific objectives. This does not come as a surprise. In other federal unions, such as the US, it is a common practice for federated entities to form *ad hoc* coalitions.

The occurrence of informal groupings outside the EU formal institutional framework, in turn, is puzzling. In fact, in the post-Lisbon era, EU foreign policy towards Europe's neighbourhood witnessed the presence of several informal groupings of EU member states interacting with non-EU actors within international settings (e.g., formats; contact groups). While doing so, these informal groups essentially steered EU foreign policy, without necessarily receiving a mandate from EU institutions to carry out such activities. As the empirical analysis demonstrates, on several occasions these groupings defined a general direction for other member states to follow by influencing the elaboration and supporting the implementation of policies addressing specific foreign policy issues. Hence, they acted as crucial drivers and enforcers of EU responses to conflicts and crises occurring in Europe's neighbourhood, while remaining loosely anchored to EU formal institutional framework.

These informal dynamics of cooperation among EU member states reflect the extent of fragmentation in EU foreign policy governance, despite the

centralisation envisaged by the Lisbon Treaty. As a matter of fact, paradoxically, the main driver behind the formation of informal groupings is precisely the EU foreign policy system of governance. The latter enshrines a tension that constantly mars EU activities in international politics. On the one hand, in an increasingly multipolar and inter-dependent world, member states need to integrate their efforts in the international arena. On the other, they continue to be reluctant to pursue integration in the foreign policy domain because of the relevance of this policy sector for their national prerogatives and the decreasing consensus over the EU in their national constituencies.

"[...] informal groupings can be considered as manifestations of coping strategies devised by EU member states – and at times institutions – to address such a tension on a contingency basis."

Consequently, although member states committed to a progressive Europeanisation of their national foreign policies, EU foreign policy governance is characterised by a pre-eminence of intergovernmental practises to allow their control over it. This pre-eminence sets fertile ground for the occurrence of stalemates within EU intergovernmental forums and inefficiencies in the implementation of EU foreign policies. Against this backdrop, informal groupings can be considered as manifestations of coping strategies devised by EU member states – and at times institutions – to address such a tension on a contingency basis.⁶³

Indeed, at first sight, these groupings could serve as the main drivers of EU foreign policy in the future. Accepting – and even fostering – multi-speed

⁶³ See Genschel, P. and Jachtenfuchs M. (2018) 'From Market Integration to Core State Powers: The Eurozone Crisis, the Refugee Crisis and Integration Theory', *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56(1): 178-196.

clusters of member states is often advocated as a suitable solution for the future of EU governance.⁶⁴ As discussed, informal groupings may have positive implications in terms of EU foreign policy effectiveness. Overall, in fact, they can provide responses to conflicts and crises while the EU intergovernmental forums are deadlocked. At the same time, they may allow small and middle-size member states not to be left aside during intergovernmental bargaining processes, as well as to benefit from EU resources and international legitimacy.

By increasing the effectiveness of EU foreign policy, these groupings may also strengthen the EU stance in the international arena, and hence its ability to be a strategically autonomous actor. While ‘strategic autonomy’ has become the mantra of EU foreign policy post-Lisbon in the context of the 2016 EU Global Strategy, achieving such an autonomy in its approach to the eastern and southern neighbourhood would be particularly relevant for the EU. In fact, while the US is progressively and inexorably disengaging from

Europe’s surroundings, it is very likely that the negative implications of the Covid-19 pandemic will further destabilise these areas.

[...] these distinctive patterns of interaction inevitably put the spotlight on the urgent need to reform EU governance, especially in the foreign policy domain.”

Nevertheless, these distinctive patterns of interaction inevitably put the spotlight on the urgent need to reform EU governance, especially in the foreign policy domain. On the one hand, informal groupings as they stand can only serve short-term purposes. On the other, their occurrence and functioning is marred by a general lack of accountability, which inevitably further aggravates the lack of democratic legitimacy of EU activities in the international arena.

⁶⁴ Schmidt, V. (2019) ‘The future of differentiated integration: A ‘soft-core,’ multi-clustered Europe of overlapping policy communities’, *Comparative European Politics*, 17(2): 294-315.