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European Union's Actorness Amid the Weakening Liberal International Order in the Fields of Trade, Digital Sovereignty and Conflict Resolution

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the implications for the EU's global actorness stemming from the weakening Liberal International Order (LIO). It elaborates on the autonomous actions that the EU pursues as a response to this particular structural change. The analysis centres on four actorness criteria (Wunderlich 2011), i.e. EU's internal self-understanding and external recognition (both forming the EU's institutional identity), the EU's international presence and the EU's capability (interest, instruments) to establish how the EU adjusted in these elements. To verify this adjustment, we investigate three fields of international cooperation where the EU has developed different levels of its actorness institutionalisation, namely international trade, regulation of digital technology and international conflict resolution. Empirical results reveal that the EU has responded to the weakening LIO by adding a geopolitical dimension to its normative self-understanding, grounding this new identity in a concept of strategic autonomy in all three policy areas. Yet, in the pursuit of an autonomous international action, there is high tension between liberal values and pragmatic competitiveness or geopolitical interest revealed in all three cases. EU's presence and international recognition are higher if this tension is lower, especially when the EU is capable to speak with one voice, such as in the case of trade and resolution of Russian aggression on Ukraine. Contrary, reconciling trade competition, digital innovation and security demands with democracy, multilateralism and respect of international law remains a critical challenge, especially when the EU's capability is internally inconsistent.

Keywords: EU, international liberal order, international trade, digital sovereignty, conflict resolution

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1. Introduction

The EU started to enact its actorness on the international scene in the form of trade and development of cooperation-based external relations in the 1960s. After the disastrous manifestation of its capability-expectation gap (Hill 1993) in the 1990s, that unfolded in the form of its poor handling of conflict resolution in the post-Yugoslav space, the organisation has increasingly adapted to the major structural transformation of the international system, namely hegemonic rise of the Liberal International Order (LIO) brought by the end of the Cold War. This period represented an opportunity for the EU, which it successfully seized and established a hegemonic position in Europe and in some of the international regimes and areas of global governance. In this way, the EU became a normative power (at least in its neighbourhood), a market power, a civilian power and an environmental hegemon. Although the EU was often estimated to be an “economic giant-political dwarf” (Medrano, 1999), Ginsberg was one of the first to challenge these conventional IR depictions, dismissing the label of “political pygmy” as invalid given the EU’s substantial external political influence (Ginsberg, 2001).

However, since late 2010s America’s fast democratic backsliding, trade protectionism and turn away from multilateralism towards unpredictable bilateralism under both Trump administrations contributed to the intense crumble of the LIO. Another complementary factor, such as Brexit, also weakened EU’s position in the UN Security Council, World Trade Organization (WTO) and in the mainly European centred defence alliance NATO. All these further changed the EU’s hegemonic position amid the weakening LIO.¹ Amid the Russian aggression on Ukraine and Israeli military campaign with elements of genocide in Gaza, the EU’s capability is

¹ LIO is not only challenged by the weakening democratic regime in the USA, but also by the growing autocratization in illiberal democracies (e.g. BRICS group) and also liberal democracies in the very EU (e.g. Chatterjee & Naka, 2022; Wodak, 2019; Nord et al. 2025). This aspect, intensely researched, falls beyond the focus of this article.

no longer self-limited. Even though in the case of sanctions against Russia the EU's willingness has been highly consistent and despite the EU's struggle to speak with one voice on the war in Gaza, it shows a steady effort on denying Israel a position of understanding, let alone support. There is a plethora of studies revealing how the EU as a global actor has responded to international crises (economic and financial, Crimean, migration, Brexit, COVID-19, Russian war in Ukraine and re-manifestation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict). Conversely, this article tackles the issue of EU adjustment and development of its global actorness amid the weakening LIO, which in the last 15 years became one of the rare permanent features of global order.

In this paper, we focus on autonomous actions that the EU pursues as a response to particular changes in the LIO. As for the selected fields of world politics, we have turned to three areas which have been highly impacted by the crumbling LIO. This process features the abandoning of the value of multilateralism, returning to great power politics or even unilateralism, curtailing the liberal principle of open free trade by "tariff wars," and neglecting the value of international law (Ikenberry, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2019; Hočevár et al., 2023). Lake et al. (2021) demonstrate not only the weakened features of LIO, but also how dysfunctional it has already become. Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska Bazerkoska (2024) show that, due to changes in world order, the EU actorness adaptations have been to support multipolar international system, multilateral governance, and ground its actions in principles of international (and more specifically, EU) law. Even though the EU has been the pioneer of interregionalism in trade, development and democracy-promotion, it has conducted these aspects of its actorness as complementary to inclusive and universal UN-based multilateralism rather than as an alternative mode of global governance. In its founding and other primary documents, the EU has always supported the UN system (Bouchard and Drieskens, 2013). The EU thus favours a well-functioning multilateral world order, which requires "a certain degree of institutionalisation that

counters unilateral action, limited bilateral solutions, or ill-considered political or military reactions which aggravate sensitive security situations” (Hettne, 2005, p. 560). This directly counters the recent development in the weakening LIO and thus merits research attention.

We analyse the EU’s actorness via basic criteria of actorness as outlined by Wunderlich (2011), namely: institutional identity, international presence, institutionalisation and capability. We focus on how the EU adjusted its global actorness by considering structural changes inflicted on diverse fields of international cooperation, such as international trade, regulation of digital technology and conflict resolution within international peace and security. These are selected as policy areas where the EU has developed three different levels of its actorness institutionalisation. Our aim is to understand how the EU has interpreted and responded to structural conditions in the weakening LIO within these three international fields. First, the paper assesses the issues connected with open international trade, where, under the external dimension of the common commercial policy, the EU has exclusive competences and the longest-practicing actorness. Second, we examine the EU’s actorness on the issues of digital sovereignty, which falls under the external dimension of its common market policy and human rights promotion, where the EU has shared competences with the Member States. Finally, we turn to the international conflict resolution, where the EU has supporting competences within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), an area where the EU has faced diverse results in addressing the Russian war in Ukraine since 2022 and the Israeli offensive in Gaza and Lebanon after the Hamas attacks of 2023. Finally, The EU’s normative contributions and actions vis-à-vis contemporary challenges in the three international fields will be examined via legal and content analysis of primary and secondary sources of EU’s origin and from relevant international settings (regimes, international governmental organisations, such as the UN, WTO, the EU primary and secondary legislation and statements by relevant EU institutions).

2. Analysing EU Actorness

Wunderlich (2011) defines actorness by four criteria: institutional identity (i.e. an internal self-understanding or identity and external recognition), international presence (i.e. the capacity to actively influence the external environment), institutionalisation (of which a continuum exists of a lower level – informal institutionalisation and higher level – legalised institutionalisation) and capability (i.e. projection of interests via policy instruments to achieve outcomes). Similarly, these criteria have already been interpreted, although at a more basic level, by Bretherton and Vogler (2006), Ginsberg (1999) and initially by Sjøsted (1977). The former defined EU actorness as a capability developed as a response to an opportunity and with a “side effect” of presence – an unintentional influence achieved only by the existence of the EU in the form of third actors’ perception of the EU (Bretherton and Vogler, 2006, pp. 25–27). Most studies of EU actorness have focused on capability, exposing the EU’s gap stemming from internal behavioural limitations in comparison to states (e.g. Sjøsted 1977) or originating from external and internal expectations (Hill, 1993).

Bretherton and Vogler (2006) have moved towards structurally-driven analysis of actorness, taking into consideration features of the international system more than internal capabilities. In essence, actorness – theorised as agency or structure driven – necessitates the autonomy of the aforementioned actor. We shall thus operationalise structurally-driven actorness as the EU’s autonomous actions in the following elements of actorness (Wunderlich, 2011): 1. EU institutional identity as an internal self-understanding and as external recognition, measured in EU self-definition in international arenas, and responses to that by relevant international actors. 2. EU international presence, namely its capacity to actively influence the external environment, such as the UN Organisation, the UN system and relevant international regimes. 3. EU capability, i.e. projection of EU interests via policy instruments to achieve outcomes, whereby we will estimate policy coherence

and consistency (EU's ability to speak with one voice and act complementarily in different international policy arenas). We shall take the EU's institutionalisation of a selected policy field as a known element, as EU's legal competences in the selected policy fields (trade, digitalisation and conflict resolution) are known. We present this conceptual model and its operationalisation in Table 1.

FIELD OF WORLD POLITICS		TRADE	DIGITALISATION	CONFLICT RESOLUTION
<i>Element of EU actorness</i>				
<i>EU' institutional identity</i>	<i>internal self- understanding</i>	self-definition and positioning in EU primary law, decisions and strategic documents		
	<i>external recognition</i>	WTO	UN GA debate	UN debate and decisions on war in Ukraine and Gaza
<i>international presence</i>		WTO procedures	trade regime, IOS, ITU, IETF, IEEE	humanitarian and conflict mitigation
<i>capability (interests, instruments)</i>		goals and tools provisioned in EU strategic documents		

Table 1: *Analytical elements and operationalisation of EU actorness*
Source: own upgrade based on Wunderlich (2011)

In the following part, we analyse how the EU has been developing its actorness dealing with three areas which have been highly affected by the crumbling LIO: a) international trade, b) digital sovereignty, and c) international conflict resolution.

3. EU Actorness in the Contemporary Weakening LIO

While immanent individual global crises (i.e. economic and financial, migration, COVID-19) have made the EU initially struggle with coordination and internal unity, these international structural constraints led to greater cooperation within the EU, along with enhanced global engagement. This set the stage for an expanded role in future crises and a rethinking of its global actorness, particularly in health diplomacy and economic resilience. In the process of weakening LIO, the EU's role on the international stage in terms of international trade, regulation of digitalisation and international conflict

resolution was directly challenged by such factors as the continued non-operation of dispute settlement mechanism in the WTO, fast developments in information-communication technology supporting commercialisation of AI, and international conflicts, the Russian war in Ukraine, the Israeli offensive in Gaza and Lebanon after the Hamas attacks, among others.

Moreover, a general development that strongly affected the need for a significant repositioning of the EU's status within the UN and the WTO was the implementation of Brexit in 2020, since the UK holds a permanent seat in the UN Security Council and has a vast global diplomatic and trade presence. While the two sides are no longer part of a common political project, they are deeply interconnected. Therefore, a functional, cooperative relationship is essential for stability, prosperity, and shared influence on the international stage. This notion has become especially relevant with the changing role of the US in the world that became evident with the first and especially the second Trump administration.

3.1 International Trade

After the end of the Cold War, the growing economic and market power of the EU was manifested mainly throughout its WTO membership. When in 1994, the EU became a WTO member, it was perceived as a necessary step for recognition by the international community of the reliability of its own trade policy and manifestation of its presence. The latter was positively enhanced as a result of the EU's decisive role in the development of global trade governance through the creation and development of the WTO and an extensive network of free trade agreements. Today, both the EU and the WTO face numerous challenges and need to reposition themselves with regards to new structural conditions of global trade. It is particularly true in cases of the US pressure with imposing tariffs, the rapid technological changes and the growth of the digital economy, climate change, and the universal values on human rights. This trend in international trade is redefining the EU institutional identity, but also its international presence.

The EU's international presence in the trade arena has been challenged by the strained relationship with the traditionally close ally – the US. Both the first and now the second Trump administration challenged the EU-US partnership and the global trade overall. Challenges to the international trading system had been mounting prior to Trump's first term in office, but the latter was a defining moment, as Trump initiated a more systematic dismantling of norms and rules, while inserting hard geopolitics into the economic realm (Eliasson and Garcia-Duran, 2025). The election of Donald Trump immediately brought a withdrawal of the US from the Transpacific Partnership, a refusal of reappointments or renewals of any WTO Appellate Body member, and a preference for a return to a power-based GATT system (Roberts et al., 2019). The EU relied strongly on the WTO and especially the WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism to project its views on international trade issues. At present, the EU has 14 ongoing disputes with China and 35 ongoing disputes with the US, while it is represented as a third party in 221 cases – which gives the European Commission a stage to articulate EU perspectives on issues pertaining to international trade.² However, the refused reappointments or renewals of any WTO Appellate Body member by the Trump administration lowers the EU's capacity to actively influence the external trade environment throughout the WTO. The US is redefining the international trade system by insisting on bilateral agreements with the countries around the world, rather than to use the multilateral trading rules imposed by the WTO. Moreover, Trump uses trade tariffs to impose USA interests on the rest of the world. His second term started with the imposition of tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China. In April 2025, his administration imposed a 10% baseline tariff on almost all countries and additional, individualised reciprocal tariffs on countries with which the US run a persistent trade deficit. In mid-July, he threatened to impose a 30% tariff on imports from inter alia the EU, starting on the first of August. According to

² https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/dispu_by_country_e.htm.

Trump, the economic security is national security and the goal of the US trade policy should serve to the US to benefit. The Trump decision to revert to “aggressive unilateralism” and pursue a protectionist trade policy, has challenged the EU and completely paralysed the WTO. To sum up, this trend of dismissal of accepted norms, a declining rule of adherence and trade wars, along with geopolitical concerns, have influenced the EU’s international presence twofold: a negative perception of the EU stems from failing as multilateralism, yet a positive perception of the EU stems from its willingness to further value WTO and act itself as a legitimate leader of global liberal trade. In the changed context of international trade within the weakened LIO, especially after the second Trump administration, the EU may be forced to redefine the internal self-understanding.

The EU capability-related reaction to challenges of multilaterally regulated global trade can be observed in the European Commission strategy on trade (2021), which is connected with the EU’s capacity to project its own interests via different policy instruments. It shows how the EU is updating its trade policy. Among other things, there is a strong focus on the review of strategic autonomy, as well as on sustainability and assertiveness (Fahey and Mancini, 2022). The EU’s determination to defend its interests and to ensure that the commitments in its trade agreements are upheld by its trade partners, can be found in the newly institutionalised regime of a Trade Enforcement Officer created in 2020. Furthermore, at the beginning of the Biden administration, the EU together with the US set up the Transatlantic Trade and Technology Council. . The Council set rather high goals to deal with the global challenges in trade and technology with its most significant third country cooperating partner - the US. This new Council represented a new modus operandi for the EU to engage with complex partners, comprising executive to executive engagement, meeting agency counterparts regularly in close groups in an era of EU trade policy deepening its stakeholder and civil society domain overall, leading the EU, like US trade law, to the use of executive-led soft law (Fahey, 2024). Despite the fact that this Council was a

projection of the EU's ability to act coherently in protecting its international trade interests, the Council's overall future is uncertain due to the political changes in the US.

In this context, trade has become a much higher profile policy area for the EU. The EU, as a significant global trade actor, again faces the need to design appropriate responses to international trade conflicts and tensions and to increase its capability. This task seems to be quite complicated given that trade policies increasingly include dimensions of security. In the summer of 2025, the US and the EU agreed on a deal on tariffs and trade, recalling that the transatlantic partnership is a key route of global trade. The agreement came fast and as a reaction to the EU's need to balance US interests in the Ukraine war, which was considered as a decisive moment to conclude the trade agreement. According to the European Council President António Costa, the war in Ukraine was a factor in the EU's accepting its much-criticised trade deal with the US.³ Although the EU is strongly opposed to the return of tariffs, it has experienced escalating tensions with a key ally over tariffs, while the Eastern border is under threat, to be an irresponsible risk. The European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen defended the agreement, arguing it was a conscious decision that avoided a trade war.

The EU's answer to the continuous problem with the US under the Trump administration, which has proven to be a highly unreliable, unpredictable and unstable trading partner so far,⁴ is to adjust itself to the rapid changes of the international trade order. The European leaders unanimously accepted the 15 percent tariff because it is better than the threatened 30 percent, but one certain outcome of this deal that will follow is that it will further incentivise the EU to turn toward a version of economic security, which is cautious of

³ 'Costa breaks ranks on EU-US trade deal, fires warning shot at Trump', *Politico*, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/antonio-costa-eu-us-trade-deal-warning-shots-donald-trump/>.

⁴ While the deal was announced on 27 July, and a joint statement with the EU issued on 21 August, less than a week thereafter Trump announced he will impose additional tariffs on all countries upholding digital taxes, legislation, rules or regulations.

the US. The EU will put even more energy into opening other markets and ensuring that they are not dependent on the partner across the Atlantic. Although, in the pursuit of such autonomous international action, there is a high tension between liberal values and pragmatic competitiveness, the EU's presence and positive international recognition are still high, especially since the EU is able to speak with one voice in this particular area. Moreover, in this new era of deeper trade, the role of the EU, as a longstanding proponent of multilateralism, is to offer leadership once again in strengthening and defence of the rules-based multilateral trading system.

3.2 Digital Sovereignty

The area of digital sovereignty development is widely perceived as geopolitically and economically crucial for the coming decades. Technological advances are merging the physical, digital and biological worlds in ways that create both huge promise and a potential threat. The EU has successfully grasped the regulation of the digital aspect of the market and assurance of human rights. As Bradford pithily observes, the EU has been adopting its own human-centric and rights-driven approach to digital regulation vis-à-vis market-centred US strategy and state-centred China's digital sovereignty strategy (Bradford, 2023). The EU's approach focusses on enhancing the individual and collective rights of European citizens and views governments as the entity playing a central role in both steering the digital economy and using regulatory intervention to uphold the fundamental rights of individuals, preserve the democratic structures of society, and ensure a fair distribution of benefits in the digital economy. The EU identifies democracy, fairness, and fundamental rights as key values guiding its policymaking, and are directly engrained in the EU's regulatory instruments with the goal of ushering in a human-centric, democracy-enhancing, rights-preserving, and redistributive digital economy where technology is harnessed for human empowerment (Bradford, 2023). This points to an initial observation that the EU remains highly devoted to its normative self-understanding and has

already gained external recognition of this type of digital sovereignty actor. In this policy field, the EU thus strengthens its institutional identity as a global actor.

As per capability-building, the EU endorsed the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, and decided on the EU 5G Toolbox to assure cybersecurity governance (Renda, 2021). The EU is the first political community to have produced regulation of AI - the EU AI Act was endorsed in April 2024.⁵ In this document, the above-mentioned self-identification as a global actor stems from EU self-definition vis-à-vis AI as a Union that values and promotes the uptake of human-centric and trustworthy AI, and ensures a high level of protection of health, safety and fundamental rights (AI Act, Preamble, 1). The standard of fundamental rights observation is not defined through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the UN GA resolution with a status of general international customary law) but as "enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union including democracy, the rule of law and environmental protection, to protect against the harmful effects of AI systems in the Union, and to support innovation" (ibid.). This shows that the EU is aware of its unique understanding of fundamental rights and has linked the use of AI to its fundamental rights-complementary understanding. This gives the EU a strong capability to pursue leadership on the question of global governance in the digital market and AI issues and boosts its positive presence as an element of actorness, yet only with like-minded – liberal democracy-supporting countries. Due to the political importance of AI, the EU response to these emerging technologies reflects broader external policies.

The EU is not an AI industry leader, barring exceptions in given sectors such as industrial robot production. Research, production and marketing of AI

⁵ Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence and amending Regulations (EC) No 300/2008, (EU) No 167/2013, (EU) No 168/2013, (EU) 2018/858, (EU) 2018/1139 and (EU) 2019/2144 and Directives 2014/90/EU, (EU) 2016/797 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Artificial Intelligence Act) (Text with EEA relevance), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj/eng>.

applications are global endeavours conducted by multinational companies that control the necessary digital and physical assets: data, computing capacity and algorithms. In other words, the EU and its Member States have little direct power to shape AI future trajectory and how it in turn transforms wider society and impacts national and regional interests (Briganti Dini, 2025). The EU's only practicable option at present is to leverage its normative power and internal market, or the Brussels Effect (Bradford, 2020), despite the attacks from the US Trump administration on its tech regulations, arguing they amount to regulatory overreach and censorship. Currently, the EU's success in this field can be measured in external governance of its immanent neighbours, EU membership aspiring states in the Western Balkans. These countries have been under the influence of the Chinese, the US' and EU digital empires. Some of them have joined US pressure to ban Chinese technologies (e.g. Albania, North Macedonia, Kosovo), while others (e.g. Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) maintain cooperation with Chinese digital companies, often for pragmatic reasons (Vangeli et al., 2025). It is therefore alarming to see that in the countries where EU's LIO supporting stance should have the strongest resonance, the national governments decide to rather hedge between the technological giants at the expense of following fundamental rights protection. Conditionality of liberal norms for extending access to technological access and regulation seems to be a limitation to the EU's positive international presence in digital sovereignty.

Capability-wise, the EU is the weakest on hard technology and digital service provisions. It has relied on American companies for its tech infrastructure, with an estimation that "80 percent of European spending on business cloud and services went to US companies" (Cheslow and Pollet, 2025). In a political debate about whether the EU is capable and willing to break from its dependence on giant US technological companies, in May 2025 it was estimated that creating a European tech stack could cost more than €5 trillion, which exceeds the GDP of the EU's largest economy, Germany, and far exceeds the EU's annual budget (ibid.). A more scientific analysis reveals

that the EU is not doing badly comparatively, but has a very divergent capacity over different fields of the global digital technology stack (Sheikh, 2022). Although the EU already has relevant policies in place for all the layers of the stack, its capacity is very diverse across the layers: it is in dire condition in cloud and application layers, under threat in resource, chips and intelligence layers, it is strong in the network layer, and it displays opportunity in the connected device layer (ibid., pp. 18–19). Despite regulation being a powerful tool at the EU's disposal in global actorness, the EU has not until now used this tool to explicitly strengthen the position of European businesses (Bradford, 2023). Considering this, Sheikh (2022, p. 20) concludes that as such, regulation is most relevant for the EU to help make digital technology stack more in line with European values and to ban certain foreign technologies that are in conflict with those values. He adds (ibid., p. 21) that standardisation is a similarly promising tool that the EU has up to now been successfully employing within different international fora (e.g. International Organisation for Standardisation – IOS, International Telecommunication Union – ITU, Internet Engineering Task Force – IETF and the Institute of Electrical and Electronic Engineers – IEEE).

Together with trade, data governance is one of the key areas of EU action with strong internal and external components. The EU wants to proclaim itself a “global digital player” by being at the forefront of global standard-setting for emerging technologies, while remaining open to trade and investment. Data and privacy regulation are a booming field of law challenging the internationalist standing of the EU, which finds itself having to choose between openness and global projection of its standards (Fahey, 2024). The multilateral efforts by the UN have failed to gain traction, and UN General Secretary Guterres recently concluded that “in the face of the serious, even existential threats posed by runaway climate chaos, and the runaway development of AI without guardrails, we seem powerless to act” (WEF, 2024). However, there is not only a problem striking the balance between liberalisation of trade and the fundamental right to personal data protection,

but also with liberalisation as a LIO norm contesting the very linkage between digitalisation and trade. Concerns about European sovereignty and geopolitical rivalry can clash with Europe's commitment to free global competition (Sheikh, 2022). This is illustrated by the EU's discourse on digital sovereignty encompassing different political areas, e.g. security, economy and right domains (Adler-Niessen and Eggerling 2024). Of these, governance in the economic domain is losing salience to control over security as the EU is shifting from its "traditional" market regulatory orientation to an increasing emphasis on assuring public order, for example in controlling the internet (Flonk et al. 2024) and in digital finance (Donnelly et al. 2024). Therefore, for the EU to strengthen its actorness in the area of digital sovereignty and to take the lead, it needs to find a way to reconcile its normative objectives of liberal trade and data privacy on the one side and strategic geopolitical objectives of state security and market competitiveness on the other.

3.3 International Conflict Resolution

Due to the self-defined image of the EU as a proponent of LIO and supporter of the UN Charter, multilateralism and international law (Treaty on EU – Title V, Chapter 1, Art. 21),⁶ the weakening of the LIO presents an ontological threat to the EU (Adler-Niessen and Zarakol, 2020). In this regard, the EU, which has been a traditional civilian power without direct mechanisms for managing the military conflict, has responded effectively by redefining its capacity to engage in international affairs in the context of "strategic autonomy." Mentioned in 2021 in the European Commission Strategic Foresight Report, strategic autonomy is "commonly defined as the EU's ability to make decisions independently while taking into account its own interests and values," which has been initially developed in the fields of

⁶ Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union — Title V — General provisions on the Union's external action and specific provisions on the common foreign and security policy — Chapter 1 — General provisions on the Union's external action — Article 21 (OJ C 202, 7.6.2016, pp. 28-29).

economic, technology and trade policy (Steinbach, 2023, p. 974). Ever since international peace and security issues have stepped into this equation of volatile international interdependence, the EU has also brought strategic autonomy into CFSP and more concretely into its Common Security and Defence Policy. We explore the EU's actorness in the cases of Russian aggression on Ukraine since 2022 and Israeli-Palestinian conflict that remanifested in October 2023.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and war against Ukraine since 2022 exposed Russia's purposeful ignorance of international law as integral parts of LIO and diminished the value of the multilateral setting offered by the UN to provide "a centre for harmonising the actions of nations in the attainment of [UN] common ends" (UN Charter, Art. 1, pt. 4).⁷ The UN – even in the most narrow understanding as the global system of collective security – seems to be sidelined by these bold displays of power in international politics that replace the open channels of peaceful settlement of disputes and institutionalised multilateral relations. After the US administration's overtures to Russia and its suspension of military assistance to Ukraine, the EU strategic autonomy response additionally encompassed defence as a logically "strategical necessity." Yet, "because the employment of coercive tools in a unilateral fashion questions the legal default of multilateralism and openness" (Steinbach, 2023, p. 973), the EU security capability needs to be conducted in coordination with and complementary to its market capabilities and liberal international norms, e.g. there is a need to focus on strong attributes of civilian role of the military and serve only defensive purposes (Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2024).

In terms of EU presence, from the beginning of the Russian aggression, what can be observed is the EU's unified stance. The EU has only supporting competences within the CFSP when it comes to conflict resolution through the usage of a mix of diplomatic, economic, security, and development tools.

⁷ <https://legal.un.org/repertory/art1.shtml>.

However, the EU international presence and its capacity to actively influence this particular conflict has been quite unified and strong in applying economic sanctions against Russia to achieve political goals and upgrading its enlargement policy. First, the UN system is one of the main international settings where the EU has repeatedly condemned Russia's invasion as a blatant violation of international law, particularly the UN Charter. At the UN, the EU has been a staunch defender of Ukraine and an active voice for multilateralism, international law, and accountability. The EU perceives itself as a defender of the European order, therefore, it projects that view throughout the UN system as well. Although limited by its observer status, the EU plays a coordinating and diplomatic leadership role, particularly through its Member States and alliances within the broader international community. In the UN General Assembly, all EU Member States have supported resolutions that condemn the invasion, call for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine, reject the illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories by Russia and emphasise the need for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace based on Ukraine's sovereignty. Until the end of February 2022, the US was on the same side with the EU and its Member States in the UN system, yet the US changed stance towards the war in Ukraine and its weakened interest in European security raised the EU's coherence and strategic autonomy approach on this issue.

Second, the EU has remained true to the value of an ever-closer Union of European peoples and amended its enlargement policy outreach to Eastern Partnership countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina that wished to align with EU values. In the wake of a full-scale Russian invasion, Ukraine applied for EU membership on 28 February 2022. In a matter of months, it was formally confirmed by the European Council as a candidate country. Before 2022, for the three of the Eastern Partnership countries - Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, EU membership was not offered as a possibility.⁸ This changed in

⁸ See further: Van der Loo G. (2016), *The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area: A New Legal Instrument for EU integration without*

2022 when all three countries applied for EU membership, and in December of 2023 the European Council decided to open membership talks with Ukraine and Moldova. Furthermore, in June 2024 the negotiation frameworks were presented. Georgia was granted candidate status in December 2023, on the understanding that it will take the relevant steps set out in the European Commission recommendations to further advance in the process. Anghel and Džankić (2023), however, exposed a high tension between this EU's quick geopolitically inspired response via enlargement policy boost and the essence of the accession process being grounded in achieving political conditions for EU membership.

As for actorness capability, the EU had showed willingness and capacity to use different policy instruments to respond to such an outstanding international challenge as the Russian aggression in Ukraine, by triggering the activation of the Temporary Protection Directive. The EU used this instrument to step in quickly and efficiently with the Ukrainian refugees, something that was not the case during the 2015 refugee crisis. The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered the largest refugee situation in Europe in decades, where most people fleeing Ukraine fled to the EU. In the EU, they welcomed the refugees under a temporary protection directive, an instrument that allowed the Ukrainians a visa-free entry. By making the temporary protection available, it helped the EU to avoid disruptions and bottlenecks in national asylum systems. This particular case has shown that if there is a political will and unity among the leaders of EU Member States, the EU can handle large-scale refugee situations relatively well. Finally, the EU is using access to the common market as a tool to punish Russia economically by sanctions. As a CFSP tool, the sanctions to deal with Russia's aggression

Membership (Brill Nijhoff); Emerson M. and Cenuşa D. (2018) (eds.), *Deeping EU-Moldovan Relations. What, why and how?* (CEPS); Emerson M. and Kovziridze M. (2018) (eds.), *Deepening EU-Georgia Relations. What, why and how?* (CEPS); Van Elsuwege P. (2021), The Ratification Saga of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement: Some Lessons for the Practice of Mixed Agreements, in S. Lorenzmeier, R. Petrov and C. Vedder (eds.), *EU External Relations Law. Shared Competences and Shared Values in Agreements Between the EU and Its Eastern Neighbourhood* (Springer).

against Ukraine are one of the most important and effective mechanisms the EU has at its disposal. Furthermore, the EU provides Ukraine with regular and predictable financial support. It thus once again proves that its economic power and enlargement policy represent the EU's uniquely important external action tools (Cardwell and Moret, 2023). Additionally, in 2025, the European Commission presented three initiatives which were newly established defence capacity-building measures: the white paper for European defence – Readiness 2030, the ReArm Europe plan, the simplification of the Defence Readiness Omnibus and a Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 to measure progress and discuss the next steps.⁹

In the second case of conflict resolution – the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza, however, the EU's response has been slow, inconsistent and marked with much less EU presence. After the Hamas attacks on 7th October 2023, the EU's (member states') reaction to the Israeli offensive in Gaza and Lebanon varied. The EU has expressed a dual stance in response to the Israeli offensive following the Hamas attacks. While reaffirming Israel's right to self-defence, EU officials have also called for the protection of civilians and strict adherence to international humanitarian law. The statement on behalf of the EU by the High Representative released the very same day of the terrorist attacks condemned "in the strongest possible terms the multiple and indiscriminate attacks across Israel by Hamas," and called "for an immediate cessation of these senseless attacks and violence, which will only further increase tensions on the ground and seriously undermine Palestinian people's aspirations for peace."¹⁰ European leaders have repeatedly urged both parties to exercise restraint, deescalate the situation, and avoid further exacerbating of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and Lebanon. Furthermore, the EU has

⁹ https://commission.europa.eu/topics/defence/future-european-defence_en.

¹⁰ Council of the EU, "Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the attacks against Israel", 7 October 2023. Available at www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/10/07/statement-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-european-union-on-the-attacks-against-israel/.

emphasised the need for a swift return to dialogue to prevent the conflict from spiralling into a broader regional crisis.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict manifestation exposed divisions within the EU which existed long before the 7th October 2023 and based on which the EU's actorness capability on this issue remained limited. The initial solidarity gave way to familiar disagreements and revealed the differences in national interests and perspectives on the conflict. Some of the EU states, like Germany, Austria, and Czechia, emphasised unwavering support for Israel, while others, like Ireland, Spain, Belgium and Slovenia, were more critical of the scale of Israel's military response and advocated stronger protection for Palestinian civilians. These divisions made it difficult for the EU to adopt a fully unified stance on the conflict, humanitarian aid to the Palestinians and the issue of Palestinian statehood. The EU Member States had consensus on only one thing – the need for deescalation. The EU's mitigation strategy, employed via diplomatic, selective trade and humanitarian instruments, did not increase the EU's capability in terms of internal consistency and the EU's international presence was limited to the Quartet and a few other multilateral platforms (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024).

The divergent vote of EU Member States in the UN confirmed these deep divisions within the EU. On 27th October 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution ES-10/21 calling for an immediate and sustained humanitarian truce and cessation of hostilities, while condemning all acts of violence aimed at Palestinian and Israeli civilians and demanding all parties to immediately and fully comply with their obligations under international law. Only seven EU Member States voted in favour, while four of the 14 members that opposed the resolutions were EU Member States –Austria, Croatia, Czechia and Hungary, while most EU Member States abstained. The EU position in the UN General Assembly and the following resolutions on this issue, send a message that when it comes to the Middle East, a united European Foreign Policy is an illusion (Soler, 2024). The EU stance in the UN system regarding the cease-fire and the inconsistent messages addressing

the Israeli leadership are just some of the ways in which the EU exposed its internal divergences.

Another element of the weak EU actorness capability visible well before the attacks on the 7th of October 2023 was the question of not whether, but when to recognise Palestine as a state. Whilst EU member states agree on the goal of a two-state solution, they disagree significantly on how it should be achieved. Vignoli et al. (2025) identify three like-minded groups.¹¹ Sweden was the first Western European country to recognise the State of Palestine in October 2014. This recognition was driven by the belief that acknowledging Palestinian statehood would help level the playing field in peace negotiations and encourage a more balanced dialogue between the two parties (Soler, 2024). The scale of the humanitarian crisis provoked by the Israeli militarys retaliation in Gaza following the October 2023 Hamas-led attacks, pushed other European countries to recognise Palestine as a state. The lack of a unified position on Palestinian statehood among Member States presented a serious challenge for the EU to achieve stronger external recognition as a single-voice actor in conflict resolution. Spain and Ireland, together with Norway (not an EU Member State), synchronised their decisions to recognise Palestinian statehood in May 2024, followed by the Slovenian recognition a few weeks later. In the absence of the EU common position on Palestinian statehood, in May 2024 the EU Member States were once again divided in their voting regarding the UN General Assembly Resolution aiming to press the Security Council to give favourable consideration to a full Palestinian membership. The resolution won a majority of 143 votes in favour, including the votes of some EU members that had not yet recognised Palestine, such as Belgium, Greece, Portugal, and quite significantly, France. Many EU Member States abstained the vote, while Hungary and Czechia voted against

¹¹ Sweden, Ireland, Belgium, France and Spain have consistently criticised Israel for its military occupation of Palestinian territories and the settlement expansion. The second group includes Austria, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia or the Baltic states, who tend to support Israel. The third group are countries like Germany and the Netherlands, which balance between pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian views (Vignoli et al., 2025, pp. 3–4).

it. This can be assessed as a positive phenomenon in terms of the EU's overall international recognition, although it does not yet resonate as an EU collective effort, but rather as individual member states' actions.

Developments in 2025 within the EU regarding recognition of Palestine have been intense. A European Parliament resolution in early September called for Palestinian recognition to enable a two-state solution.¹² At the UN General Assembly in September 2025, together with Canada, UK and Australia - France, Belgium, Portugal, Luxembourg, Malta and Andorra declared the recognition of the State of Palestine. These historic decisions brought the number of countries that recognised the Palestinian state up to 156 - 15 out of 27 EU Member States. These developments indicate that the EU is building its capability to speak with one voice also in the case of recognition of Palestinian statehood. Additionally, the EU has shown its diplomatic capacity to align neighbouring non-member countries to its foreign policy position.¹³

At the same time, the bloc is assessing its options after finding Israel in breach of human rights obligations under the Association Agreement. The EU-Israel Association Agreement is a deal that opens up advantageous bilateral relations. Suspending the agreement and all preferential trade with Israel, the EU has a chance to make a difference in the Middle East. The EU has recently started to discuss the sanctions against Israel, as the European Commission proposed on 17 September 2025 suspension of trade concessions and imposition of sanctions on extremist ministers of the Israeli government and violent settlers.¹⁴ There are instruments at the EU's disposal that can strengthen its international presence and geopolitical influence in the Israeli-

¹²<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/09/11/european-parliament-calls-for-recognition-of-state-of-palestine>.

¹³ Several European states have aligned themselves with EU's statement on the first phase of the Comprehensive Plan to end the Gaza Conflict put forward by President Trump in early October 2025, namely: Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Georgia, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, and Ukraine (Council of the EU Statement, 2025, 10 October).

¹⁴https://north-africa-middle-east-gulf.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-proposes-suspension-trade-concessions-israel-and-sanctions-extremist-ministers-israeli-2025-09-17_en.

Palestinian conflict in Gaza, but in this case, the EU still lacks the consensus to act more decisively. We can observe, however, that in the case of conflict resolution and related severe cases of human rights violation, the EU's arguments for global actorness are not a dilemma between security or economy-related strategic interest trade-offs, but rather historically-related issues of individual member states.

4. Conclusions

The article elaborated on the international actorness that the EU managed to pursue as an autonomous response to the weakening LIO. We employed conceptualisation of EU actorness and constitutive elements of its institutional identity, that is manifested as internal self-understanding and external recognition, international presence and capability. Findings are summarised in table 2 below.

We established that the EU's internal self-understanding shifted from a normative power rooted in multilateralism to a more assertive and strategically autonomous actor, as evidenced by its updated trade strategy and institutional innovations, such as the Trade Enforcement Officer and the Transatlantic Trade and Technology Council. Yet at the same time, in the field of digital sovereignty, the EU keeps asserting its role as a normative power committed to human-centred and rights-based governance. Through landmark regulatory instruments, such as the GDPR, the 5G Toolbox, and the AI Act, the EU articulated a distinct identity rooted in democracy, fundamental rights, and the rule of law. However, the EU response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the Israeli offensive in Gaza reflects a deepening of its internal self-understanding not only as a normative, but *also* a geopolitical actor. In this context, the EU has recently come to understand itself as a defender of European order, especially since it can no longer count on a liberal defensive alliance with the US as a guarantee for regional peace and security.

<i>Element of EU actorness</i>	TRADE	DIGITALIZATION	CONFLICT RESOLUTION
<i>internal self-understanding</i>	clashes between open liberal market and strategic autonomy	clashes between human rights-based provision of digital services and strategic autonomy and competitiveness	clashes between civilian power, UN and international law support and autonomous security and defence provision
<i>external recognition</i>	<i>in the WTO:</i> normatively strong, but limited by US-China rivalry	- <i>in the UN:</i> strong, potential for further “Brussels effect” - <i>in the neighbourhood:</i> unpersuasive	- <i>in the UN:</i> strong on Ukraine, weak on Gaza - <i>in the neighbourhood:</i> pragmatic, geopolitical
<i>international presence</i>	strong in WTO, FAO	standard-setting and regulation in IOS, ITU, IETF, IEEE	fast and strong on Ukraine in the UN and NATO, only like-minded states on Gaza
<i>capability</i>	Strategy on trade, Trade Enforcement Officer	- <i>strong:</i> GDPR, EU 5G Toolbox, AI Act - <i>weak:</i> resource, chips and intelligence - <i>very weak:</i> cloud and applications	- <i>high consistency:</i> on Ukraine (sanctions, refugee intake, UN representation), <i>mid-level consistency:</i> on Gaza <i>strong capability-building:</i> defence

Table 2: *Elements of EU actorness in trade, digitalisation and conflict resolution*

The EU's external recognition as a reliable and principled trade partner has been challenged by the unpredictable US tariff manoeuvres and the influence of China's rapid growth and internationalisation model. A limitation of the EU's recognition, however, remains its inability to reinvigorate multilateral dispute settlement within the WTO. The EU regulatory leadership in the field of AI has earned global attention, continuing the “Brussels Effect,” whereby its standards influence third countries and transnational companies. In its support for Ukraine, the EU has gained recognition as a principled and responsive actor, especially within the UN General Assembly. Its swift humanitarian and financial assistance, sanctions against Russia and activities in the UN have reinforced its image as a defender of liberal international norms. However, EU's recognition also has limitations. In the Western Balkans, for example, the competing digital empires of the US and China challenge the EU normative influence in the countries aspiring to the EU

membership. Additionally, the EU's inconsistent response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza, sidelining by the US and the lack of a unified position on Palestinian statehood reveal a serious challenge for the EU to achieve stronger external recognition as a single-voice actor in conflict resolution. The case of contested normative leadership in its very neighbourhood and inconsistency of internal policy are quite meaningful limitations to recognition of the EU as a credible protector of LIO.

In terms of international presence, the EU remains a central player in global trade governance, actively negotiating agreements and responding to US-initiated protectionism with agility. In digital governance, the EU is increasingly visible, though it displays diverse capabilities in different layers of the global digital technology stack. While the EU lacks industrial leadership in AI development, cloud service and applications, its proactive regulatory stance and institutional innovations have positioned it as a key player in the international regime of digital technology global standard-setting. In conflict resolution, however, the EU's presence is rather unbalanced: it is strong in the case of war in Ukraine and only gaining sight of a possible unified actorness in case of conflict in Gaza. In the UN institutions, the EU has been influential, particularly in condemning Russia and advocating for respect of international law. However, the conflict in Gaza exposes the limits of the EU's international presence due to low capability caused by internal inconsistency: although the number of like-minded states on Palestinian recognition is growing, the EU is not able to bring Israel to responsibility in cases of multiple violations of international law.

Finally, the EU's capability, both in terms of the ability to determine its interests, develop and effectively apply foreign policy instruments, is increasingly defined by its pursuit of strategic autonomy. By diversifying trade partnerships, reinforcing the negative impact of sanctions, and integrating security considerations into trade policy, the EU is positioning itself to respond effectively to the protectionism-leaning US trade policy and to punish Russia for aggression. Through economic sanctions and diplomatic

engagement, the EU has demonstrated its capacity to shape global responses to Russian aggression, whereas trade-related sanctions against Israeli breaches of international humanitarian law are still under consideration. In the digital agenda, the EU must reconcile competing objectives, such as openness in trade, protection of personal data, and digital security, whereby it must balance between liberalisation and control. The EU has shown growing capability and interest in asserting strategic autonomy, especially in security and defence-related issues. Instruments such as the CFSP sanctions, enlargement policy, and financial aid have proven effective and timely in the case of war in Ukraine, yet they have not been agreed upon in the case of Israeli war in Gaza.

Empirical results reveal there are slight differences between the three policy areas, which are grounded in different EU competence. In the field of trade, the European Commission applies its instruments quite effectively, whereas policy such as digitalisation demands internal alignment with areas of EU exclusive competence, for instance, such as market, trade, competition, as well as EU supportive competence. Namely, industry policy, consumer protection and areas of freedom, security and justice. In the end, CFSP-based conflict resolution is the weakest in the EU list of competences, yet this is also the area where the EU has just started its capability-building. The latter includes not only defence investments and strategic planning, but also slow, yet continuous foreign policy alignment on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The EU has responded to the weakening LIO by adding a geopolitical aspect to its normative self-understanding, grounding this new identity in a concept of strategic autonomy in all three policy areas. Yet, in the pursuit of such autonomous international action, there is high tension between liberal values and pragmatic competitiveness or geopolitical interest revealed in all three cases. The EU's response to Russia's war in Ukraine stands as the only exception to this rule. When this tension is lower, EU presence and international recognition are higher, especially when the EU is able to speak with one voice. In contrast, reconciling the difficulties of marrying trade

competition, digital innovation and security demands with democracy, multilateralism and respect for international law remain a critical challenge, especially when the EU's actorness capacity is low due to internal inconsistency.

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