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Informal groupings as types of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy: the cases of Kosovo, Libya, and Syria

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ABSTRACT

Although informal groups of member states often steer EU foreign policy, existing scholarly literature does not offer an overarching theoretical approach to account for their causes and their different types. This article conceptualizes informal groupings and offers a theoretical approach that explains their occurrence in EU foreign policy. It claims that while disagreements among member states and the lack of EU capacity are the main causes of informal groupings, the combination of these two factors over time and across different policy issues determines the emergence of specific types of informal groupings in EU foreign policy. Indeed, evidence from Kosovo, Libya, and Syria shows that different types of informal groups addressed various policy issues by replacing, complementing and/or supporting corresponding EU policies. Nonetheless, as these groupings lack central guidance and accountability mechanisms, they are not a panacea for EU foreign policy.

KEYWORDS Differentiation; EU foreign policy; informal groups; Kosovo; Libya; Syria

After decades of progressive Europeanisation, the Lisbon Treaty should have further centralized member states' foreign policies (Aggestam & Johansson, 2017), and hence increased the efficiency of EU foreign and security policy (Amadio Viceré, 2018; Amadio Viceré & Tercovich, 2022). Instead informal groupings of member states have frequently steered EU approach to conflicts and crises, often by interacting with non-EU actors in institutionalized international cooperation settings without receiving a formal mandate from EU institutions and/or the other member states. Not only does this phenomenon suggest a fragmentation of EU institutional scene, but it also casts a shadow over EU ability to act as a security provider in international politics (Balfour, 2015).

Understanding the emergence and significance of informal groupings for EU foreign policy is particularly relevant in an international system marred by hard security concerns. This is even more so if one considers that external

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crises and conflicts are becoming increasingly multifaceted and transnational, and, therefore, less solvable by EU member states individually. Nevertheless, to date there is no systematic knowledge about informal groupings in EU foreign policy. Existing studies do not offer an overarching theoretical approach to account for their causes and different types. While scholarship on informal groupings is marred by an absence of systematic conceptualization, it often confuses various types of groupings. Additionally, previous research has not addressed their diverse types and potential evolutions in relation to EU foreign policy. Against this backdrop, scholars mostly hold polarized views about the significance of informal groupings for the EU. This article aims to fill these research gaps by addressing the following question: How can we explain the emergence and various types of informal groups in EU foreign policy?

Drawing on the original conceptual framework outlined in the introduction to the special issue, the article conceptualizes the groupings considered as instances of differentiated cooperation (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023). It builds on insights from the scholarly literature on differentiated European integration to develop a theoretical approach accounting for the occurrence of these groupings. In particular, the article brings together the study of differentiated integration of core state powers and of informal politics in the EU. In the first place, it identifies two explanatory factors for the emergence of informal groupings: disagreement among EU member states; and the weakness of EU capacity for responding to conflicts and crises. In the second place, it claims that the combination between the level of disagreement among EU member states and the EU level of capacity over time and across policy issues determines the development of specific types of informal groupings, and hence of specific types of differentiation in relation to EU foreign policy (i.e., cooperative, combinative, and/or competitive).

To test this argument, the article carries out a congruence study in a comparative research design. It examines three typical cases of the causal relationship considered, namely: Kosovo, Libya and Syria. Evidence from these cases shows that the emergence of informal groupings can be ascribed to member states' disagreements over conflicts and crises occurring in these countries and to the EU lack of capacity to address them. Indeed, depending on the combination between the level of disagreement among EU member states and the weakness of EU capacities over time and across policy issues, informal groupings replaced, complemented and/or supported corresponding EU policies in these cases.

This article makes four theoretical contributions. First, it contributes to the special issue's effort to elaborate a theoretical framework accounting for the occurrence of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy. Second, it conceptualizes informal groupings and explains their formation and types in EU foreign policy. Third, by theorizing the occurrence of

informal groupings, it contributes to the study of differentiation in EU foreign policy, which so far has largely disregarded informal institutional practices (Howorth, 2019; Leruth & Lord, 2016). Fourth, by empirically linking the occurrence of informal groupings to the growing involvement of EU institutions in member states' foreign policies, it contributes to the scholarly debate on the European integration of foreign policy (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2016) and, more in general, on the potential expansion of EU's competences beyond economic matters (Caporaso et al., 2015). As for the empirical level, the article offers novel insights into an issue that lies at the core of EU foreign policy-making and of European integration more in general. It draws on primary and secondary sources but also on original data from 21 semi-structured interviews with EU and member states' officials.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, the article draws up an empirical typology to identify the main dimensions of informal groupings in EU foreign policy. Second, it presents a theoretical argument explaining the emergence of the informal groupings considered. Third, it tests this argument through a congruence analysis of the EU approach to conflicts and crises in Europe's neighborhood. Finally, it draws conclusions from the examination presented and discusses its implications for the literature on EU foreign policy.

Conceptualizing informal groupings in EU foreign policy

In recent years, informal groupings have attracted the attention of both EU and international relations scholars (Bassiri Tabrizi & Kienzle, 2020a; Laatikainen, 2017; Prantl, 2005; Smith, 2017; Smith & Laatikainen, 2020; Vrailas, 2017). However, existing scholarship has been generally marred by “conceptual stretching” (Sartori, 1970, p. 1034). The research community still lacks a shared understanding of the analytical categories it employs to study this phenomenon. Among other things, previous research has conceptualized informal groupings as “directoires” (Bassiri Tabrizi & Kienzle, 2020b), “informal international organizations” (Sauer, 2019), “intra-EU bottom-up regional groups” (Cooper & Fabbrini, 2021), “lead groups” (Alcaro, 2018; Alcaro & Siddi, 2021) and “like-minded groups” (Aggestam & Bicchi, 2019). Against this backdrop, there no systematic knowledge about informal groupings in EU foreign policy.

One way of imposing some coherence is to develop a tentative empirical typology (Collier et al., 2012). Based on the literature on *ad hoc* coalitions in international security responses (Karlsrud & Reykers, 2020a) and on informal groupings in EU foreign policy (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017), the proposed typology considers the levels of formality and institutional embeddedness as features qualifying informal groupings in EU foreign

policy. By examining the level of formality, the article intends to differentiate between formal and informal patterns of voluntary cooperation among groups of member states. By investigating the level of institutional embeddedness, in turn, it aims to distinguish between groups of member states that carry out their activities within the EU institutional framework and groups that are disconnected from EU institutions.

It is possible to identify five general categories of member state groups (Figure 1). The first three categories contain groups established using formal mechanisms enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty, which allow subsets 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. Crucially, these groups carry out their activities within the EU institutional framework. The remaining two categories consist of groups of member states that, rather than being established through mechanisms explicitly envisaged in the Lisbon Treaty, originate from informal patterns of interaction among EU member states, and occasionally institutions.

The specific categories are the following. The first category is *enhanced cooperation*. This involves closer cooperation among a group of at least nine member states to protect EU interests and reinforce the integration process (TEU, Art. 20). Although this mechanism was already established in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, it has never been employed in EU foreign policy. The second category is *implementation of a specific task by a group of member states* in Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) (TEU, Art. 42.5 and Art. 44). This mechanism has never been employed either.

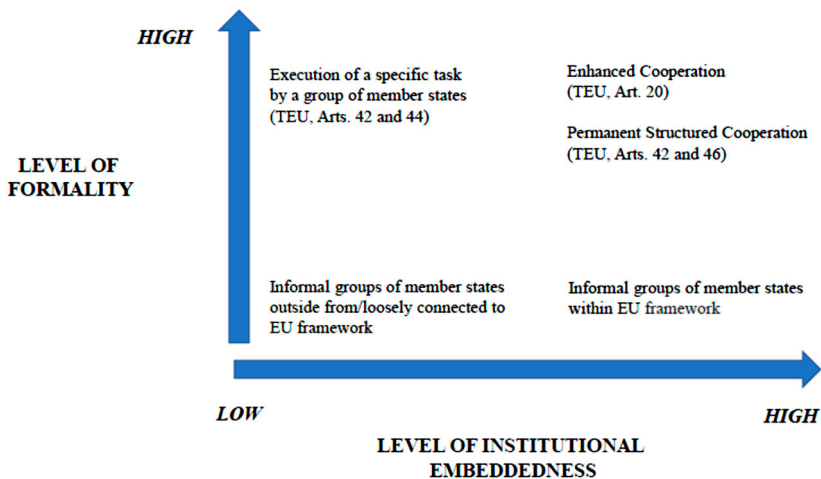


Figure 1. Empirical typology of groupings of EU member states in EU foreign policy. Source: own elaboration.

The third category consists of *permanent structured cooperation* (PESCO) in CSDP (TEU, Art. 42.6). Crucially, PESCO is the only formal treaty-based arrangement member states have so far established to strengthen cooperation in the security domain (11 December 2017) (EEAS, 2021; Martill & Gebhard, 2023). Nonetheless, it is relevant to note that 25 member states of the 27 have joined this initiative (Biscop, 2018), turning it into an arrangement to strengthen cooperation among essentially all member states rather than to establish a “division of labor” among groups of them (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017).

The fourth and fifth categories consist of informal groupings which are types of informal politics in the EU (Christiansen & Neuhold, 2013b). Depending on their institutional embeddedness, it is possible to 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* (Müller, 2016; Rieker, 2021). In the fourth category, informal dynamics of cooperation among member states occur within the EU institutional system, especially within the European Council and the Council of the EU. By coordinating their energies and resources to reach specific objectives, these member states can influence, support and even hinder the creation and implementation of certain EU policies. Examples of this include the Visegrad Group’s activities regarding migration (Zachová et al., 2018) and initiatives by Nordic EU member states concerning EU development policies (Elgström, 2017).

In the fifth category, the dynamics unfold outside the formal EU framework. These informal groupings generally lead EU foreign policy by interacting with third parties in international settings such as directorate formats, international contact groups, and/or international forums and organizations (Onderco & Portela, 2023; Schade, 2023). Crucially, however, they do so without necessarily receiving a formal mandate from EU institutions or from the other member states. One may argue in this regard that in these international settings member states are acting in their capacity as nation states. Indeed, the Lisbon Treaty maintains the intergovernmental nature of EU foreign policy. Nonetheless, the EU legal order envisages a constitutional mechanism to ensure unity in EU foreign affairs: “the duty of cooperation” (Schütze, 2019). This duty clearly emerges from the provisions in the Lisbon Treaty. In principle, it should be the High Representative and the President of the European Council who represent the EU in international organizations on matters related to foreign and security policy (TEU, Art. 27.2; TEU, Art. 15.6.2). 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 organizations or conferences in which not all the member states are present, their representatives should consult the other member states' representatives within the European Council and the Council, they should inform the other member states and the High Representative of any subject of common interest and coordinate their activities with them to uphold EU positions (TEU, Art. 32, 34). Of course, on several occasions informal groups of member states acting in international settings have contributed to EU efforts in coordination with EU institutions, as happened in the E3/EU nuclear negotiations with Iran (Bassiri Tabrizi & Kienzle, 2020b). Often, however, it has been informal groups of member states that have determined the EU's general approach (Sus, 2023). As in the case of the Normandy Format, these groups have used the High Representative and EU structures as administrative support while benefitting from EU resources (Amadio Viceré, 2018, 2021; Interviews A, Q).

Considering all this, it is reasonable to argue that despite the Lisbon Treaty's attempts to further centralize member state foreign policies, national governments have frequently opted to create groups as frameworks to flexibly cooperate in pursuit of specific interests (Henke, 2019). Crucially, when doing so they have mostly chosen informal arrangements rather than the Lisbon Treaty's predefined procedures. Resorting to informal governance arrangements is common practice in any polity. Nonetheless, as the next section demonstrates, the groups considered here do not resemble coalitions of states emerging in polities that share common features with the EU, which is to say federal regimes and international organizations.

Explaining the emergence and types of informal groupings

In federal regimes and in international organizations alike, it has become a common practice for *ad hoc* coalitions of states to informally engage in differentiated efforts in international affairs. Scholarship on federalism and international relations stresses that non-central governments have been increasingly active in formulating foreign policy in federal regimes through informal coalitions that sometimes bind central governments (Fry, 2017; Michelmann, 2009; Michelmann & Soldatos, 1990). Nevertheless, these subnational actors do not generally engage in international settings dealing with matters under the exclusive jurisdiction of central governments, namely security-related issues (Kukucha, 2017; Paquin, 2010; Rubin, 2017). Consequently, the analytical frameworks employed in these studies are not useful for explaining the occurrence of the informal groups considered here.

At first sight, the literature on the implications of overlapping international organizations in international security arrangements would provide a particularly useful framework. Indeed, scholars have successfully

employed the concept of regime complexity (Aggarwal, 1998; Alter & Meunier, 2009) to examine how states choose among multiple institutional alternatives to carry out international crisis management, including with respect to the EU (Brosig, 2015; Hofmann, 2009, 2011, 2019). However, these analytical accounts are neither sufficient to explain why (European) states remain anchored to the EU institutional framework nor in examining specific informal governance arrangements. On the one hand, they do not generally consider status distinctions among international organizations (Abbott et al., 2015). This factor is of crucial importance given that the informal groups under examination have a level of embeddedness in the EU formal institutional framework which is unprecedented in the interaction between *ad hoc* military coalitions and international/regional organizations. On the other hand, these perspectives generally focus on the governance systems arising from state interactions (Biermann et al., 2009) rather than on the drivers behind such interactions.

At the same time, it would be inappropriate to argue that these informal groupings derive from member states' institutional choices among multiple institutional international crisis management alternatives to address demands for cooperation in security policy (Hofmann, 2019). By drawing on institutional choice accounts (Jupille et al., 2013), recent scholarly work has demonstrated that states increasingly prefer *ad hoc* military coalitions to address conflicts and crises rather than formalized global, regional, or sub-regional security arrangements (Karlsrud & Reykers, 2019, 2020b), including in the EU (Reykers, 2019). Nevertheless, the informal groups considered in this article do not resemble such coalitions for three main reasons.

First, member states participating in these informal groupings generally commit time and effort to sustaining EU policies on specific foreign policy issues in addition to those already devised by other member states and the EU as a whole (Keukeleire, 2006). Second, the groups considered are not simply implementing branches of pre-determined EU policies. They often support, if not lead, the preparation, drawing up and evaluation of relevant EU policies on specific dossiers (Helwig, 2020; Interviews A, B, C). Third and last, national governments generally use *ad hoc* military coalitions for their immediate responses to imminent conflicts and crises. However, the informal groupings considered are persistent over time, as is epitomized by the informal group which has been participating in the Quint ever since 1994 (Gegout, 2002).

Bearing all this in mind, it is reasonable to argue that the informal groupings under examination are phenomena typical of the EU. Yet these groupings receive no attention in the main European integration theories. As is rightly stressed by Schimmelfennig and Winzen (2020, p. 20), liberal inter-governmentalism, neo-functionalism and post-functionalism focus on explaining "uniform integration" or a lack thereof. Consequently, they

neglect member state cooperation through flexible arrangements in EU foreign policy. Conversely, the existing literature on informal groupings does not generally consider them types of integrated practices in EU foreign policy (Alcaro, 2018; Alcaro & Siddi, 2021; Carbone, 2013). Certainly, some scholars conceptualized informal groupings as differentiated forms of functional cooperation established to complement or substitute formal EU foreign policy processes (Bassiri Tabrizi, 2018; Cooper & Fabbrini, 2021). Nonetheless, we are still missing an overarching theoretical approach that explains the emergence of informal groupings and their types in EU foreign policy. Studies on informal groupings lack a systematic theoretical account of their determinants. Scholarly work on this matter was either conducted through a predominantly inductive approach (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017; Rieker, 2021), focused on single cases (Alcaro, 2018; Carbone, 2013; Elgström, 2017; Laatikainen, 2015; Sauer, 2019), or adopted mono-causal arguments and explanations (Aggestam & Bicchi, 2019; Gegout, 2002).

In this context, while existing studies do not distinguish between the different types that these groupings may assume in relation to EU foreign policy, they do not consider their evolutions across time and policy issues. For sure, Delreux and Keukeleire (2017) pioneering article stresses that informal groupings may assume different forms, which may vary across policy sectors and time. However, by conceptualizing informal groupings only as instances of informal divisions of labor, this study disregards both situations in which informal groupings may replace the EU and situations in which they may cooperate with it while remaining loosely anchored to the EU institutional framework. Such a narrow conceptualization may also explain why, besides mapping the key dimensions of informal groupings' various types, these scholars did not unpack the significance of each of these types for EU foreign policy. More recently, Bassiri Tabrizi and Kienzle (2020a) proposed a typology of different informal groups and their significance for EU foreign policy. Still, they did so only regarding informal groupings' lack of legitimacy.

It should not come as a surprise then that this phenomenon remains largely controversial. Some scholars consider informal groupings not only as a source of segmentation of EU action, but also as means for the most powerful member states to assert their dominance over others in EU foreign policy (Fabbrini, 2014). In this regard, it has been argued that their existence is always marred by a "substantial lack of legitimacy" (Bassiri Tabrizi & Kienzle, 2020a). Others, in turn, claim that by accommodating member states' different preferences (Aggestam & Bicchi, 2019) and capabilities (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2017), informal groups may not only enhance the effectiveness but also the legitimacy of EU foreign policy action (Alcaro & Siddi, 2021). As is discussed in the next section, the

scholarly literatures on differentiation and informal governance in EU foreign policy are useful to fill these research gaps.

Informal groupings and informal differentiated cooperation

The article conceptualizes the informal groupings under examination as instances of differentiated cooperation. Based on such conceptualization, it employs and adapts the special issue's analytical framework to address their occurrence at a micro-level of analysis (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023). As envisaged in the special issue's framework, it builds on the scholarly literature on differentiated European integration to provide an explanation for the emergence of these groupings. This scholarly literature claims that since policies related to core state powers are more politicized, integration in these areas is more likely to be differentiated (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020). Differentiation should, in essence, be linked to the involvement of EU institutions in key state sovereignty functions (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2016). Existing studies on differentiated integration in core state powers pay only limited attention to informal practices. By acknowledging the existence of informal initiatives taking place outside EU framework but remaining closely linked to it, Rieker's special issue (2021) constitutes a valuable exception to such a "formalism." Still, this study does not provide a theoretical approach that can explain the occurrence of informal differentiated integration and identifies extremely unspecified drivers of it, which are mostly related to the agency of EU member states and institutions. Additionally, it does single out the various types that these groupings may assume in relation to EU foreign policy.

All this considered, this article complements the scholarly literature on differentiated integration with scholarship on informal politics in the EU (Christiansen & Neuhold, 2013a). On one side, it conceptualizes these groupings as instances of *informal* differentiated cooperation (IDC). Indeed, rather than stemming from treaty-based mechanisms, these groups originate from informal interactions among EU member states, and occasionally institutions (Kleine, 2013). Furthermore, rather than employing formal arrangements, they work by means of "non-codified and not publicly sanctioned exchanges" (Christiansen, Follesdal, & Piattoni, 2003, p. 7). On other side, the article posits that there is a degree of dependency between EU formal institutions and these informal groupings, rather than just a juxtaposition of EU formal foreign policy framework with these informal arrangements (Conrad, 2006). Based on the study of differentiated integration of core state powers (Rittberger, Leuffen, & Schimmelfennig, 2013) and of informal politics in the EU, this article argues that conflicts among EU member states and the weakness of EU capacity in relation to specific policy issues are two explanatory factors for the emergence of the

informal groupings considered. These factors determine respectively the demand for and supply of IDC. While the demand-side explanation of IDC refers to member states, the supply-side explanation refers to the EU. For each of these factors it is possible to develop a specific argument.

First, *disagreement*. Disagreement among member states, stemming from the incompatibility of their preferences, may create a demand for IDC. When member states' preferences are compatible their representatives may take unanimous decisions within the European Council and the Council of the EU, leading to uniformly integrated EU foreign policy (Amadio Viceré, 2016). However, policy areas related to core state powers, including foreign and security policy, are characterized by a heterogeneity of member states' preferences. The latter provides fertile ground for disagreements among member states about the distribution of gains and losses in EU foreign policy (i.e., distributional conflicts) (Schimmelfennig & Winzen, 2020). When these disagreements occur, intergovernmental bargaining is unlikely to result in a uniformly integrated EU foreign policy action. In this scenario, IDC may add situational flexibility (Kleine, 2013) to formal intergovernmental bargaining by accommodating the heterogeneity of member states' preferences. For sure, depending on the extent to which member states' goals are incompatible, disagreements may have different intensity. Nonetheless, informal groupings may not only occur when disagreements among member states have a high level of intensity but also when they have a low level of intensity. Indeed, they may allow member states to cooperate in ways that are closer to their preferences than either no integration in foreign policy or uniform EU collective action.

Second, *capacity*. The weakness of EU capacity may generate a supply of IDC. While EU institutions, such as the HR/VP and the Commission, would use their capacities to maintain and/or foster uniformly integrated EU foreign policy action, they may not have enough capacity to do so. On the one hand, the EU may lack ideational capabilities (e.g., legitimacy; reputation; competences), and hence be politically too weak to provide a collective response to a given conflict (Amadio Viceré, 2021). On the other, it may lack material capacities (e.g., manpower; economic assets; operational assets) to act as a crisis manager (Boin, Ekengren, & Rhinard, 2013; Smith, 2021). While the EU has an extensive external economic action capacity in areas such as trade and humanitarian aid, EU capabilities in policy areas linked to core state powers are relatively weaker. In fact, since member states have been reluctant to integrate core resources of sovereign government (Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2018), at the EU level there is a general insufficiency of civilian and military capabilities for meeting EU foreign policy objectives (Menon, 2013; Juncos & Blockmans, 2021). In this scenario, informal groups may not only replace EU crisis management capacity when certain capabilities are missing but they may also complement it when

capabilities are in place but are insufficient to address relevant conflicts and crises (Interview A) (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

Regarding the emergence of specific types of informal groupings, this article claims that it is the combination of the levels of disagreement among EU member states and of EU capacity over time and across different policy issues that determines their formation. By taking inspiration from the literature on the international activities of subunits in federal regimes (Duchacek, 1990), the article submits that informal groupings may manifest themselves in three distinct types of differentiation in relation to EU foreign policy: competitive; combinative and cooperative (see Table 1). For each of these types, it is possible to develop a specific argument.

First, *competitive differentiation*. There may be a high level of disagreement among member states on a specific policy issue on which the EU has a low level of capacity. Highly conflicting goals are likely to generate stalemates within the European Council and Council of the EU. At the same time, when the EU lacks the capacity to address a specific conflict/crisis, it is unlikely that EU institutions will be able to provide an EU response. Under these circumstances, informal groupings may replace EU formal institutions and arrangements. They may move outside the EU institutional framework, while remaining loosely connected to it. As member states of the EU, group participants may continue to make use of EU reputation and legitimacy, and thus of its political strength. Moreover, they may continue to participate to intergovernmental gatherings and share information with other representatives, while trying to influence the EU agenda. Despite member states' duty of cooperation in EU foreign affairs, however, these groupings may compete with EU institutions and other member states in some issue areas (Interview U). The excluded member states, in turn, are likely to be "presented with a fait accompli and have no choice but to accept informal groupings" (Interview T).

Second, *cooperative differentiation*. There can be a high level of disagreement among EU member states on a specific policy issue and a high level of EU capacity to address it. When there is a high level of disagreement, it is unlikely that member states will find common ground within EU intergovernmental forums and that a collective EU action would take place. Under these circumstances, if the EU has the capacity to respond to the crisis/conflict at stake, the activities of informal groupings are likely to

Table 1. Informal groups and differentiation: causes and types.

| Disagreement | Capacity | |
|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | High | Low |
| High | Cooperative differentiation | Competitive differentiation |
| Low | Formal uniform EU foreign policy | Combinative differentiation |

Source: own elaboration.

flow into the EU responses to specific policy issues *ex post*. These groups are likely to inform the European Council of their activities retroactively, rather than discussing their initiatives with other member states beforehand. At the same time, they are likely to use EU structures as administrative supports, while benefitting from EU resources. As for the rest of the member states, while they may dislike this situation, they may have reasons not to oppose the use of EU structures and the mobilization of EU resources. In fact, they may have vetoed a collective EU effort because the issue at stake was highly politicized in their domestic constituencies, but they may still be interested in the resolution of such issue or of an issue related to it.

Third, *combinative differentiation*. There may be a low level of disagreement among member states on a specific policy issue on which the EU has a low level of capacity. In this scenario, member states' representatives in the European Council and the Council may generally approve, or at least do not oppose, a collective EU effort to address a specific conflict/crisis. This notwithstanding, the EU may completely lack the necessary capacity or may not have sufficient capacity to respond to such a crisis/conflict. Under these circumstances, informal groupings may combine their activities with EU institutions in international cooperation settings. The combination of various initiatives by informal groups in EU foreign policy coordinated streams may occur *ex ante*. Informal groupings are likely to coordinate with EU institutions and the rest of the member states before carrying out their activities. They may support the preparation, elaboration and evaluation of relevant EU policies within a specific dossier. In this context, member states participating in informal groupings may commit their capabilities to sustain EU policies towards specific foreign policy issues, or complement those already devised by the EU as a whole. As for the excluded member states, depending on their specific goals they may approve and/or simply be not interested in the informal groupings' activities.

Informal groupings of the EU in Kosovo, Libya, and Syria

The article employs congruence analysis to assess the explanatory power of the proposed theoretical approach. Using congruence as a method allows making claims about plausible causal relationships. Contrary to process tracing, congruence analysis does not generally involve a full-fledged theorized causal mechanism (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). Nonetheless, this case study method is particularly suitable to start addressing the above-discussed gaps in research on informal groupings. In fact, while congruence is suitable to test initial theoretical hypotheses in the form of a plausibility probe, process tracing is more suitable to putting to test promising causal conjectures that had been already confirmed through congruence. Unlike Blatter and Haverland's (2012) understanding of congruence as competitive

theory tests, this article uses what Beach and Pedersen call “theory-testing congruence” (Beach & Pedersen, 2016, p. 275). Through this specific method, researchers can adopt a comparative design to examine a causally homogenous population of cases and evaluate the validity of theoretical hypotheses through a plausibility probe. Finding proof of the theorized causal relationship in more than one case study offers a stronger confirmation of the claims made about its existence. Bearing these methodological tenets in mind, the article offers a congruence analysis of the emergence and various types of informal groups in Europe’s neighborhood, where most of the conflicts and crises the EU has faced after the Lisbon Treaty’s ratification happened. Within this empirical field, it examines a causally homogenous population of cases composed of Kosovo, Libya, and Syria.

As a matter of fact, we can be confident that the required contextual conditions, the cause, and the outcome of the phenomenon considered are present in all of these cases. Concerning the required contextual condition, the cases considered all consists of foreign and security policy dossiers, and hence relate to member states’ core state powers. As for the cause, it is reasonable to assume that in all these cases EU foreign policy was marred by disagreements among member states and/or the weakness of EU capacity (Amadio Viceré, 2018; Cavatorta & Turcotte, 2019; Fabbrini, 2014). Regarding the outcome, in all these cases informal groups of EU member states cooperated with non-EU actors in larger formalized international cooperation settings, making decisions that affected other member states without their participation. Nevertheless, on the one hand, these case studies have never been systematically examined in relation to the occurrence of informal groupings. On the other hand, previous studies on informal groupings taking place in these cases do not offer a plausible causal explanation for their emergence and various types (Gegout, 2002; Sepos, 2005).

This section examines the degree of congruence between the causal hypotheses deduced from the proposed theoretical approach and the observed empirical fingerprints within the cases selected. In particular, the article’s empirical analysis is based on triangulation of data drawn from publicly available sources and on original ones. As for publicly available data, the article carries out an extensive examination of documents collected from EU official online repositories, such as conclusions of the European Council and the Council, and EU decision-makers’ public statements. These sources can yield information about informal groupings’ embeddedness in EU institutional framework, as well as about their various types in relation to formal EU foreign policy. Additionally, the article examines historical documents gathered from the Historical Archives of the EU. These documents include proceedings and reports of EU institutions and of the Western European Union’s Assembly. Archival records are particularly useful to collect

unpublished, declassified evidence about institutional behaviors, as well as to study the consequences of institutions and events in the long run (Kim, 2022). The original data, in turn, include 21 semi-structured elite interviews. The latter were conducted between January and July 2022 face-to-face, over the phone and virtually with EU and member state officials involved in the cases examined (see the List of Interviews below). Interviews are a particularly useful method to cast light on the causes and types of informal governance (Lodge, 2013). To contextualize these primary sources, the article employs secondary sources, such as policy reports and newspapers.

Kosovo

The Quint stems from the Contact Group which was initially established in 1994 to address the Bosnian conflict (Interviews B, D, P). The Contact Group steered the response of the international community to the 1998–1999 conflict in Kosovo (Interviews B, H). Within it, an informal group of member states consisting of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom coordinated its efforts while interacting with the United States and Russia (Schwegmann, 2000). In practice, this format served to coordinate a U.S.-led coalition of EU member states throughout the conflict, while establishing cooperative ties with Russia (Amadio Viceré, 2019). The informal group of EU member states participating in this Contact Group essentially replaced the EU formal institutions and arrangements, determining the European response to the Kosovo conflict because of a combination of a high level of disagreement among EU member states and a low level of EU capacity. As for disagreement, in the words of a member state diplomat, “because of strong internal divisions among EU member states regarding the Kosovo conflict, there were individual initiatives by member states which completely moved outside of what used to be the European framework” (Interview P). Tellingly, in September 1998 a motion for a resolution stated that the European Parliament was “outraged by the Council’s inertia on the Kosovo issue” (European Parliament, 1998b, p. 2). Concerning capacity, the EU did not have sufficient crisis management tools to address the conflict (Interviews B; P). Certainly, it imposed economic sanctions on Serbia and an arms embargo on Kosovo. Nevertheless, it did not possess the necessary military assets to back its diplomatic efforts (Duke, 1999).

Over time, this informal group remained anchored to the EU, although loosely. EU institutions systematically made reference to the outcomes of the Contact Group’s meetings in their statements and during the drawing up of EU policies (Council of the EU, 1998; European Parliament, 1998a). They fully supported the Contact Group’s efforts, and welcomed and sustained its measures exerting pressure on Serbia (Assembly of the Western European Union, 1998). Nonetheless, the informal group of EU member

states acting within the Contact Group generated an instance of competitive differentiation. On the one hand, it made decisions that affected the choices of other member states and the EU without any form of policy coordination beforehand (Sepos, 2005). An interviewee claims that “if there was already a common position of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom within the Contact Group, the Council’s conclusions were reporting such position verbatim” (Interview P). In particular, the United Kingdom used the Council’s rotating presidency to act as agenda setter and anchor EU activities to the Contact Group’s decisions (Council of the EU, 1998; UK Parliament, 2000). On the other hand, the member states excluded and EU institutions were reported to voice disapproval of the existence of the group (Gegout, 2002). Some European Parliament members went so far as to “call on the member states represented in the Contact Group to withdraw so that they may be replaced by a European Union Representation” (European Parliament, 1998b, p. 3). Against this backdrop, Russia, which opposed any arrangement giving a security role to NATO, supported the Contact Group-initiated peace talks at the 1999 Rambouillet Conference. However, because of its disagreement with the possible deployment of a NATO-led force in the region, it left the Group during the negotiations. It is from the Contact Group’s ashes that the Quint arose as the main format for France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom to cooperate with the United States on the Balkans without Russia’s involvement (Gegout, 2010; Weller, 2009).

After the 1999 NATO bombing campaign against Serbian forces, the EU institutions took over the approach to Kosovo, in particular its economic reconstruction (Wouters et al., 2006; Interview H). Nonetheless, the Quint members came back to the forefront of EU policies on Kosovo not long after the coming into force of the Lisbon Treaty. At the time, the EU approach to Kosovo featured high disagreement (Interviews C, K, L). Five member states, namely Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain did not recognize Kosovo’s 2008 unilateral declaration of independence. Concerning EU capacity, the EU had at its disposal the enlargement process, which had given it considerable influence in the Western Balkans, including in conflict management (Hughes, 2012; Juncos, 2013). As an EU official explained, because of the EU enlargement policy “the EU’s capacity to have an impact was much higher” (Interview U). Nonetheless, to ensure EU influence over local actors there was the need to maintain transatlantic cohesion between the EU and the US (Interview D, U). Indeed, the EU institutions attempted to stabilize the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo by linking their EU accession prospects (Amadio Viceré, 2016, 2020). Under these circumstances, EU foreign policy witnessed the emergence of an instance of cooperative differentiation. While coordinating with the United States in the Quint, the informal group cooperated with EU institutions.

According to a diplomat of one of the EU member states participating in the Quint, “since there is the facilitation exercise with the [EU] special representative, we member states follow the flow rather than direct it” (Interview B). At the same time, an EU official explained the role of the Quint on Kosovo as follows: “It’s the Quint plus the EU [...] It comes on top of the specific EU foreign policy coordination mechanism” (Interview G).

In practice, the member states involved in the Quint fully supported the beginning of EU-mediated dialogue (Interview P) and sustained its unfolding (Interviews B, C, D). For instance, in September 2010 German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and British foreign minister William Hague traveled to Serbia to convince Belgrade on the need to change a United Nations’ (UN) draft resolution which served as the basis for beginning EU-mediated negotiations. Moreover, German Chancellor Angela Merkel fully supported the actual beginning of talks in March 2011 (ECFR, 2012). At the local level, the diplomatic missions of the informal grouping played a crucial role in sustaining the unfolding of dialogue (Interview R, S). An interviewee reported that the Quint members and EU representatives coordinated and prepared statements which, if needed, would then be presented as Quint ambassador declarations. As she explained, “The EU has a status neutral approach to Kosovo. So, we cannot join statements that take a non-status neutral EU approach” (Interview G).

Another relevant example is the Berlin Process for the Western Balkans (Interviews A, D, I, L, M, O). This was established in summer 2014 on an initiative by German Chancellor Merkel immediately after the European Commission declaring that there would be no further EU enlargement in the period 2014–2019 (European Western Balkans, 2014). Within the Process, an informal group of member states composed of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom alongside EU representatives cooperated with the Western Balkans countries interested in joining the EU. The emergence of this informal group can be ascribed to a combination of a low disagreement within the EU and a low level of capacity. Regarding the level of disagreement, the member states generally agreed on a need to facilitate resolution of bilateral disputes in the Western Balkans. Crucially, by facilitating regional cooperation the Berlin Process could foster stabilization of the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina (Interview L). As for the level of capacity, enlargement fatigue had been marring EU leverage linked to the accession prospects of Kosovo and Serbia (Interview B, U). As expected, the informal group acting within the Berlin Process represented an instance of combinative differentiation. Within the Process, the informal group combined its activities with those of the EU institutions. Not only did the Berlin Process formally include EU institutions but it also took place with overt financial support by the European Commission (Marciacq, 2017). As an interviewee

explained, the ambition of the Berlin Process was to put forward a series of infrastructure interventions which necessarily “required massive resources coming from the EU budget” (Interview H). The Western Balkans Investment Framework served as transmission belt for such resources. Interestingly, this platform’s strategic board was recently revised to include all member states within it. In the words of an interviewee,

member states that did not participate in the Berlin process did not like to see discussions about EU funds they contribute to without being part of the decision-making process [...] Obviously, a mechanism that commits common resources cannot but involve all member states. (Interview B)

Libya

During the first phases of the Libyan conflict, an informal group of EU member states composed of Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, and Sweden cooperated with third-party actors within the Libya Contact Group, also known as the Friends of Libya Group (FLG). The then U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was particularly active in establishing such contact group in March 2011 and in securing that the countries participating in it would recognize the TNC as the Libya’s legitimate government (U.S. Department of State, 2011). As for the informal group of EU member states, it emerged because of a high level of disagreement and a low level of capacity in the EU. Regarding disagreement, when the FLG was established there were strong divisions among EU member states on the strategy to adopt towards the Libyan crisis (Koenig, 2014). While France and the United Kingdom favored military intervention, Germany opposed it (Amadio Viceré & Tercovich, 2022). In addition, although the EU was able to provide humanitarian aid and impose sanctions, it lacked the military capacity to promote regime change in Libya (Fabbrini, 2014). Formally, the main aim of the FLG was to support the Libyan National Transitional Council during the conflict, leading to the ousting of Muammar Gaddafi (UK Government, 2011). However, the format essentially intended to produce legitimacy for the military intervention, which had been “essentially unilateral” and for a “responsibility to protect” which was not clear yet (Interview L). Against this backdrop, the informal group of EU member states cooperated in particular with the US and regional stakeholders. In doing so, it generated an instance of competitive differentiation. Certainly, over time the EU officially welcomed the establishment of the FSG (Council of the EU, 2011a, 2011b) and committed to “engage energetically” with it (Council of the EU, 2011c, p. 6). In practice, however, it played no role in this format (Interviews A, J, L).

Later, the EU sought to support the emergence of a new administration through capacity building programs (Interview N), in particular through the launch of a Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) in 2014. Nevertheless, it was the UN rather than the EU that was at the forefront in the international community's facilitation of a political transition in Libya (Interviews A, J, L). Since the related discussion mostly occurred in the UN Security Council (UNSC), a series of formats emerged around the P3, namely three members of the UNSC: France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The emergence of the P3 format in this policy dossier can be ascribed to a low level of disagreement within the EU coupled with a low level of capacity. Regarding disagreement, in the period considered no significant divisions emerged among the EU member states over the creation of a national unity government in Libya (ECFR, 2016). Indeed, the EU institutions were determined to engage in this process (EEAS, 2014; Interview N). Regarding capacity, however, the EU lacked the necessary leverage to exert high-level political pressure and promote international coordination, and hence to push the conflicting parties into dialogue and keep the dialogue going while halting interference by regional powers (Toaldo, 2016). Consequently, it had to remain dependent on the "good faith" of the UNSC players (Interview reported in Marcuzzi, 2022).

The P3 + 5, for instance, was formally established with the outbreak of the 2014 civil war. In addition to France, the United Kingdom, and the United States, it included the EU, the UN, Italy, Germany, and Spain. Its main aim was to favor political dialogue while safeguarding the arms embargo on Libya (EEAS, 2015a). The P3 + 3, in turn, emerged around the negotiations that led to the December 2015 Libyan Political Agreement (ECFR, 2016; Toaldo, 2016). In this case, the "+3" consisted of Italy, which had a relevant presence in Libya, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, which had been involved as they had the potential to persuade Libyan General Khalifa Haftar to reach a political agreement. In essence, this format served to exert pressure over the UAE and Egypt (Interview J). However, the most relevant and durable P3 format steering the EU approach to the Libyan political transition was the P3 + 2, in which the "+2" consisted of Italy and Germany (Interviews A, I, L, M, J, O). While the activities of the P3 + 2 informal grouping remained anchored to the EU (Interview L), empirical evidence indicates that this group generated an instance of combi-native differentiation. An interviewee described the P3 + 2's relationship with EU foreign policy as follows: "Italy, France, Germany, and the United Kingdom know very well that all this always flows into the channel of EU action" (Interview A). Furthermore, another interviewee stressed that during relevant developments in the Libyan dossier, if there was an EU press release there would be no P3 + 2 one and vice versa (Interview J).

Nonetheless, with the outbreak of the 2019–2020 civil war and Turkey’s military intervention in it, the Berlin Process on Libya emerged as the main international cooperation setting on Libya within the UN framework. Established in September 2019 by an initiative of the German government and Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General Ghassan Salamé, the Process aimed to include the P3 + 2 members and, because of German insistence, the EU. Over time it was gradually extended to international actors with a stake in the Libyan crisis (German Federal Foreign Office, 2020). The emergence of the informal grouping acting in this Process can be ascribed to high levels of disagreement within the EU coupled with a high level of capacity. Regarding disagreement, divisions among the EU member states, particularly France and Italy, had been marring the EU approach to the Libyan political transition (Interview L). The EU’s level of capacity, in turn, was relatively high. Since neither the UN nor the UN-backed Government of National Accord had invited the EU to intervene, it lacked the legitimacy to do so. In addition, the EU did not possess the military assets necessary to halt Haftar’s offensive by force (Marcuzzi, 2022). All this notwithstanding, unlike other international stakeholders, the EU had strong diplomatic authority (Megerisi, 2020). Indeed, the informal grouping of EU member states used this authority to come back to the diplomatic arena in the context of the Berlin Process and “turn the political spotlight on the Libyan crisis” (Interview I).

For sure, the EU role in the Berlin process has been contested by relevant actors involved in it. Turkey, which considered the EU crisis management operation in the Mediterranean Sea EUNAVFOR MED IRINI as a Greek-led initiative against itself, had been opposing the EU activities within the Process. Russia, in turn, had been reported to have opposed the explicit mention of EU contribution in the declaration of the second Berlin Conference to seek revenge against EU sanctions (Interview A). This notwithstanding, in practice, the activities of the informal group of EU member states manifested themselves in the form of cooperative differentiation. Tellingly, the Council was “debriefed about the outcomes” of the Berlin Process (Council of the EU, 2020, p. 5). On the initiative of Italian EU officials, the EU chose the economic working group (Interviews J, M, T). At the diplomatic level, EEAS officials had been engaging with this working group, in which the “member states had neither the human resources nor the technical capabilities” (Interview J). In the field, in turn, the European Commission had “used some of its policy programs to feed policy-related information, research and recommendations on the economic aspects of the working group” (Interview M).

Syria

EU foreign policy on Syria witnessed the emergence of an informal group within the Friends of Syria Group (FSG). The FSG was established in early

2012 on the initiative of France in response to stalemate in the UNSC after Russia and China vetoed a draft resolution on a peace plan for Syria in February 2012 (UNSC, 2012). Its main objective was to put pressure on the Syrian regime while working around the UNSC as long as it remained deadlocked (Crocker et al., 2014). Initially, the FSG consisted of 60 countries, representatives of various international organizations including the EU (FSG, 2012a) and an informal group of EU member states consisting of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Since the beginning of Syrian protests in March 2011 there had been a general agreement within the EU, mostly fostered by France, on the need for Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to step down (Interview F). Over time, the EU imposed a series of economic sanctions on the regime and suspended bilateral cooperation with it (European Parliament, 2012). However, there was a high level of disagreement within the EU about the launch of military operations to provide relief to the Syrian population and sustain anti-Assad forces. In fact, EU member states were divided between ones which advocated a military intervention in Syria (i.e., France and the United Kingdom, supported by Germany and the Netherlands) and ones which favored settlement of the crisis through negotiations (Bouris & Nacrour, 2018). Additionally, the EU had a limited capacity in this regard. While the EU lacked a UN mandate to deploy a military operation in a third country, it did not possess the necessary assets to face Syria's powerful army and its international allies (Koenig, 2017). It is against this backdrop that the FSG sought to address the Syrian conflict, including by supporting the Syrian opposition (FSG, 2012a, 2012b).

The EU welcomed the establishment of the FSG and its initiatives against the Syrian regime (Council of the EU, 2012a) and took its activities in strong consideration when discussing the Syrian dossier (Council of the EU, 2012b). Meanwhile, as an interviewee explained, “under the pressure of particularly influential member states such as France, it carved out for itself a role of humanitarian assistance” (Interview A). Tellingly, the EU was considered “an elephant that could have an impact because it had the strength of humanitarian aid” (Interview F). EU role as major provider of humanitarian assistance to Syria is reflected in the fact that the EU chaired the FSG's donor coordination work. Although the FSG was anchored to the EU, the informal grouping within this Group generated an instance of competitive differentiation. At the time, FSG membership was “essential for any actor wishing to play a role in post-al-Assad Syria” (Interview reported in European Parliament, 2012, p. 42). Consequently, as part of the EU's “contribution to the diplomatic efforts being deployed” then High Representative Catherine Ashton maintained “her own contacts” with the FSG (European Commission, 2012, p. 20). Nonetheless, while Ashton made it clear that the FSG statements “did not reflect an official EU position” (Council of the EU, 2012c, p. 2), the scant relevance of her and the EU in the FSG encountered harsh

criticism (European Parliament, 2013, p. 246). In this respect, a diplomat stated that the EU representatives had been invited “to have a coverage” (Interview F).

Eventually, while the FSG—and other political initiatives by the Arab League and by Iran and Russia—proved unsuccessful (Interview D), a new format emerged within the UN-led process: the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) (European Parliament, 2016). The ISSG was created during peace talks on Syria held in Vienna in late 2015 with the aim of supporting the implementation of a ceasefire in Syria (EEAS, 2015b) through a 2012 Geneva communiqué (United Nations, 2012). It was proposed by the US and Russia, which supported opposite sides in the conflict. Indeed, the Russian military intervention in favor of Assad had changed the conflict’s power dynamics, upending the U.S. strategies. Russia, in turn, was eager to engage in an international diplomatic context and gain legitimacy for its activities in Syria. Against this backdrop, the ISSG comprised regional and international organizations and various countries, including in the Middle Eastern and Northern African region. Most importantly, an informal group of EU member states consisting of France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and the United Kingdom worked alongside the EU institutions within the ISSG as well. At the EU level, this informal group emerged because of high disagreement coupled with a high level of capacity in the EU. The progressive rise of the Nusra Front and Daesh on the rebel side had turned Assad into a partner in the fight against terrorism, while the September 2015 Russian intervention had strengthened the Syrian regime. Some member states headed by France remained firm in their stance against Assad, whereas others were ready to pursue a policy of accommodation to beat Daesh (Cavatorta & Turcotte, 2019). Against this backdrop, the EU lacked centralized capacity to conduct a military fight against ISIS but continued to have a high level of humanitarian capacity (Interview A).

As expected, the informal grouping generated an instance of cooperative differentiation. EU member states “fully supported” the ISSG’s efforts to end the conflict in Syria through a political process (European Council, 2015, p. 7). At the same time, the EU institutions sustained the ISSG’s work (European Commission, 2016) while cooperating with its members (European Parliament, 2018). Not only did the ISSG establish a Humanitarian Task Force but empirical evidence suggests that the informal groups of member states were steering the EU approach to the Syrian humanitarian crisis while cooperating with third parties within the ISSG (Interviews A, E, F; Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Interestingly, while the UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen was reported to interact directly with those EU member states, he was also the one inviting the EU to join the ISSG. Meanwhile, the ISSG monitored a U.S.-Russia ceasefire agreement which allowed a U.S.-led international coalition and Russia to launch air

Table 2. Informal groups and differentiation: Kosovo, Libya, and Syria.

| Case study | International setting of cooperation | Policy issue | Disagreement | Capacity | Form of differentiation |
|------------|--------------------------------------|---|--------------|----------|-------------------------|
| Kosovo | Quint I | Kosovo Conflict | High | Low | Competitive |
| | Quint II | Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue | High | High | Cooperative |
| | Berlin Process | Resolution of bilateral disputes through regional cooperation | Low | Low | Combinative |
| Libya | Friends of Libya | Regime change | High | Low | Competitive |
| | P3 + 5/3/2 | Political transition | Low | Low | Combinative |
| | Berlin Process | Political transition | High | High | Cooperative |
| Syria | Friends of Syria | Regime change | High | Low | Competitive |
| | International Syria Support Work | Humanitarian crisis | High | High | Cooperative |

Source: own elaboration.

strikes against Daesh and the Nusra Front (GRI, 2016). Eventually, however, the ISSG's political activities slowed down. As the above-quoted diplomat explained, at the time being, the ISSG "is dormant. The humanitarian task meets, but the political part has not met for several years. This may be because Iran and the US are in it"¹ (Interview F).

Conclusion

By examining the EU approach to conflicts and crises in its neighborhood, this article has found empirical evidence in favor of the special issue's theoretical approach and of the analytical framework it proposes. It confirmed the relevance of systematically incorporating informal governance developing not only within but also outside the EU framework to explain the emergence of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy. The central argument of the article is that the emergence of informal groupings can be ascribed to problems associated with the European integration of core state powers. In this sense, informal groupings can be conceived as coping strategies that the EU devises, alongside externalization of its crisis management activities to third parties (Amadio Viceré, 2021), to address the heterogeneity of member states' preferences and its lack of capacity-building in areas corresponding to key functions of state sovereignty.

In particular, the article's findings indicate that while disagreements among EU member states and EU capacity are the main determinant of informal groupings, the combination of these two factors over time and across different policy issues determines specific types of informal groupings in relation to EU foreign policy (see Table 2). Indeed, the Western Balkans' Berlin Process and the P3 + 2 format indicate that when the member states generally agreed on a collective effort but lacked the capacities to address a specific policy issue, informal groupings have complemented the EU activities

in international cooperation settings. While generating instances of combinative differentiation, they tempered the lack of effective policy co-ordination marring EU foreign policy. At the same time, the Quint, the Berlin Process on Libya, and the ISSG show that when a high level of disagreement within the EU coupled with a high level of capacity, informal groupings manifested themselves as instances of cooperative differentiation in EU foreign policy. Nonetheless, when there have been high levels of disagreement among EU member states and the EU has lacked the capacities to address specific issues, informal groupings have essentially replaced EU formal institutions. The Contact Group, the FLG and the FSG demonstrate that these groupings gave rise to forms of competitive differentiation within EU foreign policy.

Against this backdrop, one may wonder whether over time member states' preferences for informal groups might reverse the progressive trend of centralization of member states' foreign policies in the European integration process. As the informal groupings considered are an unprecedented phenomenon in both federal regimes and international organization, they inevitably raise an important theoretical challenge for the European integration of core state powers. At first sight, these groupings seem to be positive devices rendering EU foreign policy more efficient and hence strengthening the EU stance in the international arena. Indeed, these distinctive patterns of interaction among member states may make EU foreign policy decision-making processes quicker and increase the likelihood that member states will devote their resources to achieving EU objectives in international politics. Nonetheless, they cannot be considered a panacea for the urgent need to reform EU governance. Not only can informal groupings as they stand serve only short-term purposes but they are likely to sustain governance action in multiple segmented patterns (Bátora & Fossum, 2019) thus hampering the overall consistency of EU foreign policy. In addition, it is reasonable to argue that informal groupings are likely to decrease the already limited legitimacy of EU foreign policy (cf. Kleine, 2013). In fact, although their activities also have externalities on member states that are excluded from them, informal groupings lack mechanisms to ensure their accountability.

Note

1. Iran's participation to the ISSG was facilitated by its rapprochement with the US in the context of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA) signed in July 2015.

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