



# Foreign Policy and Dissensus over Liberal Democracy

*Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré*

## I INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy has long constituted a cornerstone of the EU external identity and action. Enshrined in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty and reaffirmed in successive EU strategic documents, it remains a formal normative commitment for the EU. Nonetheless, growing divisions among member states over its application in external action have progressively challenged the EU coherence, consistency, and credibility as a normative actor on the global stage. These divisions have not only affected the EU declaratory positions but have also influenced its foreign policy instruments, bilateral relations with third countries, and the tangible outcomes of its external engagement. Importantly, their consequences have extended beyond formal decision-making arenas as well. Deepening internal divisions over liberal democracy have contributed to the informalisation of EU foreign policy. In particular, they have led to the emergence of informal groupings of member states steering EU foreign policy, often in cooperation with non-EU actors within international settings for cooperation, such as Contact Groups. The emergence of informal groups has generally reflected not only the inability or unwillingness of member states to reach agreement on the practice of liberal democracy in EU foreign policy

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M. G. Amadio Viceré (✉)  
Luiss University, Rome, Italy  
e-mail: [mamadio@luiss.it](mailto:mamadio@luiss.it)

European University Institute, Florence, Italy

through formal structures and procedures, but also their difficulty or reluctance in coherently implementing decisions once adopted. These groups have provided situational flexibility for intergovernmental bargaining (Kleine, 2013) and have helped to compensate for the EU limited institutional capacities and the shortcomings of its enforcement mechanisms in specific policy areas (Boin et al., 2013; Smith, 2021). By replacing, complementing, or reinforcing official EU policies, they have given rise to instances of differentiated cooperation in EU external action (Amadio Viceré, 2023). In doing so, they have offered pragmatic responses to institutional gridlock. Nevertheless, their proliferation risks undermining the coherence of EU governance, the strategic unity of its external action, and the EU normative legitimacy on the global stage.

To support this argument, the chapter examines how dissensus over liberal democracy among EU member states has impacted EU foreign policy towards Kosovo and Ukraine, with special consideration to the occurrence of informal groupings. Kosovo and Ukraine are illustrative cases of the practice of liberal democracy in EU foreign policy under conditions of dissensus over it. These countries are part of the two main policy frameworks the EU has been employing to project liberal democratic values beyond its borders: the EU enlargement policy and the European Neighbourhood Policy (see Badulescu and Tomini in this Handbook). Within these policy frameworks, Kosovo and Ukraine are particularly relevant for the EU projection of such values. Kosovo's stability is fundamental for the security and integration of the entire Western Balkans region, where the EU aims to promote liberal democracy to prevent ethnic conflicts and support eventual EU accession, whereas the promotion of liberal democratic values in Ukraine is part of EU broader strategy to uphold the international liberal order based on multilateralism and to counter Russian aggressive stance in the post-Soviet space. And yet, EU foreign policy towards both countries has been marred by dissensus among member states over the pace and scope of democratic reforms, the level of political and security support to provide, and how to balance relations with external powers like Russia. Against this backdrop, member states have resorted to informal groups to steer EU foreign policy towards both countries.

The remainder of the chapter proceeds as follows. First, it discusses the practical challenges faced by the EU in implementing liberal democracy in its foreign policy, with special consideration to EU institutional construction. After having illustrated the phenomenon of informal groupings in EU foreign policy, the chapter examines their occurrence in response to dissensus over liberal democracy in the EU approach to Kosovo and Ukraine. Finally, the chapter draws conclusions on the broader implications of dissensus and informalisation in EU foreign policy.

## 2        DISSENSUS OVER LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND THE EU FOREIGN POLICY

The EU has long sought to champion liberal democracy as a core principle of its foreign policy (Tuominen, 2022; Wagner, 2017). The Lisbon Treaty enshrines the EU commitment in this regard. In its external relations, the EU should advance democracy, the rule of law, human rights, individual freedoms, and equality (Article 2 and Article 3 TEU). Within the context of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty's implementation, the 2016 EU Global Strategy reinforced these commitments, affirming the EU support for an international system grounded in international law, human rights, sustainable development, and open access to global commons (EEAS, 2016, p. 10). Over time, the EU has reiterated through its cornerstone strategic documents its engagement to advancing liberal democratic values on the global stage across a wide array of policy domains and issue areas. Among these, there are the 2017 European Consensus on Development (European Commission, 2017), the 2020 EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy (EEAS, 2020), the 2019 European Green Deal (European Commission, 2019), and the 2022 Strategic Compass (EEAS, 2022). As never before in the post-Cold War period, however, liberal democratic values are under threat around the world. Russia's war in Ukraine and its interferences in East European countries' internal politics, Israel's lack of adherence to international humanitarian law throughout its response to Hamas' attacks and hostage takings, as well as US President Donald Trump's hostility towards third countries' self-determination and his former advisor Elon Musk's muddling into European politics, are only some of the most known examples of a widespread disregard for liberal democratic values in the international system.

Against the backdrop of EU multiple crises, divisions over the interpretation and prioritisation of liberal democratic values have been growing within the EU as well. Despite EU liberal aspirations and commitments, member states have often resisted policies seeking to advance democracy, human rights, or social justice on a regional and global scale. Granted, certain member states, such as Denmark and Sweden, have generally remained committed to the liberal democratic agenda in EU external action over time. At the same time, dissensus over liberal democratic values in EU foreign policy has been spearheaded especially by sovereigntist countries that themselves have experienced shifts from EU core liberal democratic principles towards more illiberal models of governance, such as Hungary and Poland (Zgut-Przybylska, 2023). Yet, regardless of the political force in government, the prioritisation of national interests and geopolitical stability over strict democratic conditionality has been a cross-cutting phenomenon across Europe. Italy's enduring relations with the Libyan coastguard and militias to halt migration flows notwithstanding evidence of human rights' violations, the persistence of Germany's economic engagement with Russia after the outbreak of the 2014 conflict in Ukraine, and France's interactions with Chad, Mali, and Cameroon despite

these countries’ disrespect for democratic principles are clear examples (Cohen, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Karnitschnig & Nöstlinger, 2022).

Inevitably, such a growing dissensus among member states over liberal democracy has been weakening EU ability to coherently interpret, prioritise, and enforce liberal democratic values in its foreign policy. This phenomenon has been evident in various dimensions of EU foreign policy. Dissensus over liberal democracy has frequently hindered EU response to specific external conflicts and crises. At the same time, it has curtailed EU efforts to recalibrate its broader approach in response to evolving regional challenges through policy frameworks originally conceived to project liberal democracy, such as the EU enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy (Amadio Viceré & Venneri, 2023; Csaki, 2024). As such dissensus over liberal democratic values spread within and among EU member states, in fact, the institutional architecture governing EU foreign policy has revealed significant limitations in enabling the collective action needed for the EU to coherently pursue them externally. This is an issue to which the next section now turns.

3 THE ROLE OF THE EU FOREIGN POLICY INSTITUTIONS

What role can EU institutions play in shaping the consequences of dissensus over liberal democracy on EU foreign policy? At times, EU foreign policy institutions and procedures have been able to temper divisions among member states over liberal democratic values through the identification of a compromise among them. Often, however, EU institutions have tended to catalyse such divisions, leading to policy incoherence, selective application of liberal norms, and a weakening of the EU normative credibility on the international stage. Table 1 illustrates the implications of dissensus over liberal democracy on EU foreign policy along two dimensions of EU governance: the decision-making and implementation stage. The decision-making rules and the logics of implementation in place along these dimensions have determined four main patterns of implications of dissensus over liberal democracy in EU foreign policy.

The first pattern within the decision-making stage refers to policy domains within the context of EU external action where decisions are taken by

**Table 1** Dissensus over liberal democracy and EU foreign policy institutions: empirical manifestations

| <i>Decision-making logic</i>     | <i>Implementation logic</i>           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <i>Unanimity</i>                 | <i>Voluntary coordination</i>         |
| <i>Vetoes</i>                    | <i>Uneven policy implementation</i>   |
| <i>Qualified majority voting</i> | <i>Legislative acts</i>               |
| <i>Compromise</i>                | <i>Limited enforcement mechanisms</i> |

unanimity (see Table 1, box in the top left corner). Disagreements among member states on the interpretation and prioritisation of liberal democratic values in these policy domains have recurrently led to vetoes and thus stalemates in the European Council and the Council of the EU. Greece 2017 decision to veto an EU statement at the UN criticising China on human rights, based on its economic interests, including Chinese investments in the Piraeus port, clearly reflects this dynamic for EU common foreign and security policy (CFSP/CSDP) (Reuters, 2017). Member states' divisions in the context of EU enlargement policy are another important example. In 2019, for instance, France blocked North Macedonia and Albania from starting EU accession talks despite their reform progresses mostly because of domestic political concerns about national sovereignty and immigration (Brzozowski & Gotev, 2019).

The second pattern within the decision-making stage refers to policy domains where unanimity does not apply but qualified majority voting is in place (see Table 1, box in the bottom left corner). In these domains, member states have at times managed to overcome their initial disagreement, reaching compromises among them. The area of trade and development cooperation is an important example. Qualified majority voting was crucial to reach a compromise over the inclusion of human rights clauses in the 2020 EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, despite divisions between member states advocating for firm stances (i.e. France and the Netherlands) and others concerned about the economic implications of such clauses (i.e. Germany) (Wnukowski & Wasiński, 2021). During the negotiations for the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe) for 2021–2027 as well, member states overcame their divisions on democracy, migration, and aid priorities thanks to qualified majority voting (Lundgren et al., 2022).

As for the patterns occurring in the implementation stage, the first one refers to policy domains where the implementation logic is based on voluntary policy coordination among EU member states (see Table 1, box in the top right corner). In these domains, there have been situations where decisions have been successfully taken at the EU level, but dissensus over liberal democracy has negatively impacted their implementation. This has been the case of policies where decisions have been successfully taken at the EU level through both unanimity, such as the CFSP/CSDP, and qualified majority voting, such as migration. For instance, although EU sanctions on Belarus had been unanimously approved by EU member states in the attempt to show EU commitment to support democracy, they have witnessed varying degrees of implementation in response to the mass protests and violent crackdown following the 2020 Belarus elections due to certain member states' trade and energy-related interests (Miadzvetskaya, 2022). At the same time, Visegrad countries' lack of implementation of the EU return and admission agreements with Tunisia in 2014 and Morocco in 2000 after these had been approved

through qualified majority voting are a blatant example of how these countries' dissensus over liberal democratic values can negatively impact EU foreign policy (Lilienkamp & Saliba, 2015).

The second pattern unfolding in the implementation stage refers to domains where the implementation logic is based on legislative binding acts (see Table 1, box in the bottom right corner). Significantly, EU enforcement mechanisms may be weak in these foreign policy domains as well. For example, even though the enforcement of EU development cooperation is based on legislative binding acts, it mostly refers to financial compliance rather than on policy compliance (McAllister, 2025; Vanheukelom, 2013). Indeed, member states' disagreements over liberal democratic values have often led to inconsistent implementation of EU development policy. Egypt is an important example. EU member states have adopted diverging development aid approaches due to their stances on the 2013 military coup and the ensuing establishment of an authoritarian regime. While some prioritised democratic conditionality, others emphasised stability and security cooperation (Abdalla, 2016).

And yet, as discussed in the next section, the implications of dissensus over liberal democracy has not remained confined to the formal arenas of EU decision-making. On the contrary, such dissensus has increasingly fostered the informalisation of EU foreign policy, most notably through the emergence and consolidation of informal groupings among member states. The latter, as the chapter argues, have been crucial for the EU to navigate growing disagreement among EU member states over the practice of liberal democracy in its external action.

#### 4 NAVIGATING DISSENSUS THROUGH INFORMAL GROUPS

While dissensus over liberal democracy has repeatedly obstructed EU aspirations in its foreign policy from within, member states have often resorted to informal groups to navigate it. These groups of member states are informal insofar as they are not established through treaty-based mechanisms, such as the execution of a specific task by a group of member states (Article 42 and Article 44 TEU), the Enhanced Cooperation (Article 20 TEU), or Permanent Structured Cooperation in EU common security and defense policy (CSDP) (Article 42 and Article 46 TEU). Significantly, however, they go beyond simple bilateral or multilateral cooperation between nation-states. Informal groups remain, to different degrees, loosely connected to EU foreign policy institutional framework (Aggestam & Bicchi, 2019). They actively take part in EU decision-making processes and make use of the EU bureaucracy, drawing on both its political resources, such as legitimacy and reputation, and material means, like sanctions and humanitarian aid, to pursue their goals (Keukeleire, 2006). Moreover, while their actions may replace, and at times compete with, EU policies, they often complement or reinforce EU external action (Amadio

Viceré, 2023; Hill, 2004). These groups are, in essence, informal manifestations of differentiated cooperation in EU foreign policy (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2023).

The occurrence of such distinctive patterns of informal cooperation in EU foreign policy comes as no surprise; the scholarly literature on informal governance within international organisations has generally viewed informal arrangements as a way to foster and sustain high levels of cooperation among states (Roger, 2022). According to this literature, informal governance may arise out of the necessity to accommodate the interests of certain states, especially when these interests could disrupt cooperation within international organisations (Kleine, 2013). It may arise from the need to address domestic political concerns and reduce transaction costs that might hinder effective cooperation within international organisations (Koremenos, 2013; Vabulas & Snidal, 2013). At the same time, it may stem out of the need to accommodate the interests of powerful states, especially large ones (Stone, 2011, 2013). As these states may be tempted to act unilaterally outside the organisation, less powerful states are likely to accept informal arrangements (Carrubba et al., 2008; König & Mäder, 2014; Steinberg, 2002). Similarly, the literature on practice theory has emphasised the importance of groups of like-minded practitioners engaging in shared practices in international relations (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Neumann, 2002; Solomon & Steele, 2017).

The EU studies field too has been delving into the reasons why states opt to circumvent formal rules (Christiansen & Neuhold, 2013; Christiansen et al., 2003). The scholarly literature on EU foreign policy, especially, has identified the level of disagreement among EU member states among the main reasons why informal groups emerge in EU foreign policy (Amadio Viceré, 2023). When member states share similar preferences, they can reach unanimous decisions in the European Council (see Bocquillon and Schram in this Handbook) and the Council of the EU (see also Winzen in this Handbook), and hence devise collective foreign policies. Since EU foreign policy is anchored into their core state powers (Genschel, 2022), however, member states frequently have diverse interests over how costs and benefits of EU decisions should be shared among them. As a result, formal negotiations often fail to produce unified action. Against this backdrop, informal groups of EU member states and, occasionally, EU institutions have recurrently steered EU external action across policy sectors over time (Amadio Viceré, 2024). These dynamics have unfolded especially when disagreement, and thus dissensus, occurred among EU member states over the practice of liberal democracy in EU foreign policy.

Over time, informal groups have served as pragmatic vehicles through which liberal democratic values could be pursued despite divisions among EU member states and EU structural limitations. Where formal channels have fallen short, they have sustained the cooperation necessary to keep EU foreign policy operational and to pursue liberal democratic values. In this context, the intensity of dissensus among EU member states over specific policies or decision-making procedures pertaining to the practice of liberal

democracy has significantly shaped the qualifying feature of the informal differentiated cooperation occurred among EU member states via informal groups (Amadio Viceré, 2023; see Coman in this Handbook). In particular, this chapter argues, it has determined these groups' functions and institutional proximity to the EU. While groups responding to mild dissensus over liberal democracy among member states have often worked in synergy with EU institutions, those emerging from severe dissensus have tended to act more autonomously and even replace the EU. Mild dissensus among EU member states over liberal democracy has typically involved instrumental or procedural differences among member states that broadly agreed on core values. In such instances, informal groups have acted as flexible coordination tools complementing formal EU mechanisms. Conversely, severe dissensus has reflected deep normative or geopolitical cleavages, which have paralysed collective action. The case studies of Kosovo and Ukraine illustrate how the type of dissensus produces differentiated forms of informal cooperation.

### *Kosovo*

To promote liberal democracy in the Western Balkans, the EU has generally employed its enlargement policy, especially its political conditionality based on candidate countries' fulfilment of the Copenhagen accession criteria. Within this context, the EU has long sought to promote liberal democratic values in Kosovo, particularly in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and governance. EU member states' divisions on how to approach Kosovo have, however, often hindered EU objectives in this regard. A major point of contention among EU member states has been how to approach the Serbia–Kosovo normalisation dialogue given Kosovo's recognition dilemma. Ever since 2010, EU institutions, particularly the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, have attempted to stabilise the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo by linking such a stabilisation to their EU accession prospects (Amadio Viceré, 2016). However, while most of EU member states have recognised Kosovo's independence since its unilateral declaration in 2008, five of them have refused to do so. Recognising states have generally argued that supporting Kosovo's independence and democratic development is essential for ensuring long-term stability in the Western Balkans. They have seen Kosovo's progress towards democracy as part of a broader effort to integrate the region into the EU, and thus to prevent a return to ethnic conflicts (Newman & Visoka, 2018). Non-recognising states, conversely, have mostly shared concerns related to repercussions that such a recognition could entail over their own domestic separatist movements. While Romania and Slovakia have been concerned about their ethnic Hungarian populations, Spain has been worrying about the Basque and Catalan separatists. Greece and the Republic of Cyprus, in turn, have feared the potential secession of the Northern Cyprus region (Armakolas & Ker-Lindsay, 2020).

These divisions have not only undermined the EU credibility as a unified international actor, but also significantly weakened Kosovo's European integration prospects. As a consequence, the EU enlargement strategy has lost much of its effectiveness as a mechanism to foster liberal democratic values in the region. Against this backdrop, a group of influential EU member states, consisting of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK, has recurrently acted through informal arrangements within the Quint, a broader international coordination format originally derived from the 1994 Contact Group on Bosnia. While coordinating their positions informally, Quint members have worked closely with EU institutions and the United States to steer EU foreign policy objectives in Kosovo, particularly in relation to the Serbia–Kosovo dialogue.

The informal nature of the Quint allowed these states to bypass formal unanimity constraints while remaining loosely embedded in the EU institutional framework. The member states represented in the Quint were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the EU-mediated Brussels Agreement in 2013 and subsequent negotiations. In September 2010, for instance, German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and British Foreign Minister William Hague visited Serbia to persuade Belgrade to revise a UN draft resolution that laid the foundation for EU-facilitated negotiations. Additionally, German Chancellor Angela Merkel fully backed the official launch of talks in March 2011 (ECFR, 2012). At the same time, Quint representatives often coordinated diplomatic statements with the European External Action Service. Notably, EU member state diplomats within the Quint occasionally issued joint declarations as “Quint ambassadors” to circumvent the EU status-neutral position vis-à-vis Kosovo. These dynamics highlight how informal groups can operate as pragmatic vehicles to sustain EU liberal democratic engagement, even when severe internal divisions preclude collective EU action. Indeed, the Quint's efforts were functionally aligned with EU objectives and relied on EU platforms and resources, thus reflecting a type of informal differentiated cooperation characterised by both institutional proximity and operational autonomy (Amadio Viceré, 2018).

Yet, despite these efforts, the EU ability to sustain a transformative democratic agenda in Kosovo has remained constrained. The post-2010 intensification of Euroscepticism, especially in the wake of the Eurozone crisis, culminated in a temporary *de facto* halt to the enlargement process during the Juncker Commission (2014–2019) (Lilyanova, 2016). As a response to this halt, in Summer 2014, Germany launched the Berlin Process, a diplomatic initiative bringing together an informal coalition of EU member states, namely: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Slovenia, and the UK. While primarily oriented towards fostering economic development and connectivity, the Berlin Process also set broader objectives aligned with liberal democratic values. Especially, it aimed to reinforce democratic norms and governance reforms by offering financial incentives for institutional improvements in the Western Balkans, including Kosovo. In this

**Table 2** Informal groups and dissensus over liberal democracy: Kosovo and Ukraine

| <i>Informal group</i>                  | <i>Cause of dissensus</i>                           | <i>Type of dissensus</i>              | <i>Main function</i>                                               |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Quint (Kosovo)                         | Lack of recognition by five member states           | Severe/normative                      | Unlock Belgrade–Pristina dialogue with EU support                  |
| Berlin process (Kosovo)                | Stalled formal enlargement post-2014                | Mild/procedural                       | Promote reforms and governance via parallel mechanisms             |
| Normandy format (Ukraine)              | Failure of collective EU leadership post-Crimea     | Mild/procedural                       | Diplomatic mediation without EU mandate                            |
| Weimar triangle/<br>Weimar + (Ukraine) | EU fragmentation post-2022 + US/<br>Trump exclusion | Mild/procedural +<br>Severe/normative | Strengthen democratic and defensive response to Russian aggression |

context, programs such as the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) attempted to empower civil society and strengthen cross-border collaboration. However, the Process has lacked the strong democratic conditionality typical of formal EU accession mechanisms. Its impact on rule of law and anti-corruption efforts in Kosovo has therefore been largely dependent on domestic political will. Furthermore, Kosovo’s participation has continued to be hampered by the non-recognition of its independence by five EU member states, which has limited its ability to fully engage in regional initiatives within the framework of the Berlin Process (Vulović, 2022).

Taken together, the Quint and the Berlin Process demonstrate how varying degrees of dissensus have influenced the form, function, and degree of institutional integration of informal cooperation in EU foreign policy. The Quint, which at times partially substituted formal EU action, emerged in response to severe normative dissensus, characterised by deep and persistent disagreements among member states over fundamental principles such as state sovereignty and self-determination. In contrast, the Berlin Process developed within a context of milder procedural dissensus, referring to disagreements primarily about decision-making processes or mechanisms rather than about the core principles or objectives themselves. As such, it has served as a complementary coordination platform that helped sustain democratic engagement despite existing institutional constraints (see Table 2).

*Ukraine*

The EU has employed the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) to promote democracy, rule of law, and market

reforms in the Eastern neighbourhood, including Ukraine. Although considerably weaker than in the EU enlargement process due to the absence of a clear membership perspective, the political conditionality underpinning the ENP/EaP has represented the EU main asset to pursue its liberal democratic objectives in this region. Against the backdrop of Russia's increasing geopolitical pressure in the post-Soviet space, however, member states' divisions over how to support Ukraine's democratisation significantly limited EU capacity to promote liberal democracy in Ukraine (Dragneva & Wolczuk, 2015). These divisions primarily reflected contrasting national priorities and threat perceptions. Among others, Germany and France generally preferred a cautious stance to avoid provoking Russia and protect their economic and energy interests. Poland and the Baltic states, conversely, have often pushed for a stronger, more assertive EU role in supporting Ukraine's democracy and countering Russian influence, due to their historical and security concerns. Overall, this fragmentation diluted EU influence as a liberal democratic actor over both Ukraine's domestic trajectory and Russia's aggressive behaviour.

Member states' divisions over Ukraine persisted following Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014. While member states broadly agreed that the EU should defend core liberal democratic principles in the face of Russian aggression, a dissensus emerged among them over how far and how assertively the EU should do so. Although this dissensus was mild and mostly procedural, it was hard to forge an agreement within the EU formal structures on a strong, united foreign policy stance. Even though the EU did impose sanctions on Russia, this was achieved only after intense internal negotiations and reflected a fragile compromise. While Eastern member states called for robust and sustained sanctions in defence of both Ukraine's sovereignty and broader European democratic values, countries like Hungary, Italy, and Greece opposed them due to their economic concerns and energy dependence on Russia (Dempsey, 2014). The resulting sanctions were limited in scope. Furthermore, they faced constant challenges in being maintained and expanded (Sanus et al., 2024).

This widespread lack of agreement also prevented the EU from taking collective leadership in negotiating a settlement to the conflict in Ukraine. As a result, Germany and France stepped in. To lead negotiations with Russia and Ukraine, they gave birth to the Normandy Format in July 2014. Not only did the Format not include EU representatives, but Germany and France also never received a formal mandate from EU institutions or other member states to act within it on behalf of the EU. It is reasonable to argue that the dissensus leading to the emergence of the Normandy format mostly involved instrumental or procedural differences. Indeed, the European Council fully supported the activities of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel and of the French President Francois Hollande, who debriefed the other EU leaders about the main results of their negotiations (European Council, 2015). At the same time, the then High Representative Federica Mogherini and the Foreign Affairs Council often coordinated their activities with those of the Normandy

Format to support its efforts over time (Council of the EU, FAC, 2015; High Representative, 2015a, 2015b).

At first sight, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been a game-changer in EU foreign policy. Granted, the invasion initially pushed the EU towards an unprecedented degree of unity. The attribution of EU candidate status to Ukraine in 2022 is an important example. At a closer look, however, dissensus over liberal democracy has continued to constrain the coherence and effectiveness of the EU foreign policy even after the war's outbreak. Countries like Poland and the Baltic states have consistently advocated for a robust defence of Ukraine's sovereignty and democratic aspirations. Others, such as Hungary, and at times Germany and France, have prioritised more pragmatic concerns, including energy dependency and economic ties with Russia, to avoid an escalation and consequent expansion of the conflict to NATO countries. These divisions have complicated EU decision-making processes over critical issues, such as sanctions, military aid, and debates over Ukraine's EU accession (Dersimonian, 2024; Foy & Tamma, 2025; Meister, 2022; Victor, 2024). While doing so, they have weakened the EU capacity to act as a decisive liberal democratic actor in response to the war. Importantly, they have also led to the emergence of informal groups of member states operating outside formal EU mechanisms. For example, Poland and the Baltic countries have frequently coordinated their efforts to push for stronger military aid and tougher sanctions. As exemplified by their joint visit to Kyiv in June 2022, other countries, like France, Germany, and Italy, have pursued their own diplomatic initiatives (Amadio Viceré & Sus, 2025).

The more recent revival of the Weimar Triangle, initially consisting of France, Germany, and Poland, and its transformation into the Weimar + Group, through the inclusion of the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, and the European Commission, further highlights member states' reliance on informal groups. The Weimar + Group emerged in part due to normative dissensus, especially from member states such as Hungary and Slovakia, which resisted deeper liberal democratic commitments towards Ukraine and opposed more confrontational policies towards Russia (See Kazai in this Handbook). This resistance hindered EU unity and prompted more like-minded states to coordinate outside the formal institutional framework. At the same time, the Group's emergence responded to procedural dissensus based on disagreements over how the EU should respond institutionally to geopolitical developments, such as President Trump's exclusion of European actors from Ukraine-related negotiations (see Table 2). While cooperating with the European Commission and the United Kingdom, the Weimar + attempted to foster liberal democratic values in the international response to the war in Ukraine, alongside enhancing European defence capabilities (Pierini, 2025; Speck, 2025). Indeed, by advocating for inclusive peace negotiations, reinforcing support for Ukraine, and setting the basis for an enhancement of European defence capabilities, the Group sought to ensure that such a response would align with the principles of liberal democracy (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025).

## 5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined how dissensus over liberal democracy among EU member states shapes EU foreign policy. Despite longstanding commitments to promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law through its external action, the EU capacity to do so has been increasingly undermined by growing internal divisions among EU member states. While liberal democratic values remain enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty and in the EU strategic documents, national interests, domestic political considerations, and governments' differing threat perceptions have often shaped member states' divergent interpretations and prioritisations of such values. As the EU institutional framework was unable to significantly temper these divisions, dissensus over liberal democracy has substantially constrained EU foreign policy formulation and implementation. Not only it has hindered decision-making within formal EU structures, but it has also reduced the effectiveness of policies adopted. This has happened especially when EU foreign policy decisions required unanimity and implementation relied on voluntary coordination.

The case studies of Kosovo and Ukraine illustrate the multifaceted impact of dissensus over liberal democracy on EU foreign policy. In both cases, in fact, divisions among member states over questions of sovereignty, geopolitical strategy, and democratic conditionality have weakened the EU ability to act as a unified actor and to consistently promote liberal democratic values in its external action. In the case of Kosovo, a normative, severe dissensus stemmed from the refusal of five member states to recognise Kosovo's independence, leading to a paralysis in formal EU decision-making and limiting the credibility of EU enlargement policy as a democracy-promoting tool. At the same time, a mild, procedural dissensus emerged from the *de facto* halt of the EU enlargement process. In Ukraine too both normative and procedural forms of dissensus shaped EU foreign policy responses: normative in the form of divergent views on the primacy of liberal democratic principles in confronting Russia, and procedural in the form of disagreements over institutional leadership and burden-sharing (see Table 2).

Yet the analysis has also shown that, in response to such internal dissensus and to the resulting EU limited capacity to address pressing foreign policy challenges, informal groups of member states have often emerged to sustain EU engagement towards Kosovo and Ukraine. These informal groups, as reflected by the role played by the Quint and the Berlin Process in Kosovo and the Normandy Format and Weimar + Group in Ukraine, have enabled subsets of member states to coordinate their actions, replace and complement EU initiatives, and maintain momentum in diplomatic efforts. Certainly, such practices of informal, differentiated cooperation among EU member states have increased the flexibility and responsiveness of EU external action. Nonetheless, they have also reflected a fragmentation of EU foreign policy. While doing so, they have clearly shown EU difficulties in sustaining a unified commitment to liberal democratic values.

Ultimately, the emergence of informal groupings in both case studies suggests that while these formats can temporarily bypass paralysis and sustain foreign policy engagement, they cannot replace the need for a shared strategic vision among EU member states. In fact, the persistence of internal dissensus over liberal democracy raises fundamental questions about the EU role and credibility as an international actor. As global challenges to democratic values intensify, including the resurgence of authoritarianism and increasing geopolitical competition, the EU capacity to act as a coherent promoter of liberal democracy is likely to remain contingent on its ability to manage internal divisions. Without greater consensus among member states on the meaning and strategic relevance of liberal democratic principles and a substantial revision of the EU institutional framework aimed at facilitating collective action at the EU level, the EU risks undermining its external influence and legitimacy as a normative power.

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