

# Contested but Resilient: Accounting for the Endurance of the European Union's Foreign Policy

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## Introduction

In recent years, it has become a commonplace view that European Union (EU) foreign policy is increasingly contested (see Johansson-Nogués et al., 2020; Petri et al., 2020), that is, subject to ‘an instance of strategic social construction that aims at undermining or displacing an accepted or emerging intersubjective meaning through the formulation of competing discursive interventions’<sup>1</sup> (Contessi, 2010, p. 326). The literature has explored this phenomenon in a range of empirical fields, spanning from the United Nations (UN) Global Compact for Migration (Badell, 2020) and climate (Petri and Biedenkopf, 2021) to development (Hackenesch et al., 2021) and trade policy (Eliasson and Garcia-Duran, 2020).

To be sure, EU foreign policy has always been plagued with disagreement. Political conflict has long been one of its key features, and research in this field has paid close attention to it and the notion that Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) should be understood as a co-operation system designed to manage differences (Maurer et al., 2023). However, the underpinning argument of the literature on contestation in EU foreign policy is that something new is going on.

We approach contestation in a way that helps specify this novelty. First, we claim that it does not stand for lack of agreement but for the critique of existing consensus (or ‘emerging’ consensus, as per Contessi, 2010). The question is not whether disagreement has increased or decreased, but whether consensus on EU foreign policy is breaking down. Second, as argued by Biedenkopf et al. (2021), what makes current contestation different is not necessarily the amount of it, but the fact that it is ‘now more in line with the broader way in which political conflict is [structured] in Europe’ (p. 326). The themes addressed by current contestation are well aligned with the axes of political mobilization that organize political conflict in Western societies. The cleavage that pits cosmopolitans against nationalists (or integrationists against demarcationists) is particularly relevant in the present context. By implication, contestation of EU foreign policy can more easily resonate with ‘issues that have an appeal beyond the narrow community of its practitioners and observers’ (Biedenkopf et al., 2021, p. 327). Finally, current contestation of EU

<sup>1</sup>This article focuses on contestation but also taps into the literature on the politicization of the EU, EU foreign policy and international institutions, as can be seen in the list of references. We understand contestation and politicization as two interlinked processes, as described by Biedenkopf et al. (2021): ‘acts of contestation (which constitute observable behaviour by specific actors) can foster change along the three dimensions of politicisation’; that is, they ‘can polarise debates, engage previously unengaged actors, make the issue more salient, or any combination of the above’ (p. 334).

foreign policy also writes itself into a general pattern of opposition to elements of the liberal international order (LIO), as the latter has faced quite some pushback (Acharya, 2018) after its ‘high-water mark’ (Crocker, 2015, p. 10) of the early 2000s.

We expect that this kind of contestation is more likely to have an effect on EU foreign policy. Addressing this hypothesis does not imply holding a negative view of contestation as such. Contestability is essential to legitimacy (Pettit, 1997, pp. 185–202). However, to some, contestation of the EU (and of its foreign policy) can also be normatively problematic. Grande and Kriesi (2015) argue that ‘from a normative perspective that promotes a “cosmopolitan Europe,” the current politicization of Europe must be interpreted as disappointing, if not frightening’ (p. 222). One can embrace contestability and be concerned about the effects of particular instances of contestation.

We claim that EU foreign policy is likely to be particularly vulnerable to the effects of contestation, given the fragmentation of the foreign policy co-operation system (Stetter, 2004) and its dependence on informal commitments. The term ‘European foreign policy system’ borrows from the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature (see Clarke and White, 1989), which refers to a co-ordinated set of actors, institutions, principles, processes and outputs. According to White (2004, p. 54), all these components are ‘interrelated and constitute a foreign policy system in action’. In the case of European foreign policy, this system includes the interactions between the national and EU foreign policy decision-making levels. In the words of Maurer and Wright (2021, p. 389), ‘CFSP is a system created to manage, mediate and regulate the differing (sometimes sharply) and competing (sometimes significantly) interests of EU member states’. Fragmentation refers here to the fact that the EU’s foreign policy system remains far from unified. According to Smith (2003, p. 240), ‘(t)he member states still retain a great deal of autonomy in terms of acting internationally, and the EU itself is composed of different frameworks (“pillars”), with different decision-making rules and procedures for dealing with “the international”’. Whilst the Lisbon Treaty of 2007 formally abolished the EU’s pillar structure, the EU’s foreign policy system remains subject to a considerable degree of institutional fragmentation.

Yet, the EU’s foreign policy system has demonstrated a notable capacity for providing the Union with a common identity and for taking joint decisions even on difficult international issues (Manners, 2002; Smith, 2004). The EU’s cohesion as an international actor is sustained through an informal commitment to certain common procedural norms and habits of interaction (Juncos and Pomorska, 2006), as well as consensus on the validity of certain substantive norms pertaining to respect for democracy and human rights that inform foreign policy choices (Manners, 2002; Thomas, 2009).

Against this backdrop, it would be reasonable to expect the EU’s foreign policy to be particularly vulnerable to contestation – after all, its endurance ultimately depends on the member states’ voluntary compliance with common, sometimes unwritten, norms (Sjursen and Rosén, 2017). From a rationalist point of view, disruptive behaviour by a few states could be reciprocated by the rest, reducing the overall willingness to abide by the rules. From a sociological point of view, open challenges to the norms that organize foreign policy co-operation in the EU would signal the break-up of the community of values, undermining processes of norm internalization. This is the reason why we interrogate the effects of contestation on the resilience of the EU’s foreign policy-making system.

However, there are several indications that, in fact, the system is quite resilient. Drawing on notions of systems thinking, complexity and ecological resilience (e.g., Folke et al., 2010; Holling, 1973), resilience is defined here as the ability to ‘withstand, or to evolve and adapt to a constantly changing equilibrium’ (Joseph, 2018, p. 2). More generally, resilience can be understood as the capacity of an individual, community or system to ‘remain fit for purpose’ (Chandler, 2014). The EU also defines resilience along these lines: ‘resilience is about sustaining the core identity and capabilities of states, societies and communities in the face of disruptive pressures’ (European Commission and High Representative, 2017, p. 23). Following this understanding, the resilience of the EU’s foreign policy system can be evidenced by its capacity to continue to provide key governance functions normally associated with it, that is, producing collective decisions and outcomes and maintaining a common sense of purpose. The collective response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a case in point, with the approval of 14 rounds of sanctions and far-reaching measures in the field of defence co-operation (Maurer et al., 2023).

Resilience building is often understood as a process generated by an external crisis or a shock that might result in different outcomes: ‘bouncing back’, which refers to the maintenance of the status quo or persistence, or ‘bouncing forward’, which can imply incremental adaptation or transformation. For instance, Bourbeau (2018) defines resilience as a ‘process of patterned adjustments adopted in the face of endogenous or exogenous shocks, to maintain, to marginally modify, or to transform a referent object’. This definition is also useful because it highlights the fact that these shocks might not just be ‘out there’ (e.g., an external crisis or event) but might also be endogenous in nature. Bourbeau (2018, pp. 28–29) also argues that these disturbances could be understood as ‘interpretative moments’. Focusing on institutional resilience, Mahé and Martel (2023) also underline the socially constructed nature of ‘crises’. The discursive construction of such disturbances explains how institutions that might be initially seen as fragile can survive and transform. This also explains the resilience of the EU’s foreign policy system in the face of the endogenous challenges brought forward by increasing contestation and politicization.

The contributions to this symposium address this puzzle of resilience under contestation. More specifically, the articles contribute to understanding the effects of contestation on norms and what this does to the endurance of EU foreign policy co-operation by addressing one or several of the following three questions: (1) how has contestation impacted the norms sustaining EU foreign policy co-operation? (2) How can we theoretically account for the apparent resilience of the EU’s foreign policy system? (3) To what extent does the claim of a resilient EU’s foreign policy system hold up to empirical scrutiny?

To address these questions, the contributors to the symposium build on the combined insights of three strands of literature: international relations (IR) research on norms, sociological and anthropological research on relationships across boundaries and research in EU studies on the contestation of the EU. Drawing on the insights from these three strands of research, we identify both structural and agentic factors that contribute to the putative resilience of the system of EU foreign policy-making and its underlying norms. More to the point, we propose explanations that look in two different directions: the properties of norms themselves and the practices of actors. By focusing on the effects of contestation on the resilience of the EU’s foreign policy-making system, the articles in this symposium

contribute to the wider literature on contestation as well as to the literature on crises and how EU foreign policy responds to sustained external and internal challenges.

Aiming to provide an overview of the different questions and approaches discussed in the symposium articles, the text proceeds as follows: Section I presents the case that recent literature has detected quite a lot of resilience in the EU's foreign policy-making system, even under conditions marked by contestation. Section II explores several accounts for this state of affairs, based both on norm-level variables and on agency. Section III identifies the ways in which the contributions to the symposium illustrate these arguments. Finally, the last section sketches conclusions and avenues for further research.

## I. Resilience Under Contestation

Over recent years, research has paid attention to processes of contestation (Costa, 2019) and de-Europeanization (Müller et al., 2021) of EU foreign policy. A growing number of articles, books and special issues have addressed whether and to what extent EU foreign policy is now under more pressure because of contestation (Biedenkopf et al., 2021; Johansson-Nogués et al., 2020; Petri et al., 2020). These works have produced valuable insights, amongst others, on the contesters themselves, on the relationship between the contestation of EU foreign policy and the broader structure of political conflict and on the connections between the contestation of fundamental norms and that of subsidiary organizing principles. However, scant attention has been paid to the overall effect of contestation on the resilience of the EU's foreign policy system.

What do we know so far about the resilience of EU foreign policy co-operation under contestation? Juncos and Pomorska have looked at the effect contestation of procedural norms has had on foreign policy negotiations, that is, in relation to norms such as the co-ordination reflex, consensus building, confidentiality, the prohibition of hard bargaining, the obligation to justify national positions and respect for agreed language. Whilst the fact that such contestation has taken place is remarkable in itself, given that 'Council committees [are] an institutional arena characterized by intergovernmental, relatively insulated, and technical-level decision making', procedural norms have proven to be able to sustain contestation (Juncos and Pomorska, 2021, p. 369). Condemnation of contestation by other states has, if anything, 'reinforced' procedural norms, as 'there [is] a strong sense of social control and peer-pressure to respect the norms into which newcomers are socialized' (Juncos and Pomorska, 2021, p. 379).

The idea that the effects of contestation can be 'contained', at least for some time, has also been recognized by Badell. This is his appraisal of what happened as regards the negotiation of the Global Compact for Migration before Vienna jumped ship and joined Hungary as a contester whilst holding the Council presidency. Until then, 'an agreement between the remaining 27 Member States authorized Austria to speak on their behalf' (Badell, 2020, p. 355), symbolically shutting out Hungary from the EU norm community. Similarly, Johansson-Nogués et al. (2020) found that whilst 'the EU's foreign policy is challenged on multiple levels', there was little evidence 'to support the claim that this equate[d] to a significant or short-term decline in the legitimacy of the EU foreign policy norms' (p. 11).

On other occasions, the (likely) contesters themselves seem to keep their challenges at a manageable level. Monteleone has researched the impact of the populist and

euroceptical Italian governments of M5S and Lega in terms of a possible de-Europeanization of Italy's voting and sponsoring behaviour in the UN General Assembly (UNGA). She claims that 'Italy maintained its constructive role in EU coordination [and hence] the discourse de-Europeanization did not translate into a substantial foreign policy change', with migration being an exception (Monteleone, 2021, p. 551). On their part, Dyduch and Müller (2021) have claimed that notwithstanding its 'readiness to resist procedural norms of Europeanised CFSP governance', the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) Polish government 'did not engage in open value-based contestation of substantive EU foreign policy positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict' (p. 582). Overall, the EU's foreign policy-making system seems to hold up in quite a few critical cases, defying expectations derived from its apparently fragile nature. Certainly, we cannot offer any quantitative estimate of the prevalence of such coexistence of contestation and co-operation. But surely it happens frequently enough to qualify as a puzzle worthy of an explanation.

Another issue that is of particular relevance to this symposium is the distinction between external and internal sources of contestation in EU foreign policy. At the international level, contestation has increased in the context of the crisis affecting the LIO (Lake et al., 2021). Whilst the LIO has faced challenges from powers outside the order since the very beginning, external contestation has accelerated in a more competitive geopolitical context with the emergence of new and revisionist powers. China and other 'outsiders' seeking recognition, such as Russia, Turkey or Venezuela (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol, 2021), have adopted the role of external challenges of the LIO. The Donald Trump Presidency posed a key threat to the LIO, coming as it did from the hegemon responsible for sustaining that order. As an expression of populist and illiberal foreign policy, it constituted a direct attack on the core values of the LIO. The decline and contestation of the LIO have in turn impacted EU foreign policy, as the Union has usually portrayed itself as a defender of the LIO, its multilateral institutions and liberal values (Smith and Youngs, 2018). Although there is still evidence of the EU's ability to mobilize others, for instance, alignment with EU sanctions by other neighbouring countries (Cardwell and Moret, 2023), contestation of EU external policies has increased in recent years. Though deploying different modes of ethical-political and moral contestation, powers such as Russia and Turkey have sought to contest the EU's actorness in international politics by targeting its international legitimacy (Aydm-Düzgit and Noutcheva, 2022).

Alongside external contestation, we have also witnessed contestation within the EU. As argued above, the internal contestation of foreign policy is nothing new and can be seen as a sign of a healthy political system. It is normal to see contestation coming from the legislative power and opposition parties. Foreign policy might also be contested by other domestic actors outside the elected system, such as think tanks or civil society (Cantir and Kaarbo, 2016). The case of EU foreign policy is interesting because of its multilevel form of governance, which multiplies the likelihood of internal contestation (Biedenkopf et al., 2021). The intergovernmental nature of the CFSP also increases the potential for contestation given the sensitive nature of the issues and the fact that member states retain their veto power. But the contestation faced by the EU in this area also responds to the end of the permissive consensus that enabled integration in previous decades (Hooghe and Marks, 2009) and the continued transfer of authority to supranational institutions (Börzel and Zürn, 2021). The rise of illiberalism, populism and eurocepticism within the EU has translated into contestation of EU foreign policy and

the universal liberal norms at its core (human rights, rule of law and democracy) (Meunier and Vachudova, 2018).

However, the lines between external and internal contestations are blurred (see Thevenin et al., 2020, p. 456). For instance, regarding the interplay between internal and external dynamics, Aydın-Düzgüt and Noutcheva (2022) have found that contestation of Europe/EU by third parties is enabled by the lack of a unified and coherent European foreign policy in various areas. More often than not, contestation by external powers might drive or accelerate internal contestation, and contestation within the EU might also facilitate external contestation where the EU is seen as weak and divided.

This symposium contributes to illuminating the research puzzle of resilience under contestation in several ways. First, it provides new empirical insights regarding the impact of internal and external contestations on the EU's foreign policy system. Second, it seeks to develop a better understanding of what system resilience means in the face of contestation. Given the multifaceted nature of resilience (Juncos and Bourbeau, 2022), system resilience might point to different outcomes, namely, status quo, adaptation and transformation. For instance, one might think of resilience as maintaining the status quo in the face of a shock (or 'bouncing back'). This is what Bourbeau (2018) has termed the 'logic of persistence'. By contrast, resilience might also result in change so as to ensure the endurance of a system when confronted by disturbance (or 'bouncing forward'). This is in fact how the EU itself understands resilience, where it describes this property as 'the ability to adapt and reform to meet new needs' (European Commission and High Representative, 2017, p. 23). This 'bouncing forward' aspect of resilience is, amongst other things, inherent in what has been described as a failing forward logic to European integration (Jones et al., 2021), whereby EU leaders have responded to major challenges and crises that challenge the institutional status quo by upgrading EU foreign policy institutions (Bergmann and Mueller, 2021). This change might be just gradual in the form of adaptation or incremental adjustment, or it might actually be a deeper form of change, that is, transformation. Third, the symposium develops some theoretical explanations to account for the resilience of the EU's foreign system. The next section advances some possibilities.

## II. Accounting for Resilience in EU Foreign Policy

We see the EU's foreign policy system as composed of procedural and substantive norms. Procedural norms regulate the decision-making process, both formally (by way of legally binding rules) and informally (by way of shared understandings that shape the expectations of states about appropriate behaviour in decision-making bodies). Core substantive norms reflect a broad consensus on the role of the EU in international politics. We claim that, as with other systems, the EU's foreign policy system does not depend on the fate of each of its constituent units, for example, norms. Contestation of specific norms, even when successful in making them weaker, which is not a given, might fail to impair the capacity of the EU's foreign policy system to deliver.

We advance two different families of explanations to account for the resilience of the EU's foreign policy system and the norms that are a key component of this system. First, we look at norm-level variables, and then we shift to actors' behaviours (agentic explanations). Whilst the former account for resilience in the face of contestation by alluding to

the features of norms, the latter refer to the agency of actors. In both cases, we address arguments that have to do with the effects of contestation on specific norms and on the system as a whole. We do not conceive of these explanations as mutually exclusive. They refer to different but compatible mechanisms that may operate in parallel.

### *Norm-Level Variables*

The first set of explanations focuses on the features of norms themselves and argues that due to their features, norms should be able to sustain some degree of contestation.

To begin with, norms are by definition both stable and dynamic (Wiener, 2007, p. 5). As they ‘embody a quality of “oughtness” and shared moral assessment’ (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 892), that is, as they are of an intersubjective nature, they are at the same time sticky and open to the intervention of actors. From this point of view, some capacity to sustain contestation is part of what norms are about. The question then turns to variation – the diverse effects that contestation can have on norms. Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2020) have claimed that contestation can target either its application or its validity. Applicatory contestation deals with the appropriateness of a specific interpretation of the norm in a specific case, whilst the latter questions ‘the righteousness of the claims a norm makes’ (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2020, p. 52). Only validity contestation will lead to norm decay, but not applicatory contestation – except when it becomes permanent. Actually, contesting the application of a norm can make its contours more precise and more stable. Moreover, Wiener (2014) argues that contestation can indeed strengthen norms by making them more legitimate and fostering a shared understanding of their meaning (p. 30).

Second, the degree of codification of norms has also been identified in the literature as a factor determining norm robustness. The expectation here is that the more norms are precise and binding (the more legalized they are) (Abbott et al., 2000), the more robust they will be. Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019) have argued that factors such as ‘institutionalization, normative embeddedness, and legal character [...] can help explain robustness trends’ (p. 13).

The final argument deals with norms as a system and is based on the idea that ‘international norms can hardly be understood without analyzing their relations and interactions with other norms’ (Fehl and Rosert, 2020, p. 1). Lantis and Wunderlich (2018) have made the point that the relevant unit of analysis is not always individual norms but norm clusters, that is, ‘collections of aligned, but distinctive norms’ (p. 571). According to this point of view, ‘critical characteristics’ of such clusters ‘may allow them to remain surprisingly resilient in the face of challenges’ (Lantis and Wunderlich, 2018). Clusters, particularly those that contain ‘synergistic linkages’ between their constituent norms and are highly institutionalized and legalized, protect single norms ‘against possible weakening effects of contestation and insulate the norm core from validity challenges’ (Lantis and Wunderlich, 2018, p. 572). By looking at clusters, Lantis and Wunderlich invite a focus on resilience too, in the sense that, being more articulated, clusters are also more flexible. They can adjust to change and remain fundamentally stable at the same time.

### *Agent-Based Explanations*

Agentic explanations of norm stability in the face of contestation are harder to come by in the literature. We advance two of them. First, there is a growing literature that has sought

to explain how agents' capabilities, and specifically, the relative power of norm contesters, might explain the success or failure of contestation in a particular context (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020; Börzel and Zürn, 2021). Panke and Petersohn (2016) claim that 'if the challenger [of a norm] is weak, the validity of the norm remains untouched', but if it is strong, 'the norm may be replaced, significantly weakened or even completely abolished' (p. 4). Previous rationalist explanations have highlighted that norm contesters may give up their contestation when they are offered side payments or when they are coerced (Abbott and Snidal, 2002, p. 144).

These different agent-based accounts, which emphasize the relative (material) power of actors or their identities, might be complemented by an approach that highlights the importance of communicative interaction. From such a perspective, one would link the capacity of norms to sustain contestation to actors' assessment of their validity (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann, 2019, p. 6). Such a hypothesis rests on the assumption that rational actors are capable of assessing the reasonableness of different norms. Following a norm is a rational choice rather than seen as linked to habit or a specific identity. As such, actor rationality is linked to the ability of actors to justify and explain their actions and to evaluate the arguments presented by others (Eriksen, 2009, pp. 49–53; Sjørusen and Rosén, 2017).

Finally, we claim that the fact that the EU's foreign policy system is a social system matters as well. Overlooked so far in the literature, we also raise the impact of boundary-making practices and group dynamics that are enacted by actors to deliberately defend the capacity of the decision-making system to deliver despite contestation. The literature on foreign policy decision-making within the Council has implicitly assumed that it is a community of values dealing with a world that might or might not share those norms. From this point of view, the main boundary exists between the Council/EU and the outer world. However, this is an assumption that should be relaxed to account for the fact that at least some kinds of contestation imply breaking with such a community of values. When this is the case, new boundaries may also appear inside the Council that demarcate an in-group from an out-group.

Boundary work refers to the practices associated with the construction and maintenance of such a demarcation. The concept has been used in different branches of knowledge. In the sociology of scientific knowledge, boundary work keeps scientific intellectual activities distinct from non-scientific ones (Gieryn, 1983). Boundary work is also of essence in the study of ethnicity. Particularly after Barth (1969/1998), 'ethnicity is not primarily conceived as a matter of relations between pre-defined fixed groups' but 'rather as a process of constituting and re-configuring groups by defining the boundaries between them' (Wimmer, 2008, p. 1027). From this constructivist approach, groups (ethnic, professional and scientific) are made and unmade by way of their interactions (Valenta and Gregurović, 2015, p. 418).

This sheds a different light on the dynamics of contestation within the EU's foreign policy system as a social interaction that is not blind to in-group and out-group divides. Challenges to predominant views coming from countries (intersubjectively defined as) situated in the out-group are different from challenges coming from countries situated in the in-group. The latter's positions will be naturalized into the decision-making system under concepts such as *domaine reserve* or legitimate national interest. The former's stances will be seen as extraneous to EU values. Their ostracization becomes, at this point, both a way of protecting norms and a way of keeping the foreign policy-making

system safe from intrusions. Hence, member states have developed ways to bypass some of these challenges, creatively crafting decision-making procedures in the process if necessary. Contestation by members of an out-group may even help bolster the social identity of in-group members, which can have a positive effect on the resilience of the EU's foreign policy system.

### III. Contributions

The articles in the symposium explore the implications of contestation in EU foreign policy in relation to both intra-EU politics (Brussels-based negotiations and institutions) and its extra-territorial application in a wide range of issues [from development and security policies to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)]. Case selection has been guided by our understanding of contestation (see the [Introduction](#) to this article). This has two implications. First, the symposium examines the contestation of different substantive norms (e.g., gender rights, multilateralism and liberal democracy) around which a consensus has been built over the years. By implication, these are also cases that concern norms around which the EU has built its identity as an international actor. Second, contributions explore instances of contestation that can be associated with broader patterns of political conflict, and particularly with the 'integration-demarcation (or "cosmopolitan-nationalist") cleavage, which has been emerging in Western European in the past [...] decades as a consequence of globalization' (Grande and Kriesi, 2015, p. 191). The conflicts also raise questions about the contestation of procedural EU foreign policy norms, like the consensus-seeking norm. In addition, by selecting a broad-based sample of norms, we aim at exploring the diversity of structural and agentic factors and mechanisms that cushion EU foreign policy from the potentially disruptive effects of contestation. The articles also include cases of internal and external contestation.

Highlighting the distinction between procedural and substantive norms, Sjørusen et al. (2024) analyse the digitalization of multilateral communication between EU member states. [Corrections made on 01 October 2024, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, in-text citation and details for 'Sjørusen et al. (2024)' have been added in this version.] Considering multilateral communications as the backbone of EU foreign policy, the authors suggest that one of the first symptoms of a weakening of EU foreign policy would be the fragmentation of these processes of communication. The digital transition in diplomatic practices would have facilitated such fragmentation. However, this is a dog that did not bark. Even under conditions of transformative change in communication technologies, the multilateral mode of communication has remained not so much resilient as strikingly uncontested. To understand this robustness, the authors suggest that we must move beyond the focus on the functional role of procedural norms to analyse their normative qualities. The legitimacy of these norms, which reflect the basic requirements of due process, offers the most plausible explanation for lacking contestation in a context that should have made it more likely. In turn, identifying these normative qualities can also help our understanding of the relative robustness of the overall EU's foreign policy system.

Badell (2024) provides insights into the dynamics of contestation in EU foreign policy concerning SRHR. [Corrections made on 01 October 2024, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, in-text citation and details for 'Badell (2024)' have been added in this version.] This is a case in which the norm bounces back under the combined influence of two different factors, norm and agent based, respectively: norm codification (including the

creation of institutional channels for contestation) and active boundary work by member states. Three distinct dynamics are identified. The first occurred between 1997 and 2020, during which the EU and member states institutionalized contestation against SRHR through established channels for expressing disagreements. This allowed member states to maintain autonomy in implementing the norm domestically whilst enabling the EU to advocate for it globally. The second period, in 2020, witnessed a shift in contestation dynamics as Hungary and Poland formed alliances outside the EU to undermine SRHR, which led to their being expelled from the EU's normative community. The third period, from 2021 onwards, characterized by a less polarized international environment, saw the SRHR norm (preserved through the previous phase by way of its codification) bounce back.

The contribution by Monteleone et al. ([in press](#)) examines the role of Hungary's government led by the Populist Radical Right (PRR) Fidesz party on co-operative EU foreign policy norms at the UNGA. [Corrections made on 01 October 2024, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, in-text citation and details for 'Monteleone et al. ([in press](#))' have been added in this version.] Based on UNGA voting data and expert interviews, the article finds that the resilience of the EU's foreign policy system in New York, in terms of producing common voting outputs, has remained strong. Despite frequent warnings about the populist challenge to EU foreign policy, the contestation of co-operative CFSP norms has been rather limited in scope at the UNGA, focusing on a relatively small range of issues related to migration, human rights and the Arab–Israeli conflict, where Hungary defected in its voting behaviour from the EU majority. Hungarian representatives at the UN have demonstrated a considerable willingness to conform to co-operative EU foreign policy norms, keeping defection from EU co-operation limited to a relatively small number of issues where instructions from the capital did not allow them to do so. In this case, the inherently stable character of norms, including those underpinning such a culture of co-operation, has allowed for a remarkable degree of bouncing back. There is also an agent-level ingredient in this case; the fact that the majority and the most powerful member states support co-operative norms involves costs for contestation. Hungarian representatives either seem to shy away from assuming the costs of openly contesting co-operative EU foreign policy norms. Both factors have had a moderating impact even on the PRR government, contributing to the resilience of the EU's foreign policy system.

In their article, Bergmann and Furness (2024) interrogate the ways in which two fundamental norms, the 'solidarity' and 'protection' norms, clash over EU policy towards conflict-affected countries. [Corrections made on 01 October 2024, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, in-text citation and details for 'Bergmann and Furness (2024)' have been added in this version.] Drawing on norm-level explanations, and more particularly the stabilizing effects of norm clusters and codification, they examine how the rise of the protection norm has resulted in norm collision with the solidarity norm. An analysis of key EU documents and practice demonstrates that norm collision has not led to validity contestation of the solidarity norm, inscribed in treaty and non-treaty language alike. However, there is evidence of increasing applicatory contestation. Specifically, the comparative analysis of EU engagement in Mali and Libya demonstrates that the rise of the protection norm has impacted the concrete implementation of the solidarity norm. Their findings not only provide evidence about resilience at the level of well-codified norms but also have relevance for our understanding of the resilience of the EU's foreign policy system as a whole. As Bergmann and Furness (2024) note,

growing applicatory contestation of the solidarity norm has led to greater fragmentation and incoherencies in the EU's external action, which points at the systemic effects of norm contestation.

Finally, Chaban and Elgström (2024) explores the resilience of the EU's normative identity as perceived by external actors. [Corrections made on 01 October 2024, after first online publication: In the preceding sentence, in-text citation and details for 'Chaban and Elgström (2024)' have been added in this version.] More to the point, they look into changes in perceptions of the EU's international role on two issue areas – climate change and global health – deemed to be most likely cases of image change because of the catastrophic risks associated with them. However, the EU's normative image shows in these cases a mixture of stickiness, bouncing back and bouncing forward. Their contribution relies on opinion surveys, focus groups with university youth, interviews with national decision-makers and content analysis of leading media in 10 Strategic Partners of the EU, with research undertaken in 2015 and 2021 and allowing for tracing changes over time. Their findings show a rather resilient image of the EU as a normative leader in both issue areas. However, resilience takes place in two different ways. First, there is the resilience that stems from image stickiness, the cognitive resistance to image change anticipated by the literature. Second, the EU's image is also resilient because, after stark contestation triggered by expectation–performance gaps, it can bounce back to the status quo ante, as well as forward widening the perceived scope of EU actions. Chaban and Elgström underline the importance of a communicative interaction based on listening and learning about external perceptions of the EU.

## Conclusion

This symposium addresses the puzzling finding that the EU's foreign policy system has remained resilient (i.e., able to produce collective decisions and outcomes and keep a common sense of purpose) even under conditions shaped by contestation. A system frequently seen as fragmented and fragile has failed to break down under the weight of the end of the permissive consensus on the role of the EU in international affairs.

The contributions to this symposium provide rich and detailed empirical illustrations of this argument in a broad array of policy fields. They also explore the mechanisms that explain the resilience of the procedural and substantive norms that sustain EU foreign policy co-operation. These mechanisms are of two kinds: normative and agentic. Norms are resilient due to their intersubjective nature. They can prove compelling even when the material conditions within which they are implemented change entirely (see Sjørnsen et al., 2024). Beyond that, they are made more resilient through their codification and by the fact that they are part of clusters of interlocking and mutually sustaining norms. The other family of explanations explored in this symposium has to do with how actors react when critical norms of EU foreign policy are contested.

This symposium does not aim to test these two broad kinds of factors (norm level and agentic) as if they were alternative hypotheses, nor to provide any assessment as to their relative prevalence. Quite on the contrary, if anything, contributions indicate that norm-level and agentic explanations are intricately linked. Contradictory norm clusters collide over the EU's policy towards fragile and conflict-affected countries, but to be sure, these norms are sustained by agents, some of whom have organized their identities and

interests around precisely those norms (Bermann and Furness, this issue). In the field of SRHR, the role of agents in the management of contestation is very prominent, as they deploy strategies to keep key shared understandings safe. But actors rely on the previous codification of rules pertaining to large clusters that are hard to unpick (Badell, 2024). External images of the EU on climate and health seem to be able to bounce back and even bounce forward, but of course that is not unrelated to actions taken by the EU itself to lign performance with expectations (Chaban and Elgström, 2024). Procedural norms of co-operation amongst EU member state delegations in New York are resilient enough to constrain Hungarian diplomats representing an openly illiberal government. At the same time, the strategic use of accommodation and that of soft forms of dissent, as well as the sporadic recourse to exclusion, provide for much-needed room when such constraint is less than absolute (Badell, 2024). In other words, in the production of resilience, agents rely on norms, and norms depend on agents.

The final question raised by the contributions to this symposium is how much stress the EU's foreign policy system can sustain before losing its resilience. This is a critical issue, given the shifting realities of IR. The fact that the system has been rather resilient under contestation could be seen as auspicious. Yet, a rapidly changing international order will continue to push (is pushing) the EU to open a grand debate over its international role. As long as EU foreign policy can rely on an informal and flexible consensus over its own processes and substance, then changes should be possible to allow the EU to address new international circumstances. However, we call for caution in this regard. The system might not only be a fair-weather one, but how much worse weather it can sustain is an open question.

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