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**The European Union's normative power under  
fire: How does EU diplomacy balance NPE and  
Realist rhetoric about the war in Gaza and how  
does this balance reflect on its actions?**

By Georgios Thalassinos

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1 Problem formulation.....	4
1.2 Thesis overview.....	5
1.3 The background situation of the war in Gaza.....	6
<b>2. Literature review.....</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1. Normative Power Europe: Literature review.....	8
2.2 Challenges for EU influence in the Israel-Palestine conflict.....	11
2.3 The position of this thesis within the literature.....	13
<b>3. Theory.....</b>	<b>14</b>
3.1 Normative Power Europe.....	15
3.2 Core tenets of Constructivism.....	16
3.3 Normative Power's relation to Constructivism.....	17
3.4 NPE in the case of Gaza.....	19
3.5 Realism.....	21
3.5.1 Structural realism.....	21
3.5.3 Relative gains.....	24
3.5.4 Institutional scepticism.....	24
3.5.5 Balance-of-threat.....	25
3.6. Realist critique of NPE mechanisms in effect in Gaza.....	26
3.7 Brief table predicting analysis outcomes.....	28
<b>4. Methodology.....</b>	<b>30</b>
4.1 Research Design.....	31
4.2 Data selection.....	32
4.3 Operationalisation.....	33
4.4 External validity.....	40
4.5 Limitations.....	40
4.6 Transparency.....	41
<b>5. Analysis.....</b>	<b>42</b>
5.1 Warrants and Instruments: Reading EU Gaza Discourse through Normative Power and Structural Realism.....	42
5.2 The European Union on the two-state solution: Signaling and tools.....	46
5.3 Internal divisions in EU leadership.....	48
5.4 The EU's shift in rhetoric and the imposition of potential sanctions.....	51
<b>6. Discussion.....</b>	<b>55</b>
6.1 Key actors and institutions that affect EU diplomacy.....	55
6.2 General findings of the analysis.....	56
6.3 Theory implications: NPE vs. Realism under constraint.....	57
6.4 How are NPE diffusion mechanisms implemented in practice.....	58

6.5 Venue/genre effects and argument/instrument linkage.....	58
6.6 Intra-EU constraints and alliance dynamics.....	59
6.7 Rhetoric–practice discrepancy and credibility.....	60
6.8 How does the thesis answer the research question.....	61
6.9 Future research.....	61
<b>7. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>64</b>

## Abstract

This thesis examines how the European Union (EU) balances its self-proclaimed role as a Normative Power with the constraints of Realist politics in the context of the war in Gaza that erupted after Hamas's October 7th 2023 attack. The study uses Critical Discourse Analysis of key institutional speeches and policy statements from EU leaders, exploring how the EU's external communication adapts to various venues, audiences, alliance pressures and the EU's own internal constraints. A recurring rhetorical pattern is observed in the analysis. In humanitarian and diplomatic venues, EU discourse is based on norm-based language and international law, whereas in venues that center around defence realist considerations are dominant. It is also observed that the use of coercive tools to back up the EU's normative claims is being restricted by three constraining factors: intra-EU politics, alliance dependencies and instrument limitations. As a result, rhetoric declarations often exceed the practical capabilities, leading to the erosion of normative legitimacy by means of inconsistency. The study adds to EU foreign policy literature by offering a detailed mechanism that can account for how normative claims are filtered, diluted or reinforced across institutional contexts. It also highlights the empirical limits of NPE in conflict scenarios of high intensity.

## 1. Introduction

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians stands as one of the most enduring and contested disputes in modern international politics. At its core lie competing claims over land, sovereignty, and national identity, rooted in overlapping historical narratives and religious attachments. The founding of the State of Israel in 1948, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians that followed, marked a turning point. Since then, the region has witnessed multiple

wars, uprisings, and recurring cycles of violence. The occupation of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem since 1967 is a central issue, as Palestinians continue to seek recognition of their right to self-determination and the establishment of an independent state. Efforts at peacemaking have repeatedly faltered, while humanitarian crises have become a characteristic feature of the conflict, with the citizens of Gaza facing the most issues. Divisive matters such as the political future of Jerusalem, the status of Palestinian refugees, the expansion of Israeli settlements, and mutual recognition of statehood continue to block the path toward a durable resolution (Pappé, 2014).

The European Union provides an important example of regional integration that has successfully transformed relations among its own member states (McCormick, 2020). Using this as a starting point, the EU has positioned itself as a prominent external actor in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, framing its role around the promotion of peace, security, and development in the region. A main feature to the Union's diplomatic pursuits has been its longstanding endorsement of a two-state solution, alongside engagement with both Israeli and Palestinian authorities. However, in recent years, questions have been raised about the effectiveness and credibility of the EU's approach. The war in Ukraine has absorbed much of the Union's political attention and resources, raising doubts about its capacity to project influence in other conflict zones. At the same time, the EU's leadership has faced criticism for appearing hesitant or inconsistent in its response to escalating violence in Gaza and the West Bank, with President Ursula von der Leyen and former High Representative Josep Borrell singled out for their handling of the crisis since 2023. These developments highlight a deeper theoretical challenge: whether the EU can act as a coherent and credible power in international affairs, or whether its influence remains constrained by internal divisions and external dependencies (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, Özel, S, 2024).

## 1.1 Problem formulation

At the kernel of the research question that this thesis is trying to examine is how the EU's diplomacy operates the balance between projecting normative power and conforming to realist goals and constraints, considering that normative pursuits reflect the core values of the Union, while Realist pragmatism is getting more and more popular as a code of conduct in a multipolar

international system (Parent, 2024). The Israeli–Palestinian conflict provides a hallmark contemporary example of this balance, with the eruption of the war in Gaza making it an issue that can no longer be ignored and contained but requires immediate action. As much as the EU claims a role as promoter of democratic values, human rights, and peace, its effectiveness in the region is often doubted (McCormick, 2020). Therefore, this thesis will try to answer a research question that is highly pertinent to, in the writer's opinion, one of the most politically divisive crises in recent history: *How does EU diplomacy balance NPE and Realist rhetoric about the war in Gaza and how does this balance reflect on its actions?*

## 1.2 Thesis overview

The Israeli–Palestinian dispute is a long-running, multi-layered contest over sovereignty and belonging that has far-reaching geopolitical consequences. Few arenas concentrate as many cross-pressures on EU foreign policy as this issue. In this case, the Union's self-image as a normative power and a rules-based actor comes to clash with the practical demands of crisis management, alliance maintenance and domestic consensus. Tracking what the EU's actions are in this setting, what it emphasises, what it defers and what it avoids, offers a stringent test of how self-perceived roles and claims survive when faced with hard constraint.

This study stages a structured dialogue between two perspectives. On the one hand, there is the normative view, that expects the Union to project standards through law, assistance and diplomacy. On the other hand there is the realist, systemic view that expects policy to be dependent on power capabilities, alliance ties and relative-gains risks. The analysis doesn't ask which view is 'right' but rather under what conditions one overshadows the other, how language is used to overcome this tension and how actions relate to and are influenced by the genre of rhetoric. It also investigates how commitments expressed by EU leaders are translated, or not, into operational choices. For that purpose, it assembles a corpus of highly representative texts, including plenary speeches, EEAS speeches, diplomatic forum addresses and State of the Union updates.

The thesis follows a logical progression by laying out the theoretical and methodological basis, then advancing to the core analysis and final conclusions on the EU's role. The structure of this thesis is developed to trace how the EU's rhetorical positioning on Gaza reflects deeper tensions between its normative commitments and realist constraints. Chapter One introduces the

topic, formulates the research question, and explains the significance of examining the EU's Gaza diplomacy through the combination of NPE and Realist lenses. Chapter Two surveys both normative and realist perspectives in the existing literature, remarks to critiques of the EU's double standards and its credibility as a global actor. Chapter Three introduces the theoretical framework, explaining how Realism and NPE are operationalised through a venue-sensitive approach. Chapter Four outlines the critical discourse methodology, the codebook, and the rationale for selecting elite EU speeches as data. Chapter Five presents a detailed analysis of selected speeches and identifies how rhetorical patterns shift across institutional venues and linking those patterns to broader geopolitical or internal constraints. Chapter Six discusses the results of the analysis in the context of important theory-driven topics, such as key mechanisms of norm diffusion and how venue, genre, and intra-EU dynamics shape what the EU says and does. Finally, chapter Seven concludes with a general overview of the EU's balancing act in the context of the war in Gaza, summarising the key findings of the thesis, and outlining implications for theory and future research.

### 1.3 The background situation of the war in Gaza

With a very large population in a tiny piece of territory, the Gaza Strip is bound to pay a large price in human lives in the case of full-scale war. Roughly 365 km<sup>2</sup> in size, with 2.2 million pre-war inhabitants and with more than 6000 people per km<sup>2</sup>, Gaza is one of the world's most densely populated territories (Britannica, 2023). Hamas's October 7th 2023 massacre in Israel prompted the Israeli invasion of the Strip that followed, leading to an extraordinary amount of death, displacement and destruction in Gaza. As of early October 2025 the UN has registered at least 67.000 Palestinians killed, with more than 170.000 injured. Independent analysis indicated that by July 2025, 62% of the casualties were women and children. Furthermore, 90% of the population in the Strip has been displaced and civilian infrastructure, including schools, clinics, water infrastructure and power systems, while 78% of the buildings have been damaged or destroyed (AP News, 2025, October 7). With Israel preventing the free flow of humanitarian aid in the region, the existence of famine has been unequivocally confirmed by the World Health

Organisation(WHO), with 1.14 million people in the region facing an emergency malnutrition situation (IPC, 2025, August 22)(WHO, 2025, August 22).

The humanitarian situation in Gaza remains grave, as a result of sustained hostilities and limits to access that have undermined access to food, water, shelter, sanitation and basic services. Already from late 2023, human rights reporting has documented systematic obstruction of water, food and fuel, characterised by Human Rights Watch as use of starvation as means of warfare (Human Rights Watch, 2023). A subsequent report by the same organisation describes the act of deliberate deprivation of resources as amounts to the crime of extermination and acts of genocide under international law. The report frames these deprivations as deliberate, systemic, and targeted at the civilian population, creating conditions of dehydration, starvation, illness, and institutional collapse (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Israel has dismissed these findings as inaccurate and politically motivated (Reuters, 2024). The claims have resulted in international criminal proceedings, launched by South Africa in early 2024 and submitted to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Under the genocide convention, the case accuses Israel of committing genocidal acts in Gaza (ICJ, 2024).

On October 10 2025, a ceasefire was finally put into effect after two years of war. The ceasefire is part of a broader deal that was brokered by the US with the ultimate goal of an eventual Palestinian state. The first phase of the deal includes the exchange of the remaining Israeli hostages in Gaza for thousands of Palestinian prisoners, a cease of hostilities in order to allow the free flow of humanitarian aid and the beginning of reconstruction planning and a phased withdrawal of Israeli troops to agreed lines, as long as the truce holds and trust is being built (Magdy, Mednick & Madhani, 2025).

## 2. Literature review

In the following literature review section, an effort will be made to provide greater insight into the core concept of this thesis, namely the concept of Normative Power Europe(NPE). The aim is to shed some light on the concepts surrounding the research question as well as examine how the concepts interplay with each other when it comes to influencing the topic of the thesis. Additionally, this part will also help position the paper into the broader body of literature

regarding NPE and securitization in the European scope. The actor that it focuses on is naturally the European Union(EU), as the paper will be focused on its actions and rhetoric in situations of humanitarian abuse and wrongdoing.

## 2.1. Normative Power Europe: Literature review

This first part will attempt to conceptualize the notion of Normative Power Europe, as it has been defined and developed from the early 2000s forward. There will also be an effort to present critical assessments on it as well as a review of new literature that has been written in response to recent events that will also feature in this paper.

The concept of “civilian power” Europe started to gain popularity in the 1970s with François Duchêne arguing that the then European Communities(EC) were such a power(Duchêne,1972). After the creation of the EU and the adoption of its fundamental treaties, the term Normative Power Europe was coined by Ian Manners in 2002. According to him, it amounts to the EU’s ability to "shape conceptions of the normal" in international relations through ideational influence, not coercion(Manners, 2002, p.239). Within the same article, he contrasts it with civilian power, like diplomatic tools and economic relations and military power in order to outline its distinct nature as the “ability to shape conceptions of normal” as opposed to the “ability to use civilian instruments” and the “ability to use military instruments”, building on the Carr’s triad of power and Galtung’s "ideological power" concepts(Manners, 2002, Table 1).

Starting by rejecting Hedley Bull’s argument within the realist school that the EU’s power primarily stems from the military powers of its member states, Manners goes on to claim that the EU’s power originates "not from what it does or what it says, but what it is" (Manners, 2002, p. 252). This means that the very ontology of the EU as a post-Westphalian institution with supranational governance, focuses on containing the destructive sides of nationalism by "pooling resources to preserve peace and liberty"(p.240), gives it a predisposition to act on the international stage in accordance to the norms that this ontology entails. He further claims that the Union's normative distinctness also owes to the legal entrenchment of democracy, rule of law, human rights (TEU Art. 6) and ECHR/UN Charter alignment (pp. 241–242) and that this

normative distinctness and difference is precisely the reason why it can spread its normative power without the possession of and will to use military power.(p.242)

In addition to the definition and ontology of these core concepts, based on the fundamental treaties of the EU, Manners goes on to identify the four core values of liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights that inform the normative action. To those, he also adds four more minor ones with social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance.(Manners, 2002, pp. 243–244). Lastly, he identifies the existence of six diffusion mechanisms of normative power. The first, contagion, refers to the unintentional spread of norms via virtuous examples, such as the Mercosur emulation EU of integration. The second, the informational diffusion mechanism, is a function of strategic and declaratory communications from official EU bodies. The third one, procedural, is the diffusion of norms by means of agreements or enlargement that are subject to conditionalities. The fourth is transference and it hinges on the use of material incentives or counterincentives, such as aid, trade or sanctions to achieve the desired result. The fifth one is overt presence of EU personnel in a foreign country, such as delegations. And lastly, the sixth diffusion mechanism is referred to as the cultural filter meaning the adoption of norms and values by the subjects of foreign countries by means of internal societal mediation that accepts, modifies or rejects values that are upheld by the Union.(Manners, 2002, pp.244-245)

While Manners posits that "The ability to define what passes for 'normal' in world politics is, ultimately, the greatest power of all" (Manners, 2002, p. 253) in the next passage we will examine two sides of critique on the general notion of 'ethical power europe' that the NPE theory is part of, one that outright rejects its validity from a realist perspective and another that evaluates more recent trends in normative power application by examining how it functions in an increasingly multipolar international stage.

Criticising Europe as an ethical power and NPE from a realist perspective, Hyde-Price in his 2008 article approached the concept as a reframing of the EU's weaknesses as strengths by the European political elites. He explains the EU's ethical posture as a combination of its three functions as seen by structural realists: promoting economic interests, shaping Europe's near-abroad and "second-order normative concerns" as he describes them, which serve as the basis of NPE. Additionally, he claims that EU influence actually stems from material power such

as market access to third states and conditionalities of international deals, not from normative power(Hyde-Price,2008, pp.30-31). These claims are backed up by examples of contradictory decisions by the EU where economic interests, regional stability and internal economic policy took precedence over human rights concerns(Hyde-Price,2008, pp.31). In this way, the concept of NPE is presented as a universalist argument that is used to disguise self-interest, as the thought process that claims that “what is good for Europe is good for the world” is mirrored with U.S exceptionalism. Claiming that the idea of a “common good” is very rarely shared among actors in international relations, he adopts E.H. Carr’s view that theories of universal interests are always used by dominant actors in order to have a moral basis for the imposition of their self interests on the rest of the world(Hyde-Price,2008, p.33). Finally, Price warns that the adoption of NPE-like policies in the context of the anarchic environment of international relations can render an actor ineffective in the international sphere, resulting in its overall weakness. Moreover, an actor like that would be in danger of embarking in ‘moralistic crusades’ that go against its vital interests as well as engage in actions that even though they were made with good intentions can horribly backfire and produce unintended and unexpected results.

Ultimately, Price-Hyde’s critique on Manner’s viewpoint boils down to the opinions that NPE ignores the material foundations of EU influence and that liberal idealism obscures power politics in a way that is risking EU irrelevance. He instead proposes a realist approach focused on the prudence of prioritizing stability over utopian ideals, the scepticism of accepting "lesser evil" choices while doubting human perfectibility and the reciprocity of mutual accommodation among sovereign states.

Contrary to the views of Price-Hyde, Laurent Cohen-Tanugi’s 2021 analysis affirms the EU’s global influence through legal and regulatory norms but also observes substantial deviations from the original NPE framework. While not explicitly refuting specific NPE elements, Cohen-Tanugi argues that the application of normative power in practice overlooks critical structural, material, and geopolitical dimensions that define—and limit—the EU’s normative efficacy(Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, pp. 91–92, 94–96)

However, many of the points that Cohen-Tanugi makes reveal omissions and limitations of Manner’s original NPE framework. The first such point that is made is that the EU’s normative power relies on market leverage and legal coercion, not moral persuasion, with GDPR’s global

impact provided as an example, also called the "Brussels Effect", and the assessment that it stems from the EU market's size, not shared values. He argues that firms comply to access 450 million consumers, not due to normative appeal(Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, pp. 91–92).

Another critique that is raised in this article is that the inherent institutional weaknesses of the EU are an undermining factor in the consistent application of norms. While Manner assumes that EU norms are diffused organically through “contagion” or “procedural diffusion”, Cohen-Tanugi argues that NPE cannot project norms externally while at the same time the very same norms are applied in piecemeal within the ranks of the EU, raising examples such as the backsliding of rule of law in Hungary and Poland in recent years without any meaningful application of sanctions and the challenges brought against the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice(CJEU) by national courts in Poland and Germany(Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, 95-96).

To add to the above, another point of critique in this article touches on the notion derived from Manner's original article, that norm diffusion is a win-win process for all parties involved(Manners, 2002). Here, Cohen-Tanugi argues that the exercise of normative power can indeed have costs to the EU, as, for example, in cases of stringent standards that bound EU firms versus more permissive standards in the US and China as well as in the case of environmental regulation that can drive industries offshore without any counter-benefits being gained. In the same vein, it is argued that norms can indeed be used as tools of strategic advantage by emerging powers, as in the instance of the Chinese “Standards 2035” push that aims to disseminate its own technical norms around the world(Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, pp.95-97).

In order to effectively wield the power of norms Cohen-Tanugi advises that the EU moves towards a more federalised structure and builds coercive capacity in order to empower it to effectively apply its own norms internally. To add to this aspect, the integration of norms with industrial, economic and military leverage is deemed necessary, in a push for strategic autonomy(Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, pp.95-97).

## 2.2 Challenges for EU influence in the Israel-Palestine conflict

Even though the EU frequently presents itself as an actor that advances international legal standards and humanitarian rights, in the case of Israel and Palestine there are numerous

criticisms that have been raised against its action or lack thereof. The Union's diplomacy relies on statements, condemnations and financial and humanitarian aid while not employing measures that would materially alter decision making on the ground. Critics argue that the mismatch between identity and instruments makes the EU's normative position in the global stage weaker as the Union's response to violations of international humanitarian and human rights law (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp. 61–62). This undermining of the EU's normative claim is further compounded when internal divisions lead to individual member-states blocking or watering down statements regarding a ceasefire in Gaza or obstructing common positions on Israel's annexation plans (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, p. 65).

Further criticism is raised regarding the adherence of the Union to the Oslo framework, as Dajani and Lovatt argue that it provides political cover for the prolonged occupation and piecemeal annexation of Palestinian lands as they urge the official to take action that ties real costs to transgressions of international law (Dajani & Lovatt, 2017, pp. 3, 9–10, 12).

The room for independent action the the EU appears to be a major source of constraint, as Akgül-Açıkmeşe and Özel note that Washington is “the main financier of the Israeli security sector” and “the only actor with significant leverage over Israel”, noting that in an environment of multipolar competition the EU does not hold significant leverage, especially against great power actors such as the US (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, p. 62). They also note that U.S policy often engages with diverging objectives on their own accord, further limiting the EU's potential for influence in the region. Specific actions by the US in recent years that show clear partiality towards the Israeli side, such as the recognition of the annexation of the Golan Heights by Israel and the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem, run contrary to the EU's invocation of multilateral baselines (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp. 62–63). Furthermore, as the US does not respect UN resolutions, international law or multilateral attempts for a solution, there is little that the EU can do to de-escalate the conflict. Coupled with the internal division of the member states, the possible options that remain on the table can be little more than rhetoric and statements (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp. 65–66, 73).

To add to the above, within the internal politics of some of the EU member states, the political climate has shifted from pro-Palestinian to pro-Israeli, as rights wing politics appear to be more and more dominant. This is reflective of a general shift of EU politics towards nationalist, eurosceptic and populist movements whose core policies prioritise national interest over EU

values. As a result of this general inward focus of domestic politics, the EU's role in international peace negotiations appears to get more complicated (Pardo, Gordon, 2018).

## 2.3 The position of this thesis within the literature

This thesis is positioned at the intersection of the Normative Power Europe debate and realist critiques of the EU's external action. It doesn't aim to frame the actions of the EU as following either approach but rather to investigate the conditions under which each approach is followed. Using a discourse analysis framework, the study aims to investigate when NPE can influence outcomes and when it has to give way to actions that are determined by realist logic. It contributes to the elucidation of how NPE works in times of high-stakes crises and also provides a replicable framework for linking EU language to feasible actions under structural constraints.

When it comes to addressing gaps in the NPE theory, this thesis works to address four separate instances where there appear inconsistencies between theory and real-life application. First, the NPE claims that the EU "shapes conceptions of the normal" (Manners, 2002, p. 240) is often simply asserted rather than measured. The design of this thesis maps this claim onto DHA topoi and testable textual cues and codes segments to be checked for discursive and social practice check. This converts Manners's ontological position of "what the EU is/says/does" to observable warrants in speech acts (Manners, 2002, pp. 566–571).

Second, this thesis is able to elucidate the realist claim that there's a rhetoric-practice gap when narratives in normative power acts are not backed by capabilities and costs. By crafting a precise codebook, the thesis is able to pair norm talk to specific implementation instruments and constraints, allowing for testing of when legal/moral claims are backed by deployable tools (Hyde-Price, 2008, pp. 33–35).

Third, there's a gap in the EU's internal coherence, that refers to the EU's foreign policy being structurally prone to fragmentation across levels and pillars, is something that this thesis is able to trace (Portela, 2012, p. 3). By coding for intra-EU constraints, and tracing how normative claims are recalibrated according to the different venues that they're presented in , the analysis

coherence an explicit explanatory variable rather than a background assumption (Portela, 2012, pp. 2–4; Hill, 1993, pp. 315–316).

Lastly, since NPE under-specifies how systemic and alliance constraints shape EU choices, there appears to be a great-power/alliances gap (Hyde-Price, 2008, pp. 41–43). This thesis introduces codes that detect great-power context and interest-based legitimisation codes that identify US/UK coordination, sea-lane security or sanctions linkages, among others. In this way, it can be made observable when the EU's normative signalling is conditioned by such contexts, showing when and how external alignments tilt the NPE/Realism balance towards realist warrants.

### 3. Theory

This part introduces the theoretical framework, which draws on both normative power theory and realist perspectives. These approaches highlight different ways of understanding the EU's external engagement, with special relevance to conflicts that pit normative principles against strategic considerations. While these two theories are the primary focus, it is essential to recognize their links to broader theoretical debates in international relations, such as neorealism, liberalism, constructivism and Marxism.

The framework of NPE explains the Union's effort to exert influence by promoting norms including democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Realism, by contrast, highlights the challenges the EU faces in realizing its normative ambitions when power politics, national interests, and security imperatives prevail. The research narrows its scope to realism and Normative Power Europe, which provide the clearest insight into the EU's approach to the conflict. The theory section also attempts to highlight a distinct link between constructivism and NPE, in order to better flesh out the ontological substructure of NPE. Combining these theoretical lenses allows the study to expose the contradictions in the EU's global role, where its normative claims often clash with pragmatic responses in conflict situations.

### 3.1 Normative Power Europe

According to Ian Manners, the EU's identity as a normative power has emerged over five decades through a combination of treaties, declarations, policies, and conditionality. Together, these factors underpin the argument that the EU exerts significant influence as a normative power. Manners describes normative power as rooted in "power over opinion" and linked to the ambition to shift discussions away from state characteristics toward the Union's identity (Manners, 2002, p.239). In effect, this identity amounts to collective principles and standards that member states both adhere to and project outward. Among the extensive framework of EU laws and policies, Manners identifies five key norms forming the core of the *acquis communautaire* and political *acquis*. In addition to the definition and ontology of these core concepts, based on the fundamental treaties of the EU, Manners goes on to identify the four core values of liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights that inform the normative action. To those, he also adds four more minor ones with social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance (Manners, 2002, p.241-242). He then goes on to identify the existence of six diffusion mechanisms of normative power. The first, contagion, refers to the unintentional spread of norms via virtuous example, such as the Mercosur emulation EU of integration. The second, the informational diffusion mechanism, is a function of strategic and declaratory communications from official EU bodies. The third one, procedural, is the diffusion of norms by means of agreements or enlargement that are subject to conditionalities. The fourth is transference and it hinges on the use of material incentives or counterincentives, such as aid, trade or sanctions to achieve the desired result. The fifth one is overt presence of EU personnel in a foreign country, such as delegations. And lastly, the sixth diffusion mechanism is referred to as the cultural filter meaning the adoption of norms and values by the subjects of foreign countries by means of internal societal mediation that accepts, modifies or rejects values that are upheld by the Union (Manners, 2002, pp.244-245).

In external agreements, the EU incorporates limitation clauses that condition cooperation on adherence to the human rights principles of the European Convention. By codifying its values in legally binding accords, the EU reinforces its identity as a normative power. That said, it remains necessary to question the extent to which these human rights norms are consistently maintained

within the EU (Manners, 2002, p. 242). The EU's normative role, as outlined by Manners, is its ability to frame what is accepted as "normal" in world politics, focusing on democracy, rule of law, and human rights. However, the Union's ability to consistently project these values is often undermined by internal divisions, exemplified by the contrasting member-state stances on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. While committed to human rights and other normative principles, the EU's coherence is undermined by internal splits and national strategies, limiting its capacity to shape Israeli policy or enforce unity around its values (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp. 60–61, 65).

## 3.2 Core tenets of Constructivism

Emerging during a time of profound change in world politics, during the 1990s, constructivist theory aimed to provide an alternative discourse to the more traditional theories that had failed to predict the sweeping changes in the late 80s and early 90s (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 391–392). Unlike older theories, like neorealism and neoliberalism, that base their assumptions about the international system on the distribution of material power, constructivism has at its heart the fundamental assumption that ideational factors are the primary drivers of human interactions. More specifically, it first asserts that human interactions are not simply shaped by material factors but are primarily determined by ideational factors; second, that the most important of these ideational factors are not just beliefs that are held by individuals but are broadly shared, meaning that they are intersubjective; and third that these intersubjective beliefs serve as the foundations of the identities and interests of the examined actors (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 393). In the context of world politics this means that international relations are not objectively given but the result of social construction, meaning social processes and intersubjective understandings. On a more fundamental level, constructivism is focused on understanding "social facts", which do not exist in a material sense. These entities have no material reality independent of belief; they exist only because people collectively agree that they exist and act accordingly. The central puzzle of constructivist inquiry, therefore, is to understand how such social facts come into being, how they change over time, and how they shape the practices of world politics (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 393–394).

Unlike realism, liberalism, or Marxism, constructivism does not offer a substantive theory of politics in the sense of providing fixed predictions about outcomes. Rather, it is best understood as a social theory that establishes the ontological foundation of international life. In this regard, constructivism is analogous to rational choice theory: both supply a lens through which to understand how social processes operate but require further specification about the actors, interests, and structures under examination before offering concrete explanations. Where rational choice assumes actors pursue utility maximization within a materialist framework, constructivism posits that actors and structures are mutually constituted through shared ideas, which means interests themselves are socially produced rather than given (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 393).

Another hallmark of constructivist scholarship is its emphasis on process. Because identities and interests cannot be taken for granted, constructivist research often seeks to uncover how they are formed and transformed. This attention to process entails a broad conception of causality, one that values constitutive explanations alongside traditional causal accounts (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 394–395). Understanding how norms of sovereignty, rights, or international law are constituted is not treated as descriptive background but as integral to explaining political outcomes. In this way, constructivism broadens the field of inquiry beyond the constraints of materialist and individualist theories, highlighting the role of ideas, discourse, and intersubjective meaning in shaping global politics (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 393, 395, 402).

### 3.3 Normative Power's relation to Constructivism

Manners famously defined NPE as the Union's "ability to shape conceptions of the normal" in international affairs, thereby situating its power primarily in ideational influence rather than military coercion or material incentives (Manners, 2002, p. 239–240). This emphasis reflects a distinctly constructivist ontology: power is understood not as the accumulation of capabilities but as the ability to embed values and shape intersubjective meanings in the international system.

Constructivist theory provides the necessary foundation for NPE because it foregrounds the social construction of interests and identities. As Wendt argued, "anarchy is what states make of it," meaning that systemic structures do not predetermine behavior but acquire meaning through shared practices and norms (Wendt, 1992, pp. 395). In this light, the EU's role as a normative

actor is less about its structural position in the international order and more about how it projects and embodies certain values, namely democracy, human rights, rule of law, that both constitute its internal identity and define its external actions.(Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001)

Diez deepens this linkage by demonstrating that the discourse of NPE itself constructs the EU's identity vis-à-vis external "others." By framing itself as a force for good, the EU simultaneously produces a self-image and delineates outsiders as objects of transformation. This process underscores the reflexive dimension of constructivist analysis: the EU does not simply export norms but also continuously reconstitutes its own identity through this normative discourse(Diez, 2005, pp.615–616)

The diffusion mechanisms identified by Manners, such as contagion, procedural conditionality, and cultural filtering, further illustrate how constructivist processes operate (Manners, 2002, pp. 244–246). These mechanisms rely on persuasion, socialization, and internalization, which align closely with the "norm life cycle" model (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, pp. 394–400). Norms spread not because they are materially enforced but because actors come to see them as appropriate and legitimate. Enlargement cases vividly demonstrate this dynamic, as candidate states internalized EU norms partly because membership required them, but also because alignment with EU identity became socially desirable (Manners, 2002, pp. 245–246).

Nevertheless, constructivist readings also expose the vulnerabilities of NPE. Cohen-Tanugi stresses that much of the EU's normative influence rests upon regulatory capacity and market leverage, the so-called "Brussels effect", rather than purely ideational appeal (Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, p. 92). While this does not entirely negate a constructivist interpretation, it highlights the hybrid nature of NPE, where normative discourse coexists with structural advantages. If EU norms are perceived as imposed through asymmetric power relations rather than intersubjective consensus, their legitimacy and thus their effectiveness are diminished (Cohen-Tanugi, 2021, pp. 95–96).

Whitman adds that NPE is intrinsically tied to the Union's ontological foundations (Whitman, 2011, pp. 1–2). The EU emerged as a community of law, built upon treaties and rights frameworks, which gives it a predisposition to act through normative means. This reinforces constructivist insights as the EU's external conduct flows from its identity as a legal-political order that was itself constituted through shared norms and principles (Whitman, 2011, pp. 2–3).

### 3.4 NPE in the case of Gaza

The EU's engagement with the Gaza conflict reveals both the application and the limitations of NPE. While the Union consistently articulates its foreign policy in terms of democracy, human rights, rule of law, and the pursuit of peace, its actions in Gaza demonstrate a gap between normative discourse and political practice. This section outlines the six NPE diffusion mechanisms, how different mechanisms are applied in the Gaza case, and evaluates their effectiveness.

Manners describes that the EU can project norms through six diffusion mechanisms: informational, procedural, transference, overt presence, contagion, and the cultural filter (Manners, 2002, pp. 244–246). In the case of Gaza, the analysis identifies four mechanisms operating in practice.

Informational diffusion works through strategic and declaratory communication, such as regular Commission/HRVP statements tying the EU's stance to international humanitarian law, civilian protection and the pause into ceasefire into a two-state solution sequence. These declarations seek to define what “appropriate” conduct looks like (Manners, 2002, p. 245; cf. European Commission, 2025).

Procedural diffusion is visible in legal-institutional linkages, such as the EU-Israel Association Agreement's Article 2 human rights clause, that converts respect for rights into a necessary condition for the relationship and provides standing mechanisms for review and potential measures (European Parliament, 2025, p. 1; Manners, 2002, pp. 244–245).

Transference operates through material incentives and instruments, such as EU humanitarian and development financing to Palestinians, emergency support and humanitarian funds that are conditional to normative claims (Manners, 2002, p. 245; European Commission DG ECHO, 2025).

The cultural filter mechanism functions via EU support to civil society and governance actors. Local mediation and social learning are the key factors to whether norms promoted by the EU are accepted, adapted or resisted inside the Palestinian society (Manners, 2002, p. 246).

The two diffusion mechanisms that are not present in the case of Gaza are overt presence and contagion.

Overt presence necessitates norm diffusion that stems from the EU's physical presence in third states and international organisations, for example via Commission delegations, embassies, high-level visits. In this case, EU rules and practices are enacted and normalised on site (Manners, 2002, pp. 245–246).

Contagion refers to the unintentional spread of EU norms as other actors emulate the Union's "virtuous example," including regional replication such as the efforts in Mercosur (Manners, 2002, p. 244).

Since the Venice Declaration of 1980, the EU has upheld the principle of a two-state solution as the normative framework for resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This principle reflects the Union's commitment to international law, peaceful conflict resolution, and the self-determination of peoples. More recently, in the aftermath of the October 2023 escalation, EU leaders reiterated the centrality of humanitarian law and the protection of civilians in Gaza. (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, Özel, 2024, pp. p. 59, 60, 72). In line with NPE, these commitments embody the EU's effort to "shape conceptions of the normal" by presenting peaceful coexistence and respect for human rights as the legitimate path forward. (Manners, 2002, pp.240).

Out of the six mechanisms of normative diffusion that Manners identified in his original article, at least four can be discerned as being active in the EU's policy on the Middle Eastern Peace Process (MEPP).

Firstly, informational diffusion can be identified as the EU deploys its declaratory diplomacy, repeatedly emphasizing support for a two-state solution and its adherence to the Oslo Accords, with statements by the High Representative and the Commission President reflecting the EU's attempt to establish normative expectations (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, Özel, 2024, pp. 59, 60–61).

Secondly, procedural diffusion attempts can be observed with the EU's linked cooperation agreements with both Israel and Palestine that are contingent on respect for international law. However, their enforcement has been inconsistent, as for example can be seen in the reluctance of the EU to enforce binding conditionalities in the case of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, even though it rhetorically condemns them (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, Özel, 2024, pp. 71–72, 72).

Thirdly, transference can be seen at work, as the EU is the largest donor to the Palestinians, providing extensive humanitarian aid and institution-building support to the Palestinian Authority. (Akgül-Açıkmeşe, Özel, 2024, pp. 72).

Lastly, the cultural filter mechanism is present, as the supports Palestinian civil society actors and NGOs, aiming to foster internal adoption of EU-promoted values such as democratic participation and good governance.(Akgül-Açıkmeşe, Özel, 2024, pp.71)

### 3.5 Realism

This section will focus on the specific notions of realism that will inform the analysis part. Realism as a whole holds a dominant place in international relations since it provides the clearest explanation for the recurrence of war in global politics (Wohlforth, 2008, pp.131) The focus is placed more on interests than on ideological concerns (Donnelly, 2000, pp. 8). It questions the existence of moral or universal norms, warning leaders not to compromise their own interests for the sake of being “ethical” (Morgenthau, 2005, 12-13). Since power increases the likelihood of survival, realism views international politics as a struggle for power where ethical concerns and legal norms are frequently overlooked (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 33-34) .

The thesis draws from the structural realism stand, as it treats outcomes as shaped by the structure of anarchy and the distribution of capabilities within the international stem. This provides a precise way to explain when EU discourse will shift from legal-moral claims to security/interest claims (Waltz, 1979, pp. 79–106, 97–99). In the case of crises, like in Gaza, the security dilemma and offence-defence conditions make prudence, hedging and alliance coordination rational, even in cases where normative commitments are voiced, which is exactly what structural realism expects (Jervis, 1978, pp. 168–170, 186–191). Realist critiques of “ethical power Europe” warn that norms without capabilities risk ineffectiveness or moral crusading (Hyde-Price, 2008, pp. 33–35, 41–43). Using structural-realist notions lets the thesis test when tools, costs and great-power dynamics condition or override NPE claims.

#### 3.5.1 Structural realism

Structural realism theory provides a theoretical background that contributes an understanding of what is fundamentally possible for the EU in high-stakes crises. As a systemic theory it posits

that outcomes in world politics are shaped primarily by the structure of the international system, that is characterised by anarchy and distribution of capabilities rather than by leader preferences or regime types. The theory supposes that as long as the basic tenets of the international system remain the same, changes within the system, such as new technologies, nuclear weapons and denser institutions, merely alter the way of how states provide for security, while still functioning within the realms of anarchy and self-help. (Waltz, 2000, pp. 5-6). Under anarchy, states cannot rely on enforceable promises. Rather, they must assume responsibility for their own survival. Waltz makes this explicit, noting that even the massive “within-system” change of nuclear weapons did not alter the anarchic structure or the self-help imperative. (Waltz, 2000, pp. 5–6).

As there is no arbiter that distributes power within the system, states worry about future power balance. Cooperation is evaluated not just for absolute benefits, but for effects on relative capabilities. Therefore, states that chose to cooperate may opt to maximise their own power potential projection for the future rather than focus on mutual gain for themselves as well as their partners (Waltz, 2000, pp. 40–41).

Waltz notes that whether the international system changes towards a unipolar, bipolar or multipolar polarity has profound effects on how states make their security arrangements. These changes, however, do not mean that they abolish self-help strategies. Also, the number of great powers in the system has an effect on the choices that states make when it comes to alliances. When two or more great powers exist, states tend to rely on alliances more than in unipolar situations. As the number of great powers rises in the system so does complexity and uncertainty regarding the comparative strength of the units in the system as well as the cohesion and capabilities of alliances (Waltz, 2000, p. 6).

According to structural realism theory, it can be implied that some specific situations will be observed in the analysis. Firstly, a gap between rhetoric and practice of actors, when the security stakes are high. Even actors that are rich with norms will moderate their enforcement if it threatens their future security position or the cohesion of the alliance (Waltz, 2000, pp. 40–41). Secondly, it should be observed that secondary powers under a capable patron that dominates the security environment will make very cautious use of coercion (Waltz, 2000, pp. 32–33). Lastly, it is expected to observe that institutions reflect power relations rather than override them. This is consistent with realism's core claim that system structure sets limits for what rules can achieve without material backing (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 7–9, 13–15).

### 3.5.2 Security dilemma

The concept of the security dilemma describes a situation where defensive moves by one side can be interpreted as offensive by the other side, leading to the deployment of counter measures that can again be interpreted as offensive action. This situation is detrimental to both sides (Jervis, 1978, pp. 171–172).

The primary mechanism of the security dilemma describes that, in an international system with no central enforcer to guarantee agreements, generates uncertainty about intentions which in turn leads to precautionary arming and postures. This leads to a spiral of defensive/offensive moves, as each side feels less and less secure and responds in kind to the moves of the other side (Jervis, 1978, pp. 172–176).

There are two variables that regulate the intensity of the security dilemma. The first one is distinguishability, which means the degree to which a weapon deployment can be verified to be defensive or offensive. The lower the distinguishability the worse the security dilemma gets. The second one is the offence-defense balance. If the situation that the actors find themselves in favours offense, in the sense of it being easier, not as costly or both then the escalation spirals get bigger, as both actors fear of getting left behind in the escalation procedure (Jervis, 1978, pp. 187–191).

The implications of the security dilemma on policy signals are threefold. First, there is the problem of reassurance, meaning that restraint from one side can invite exploitation from the other. Second, there is the issue of deterrence, where building a visible capability to deter can also threaten and provoke. Lastly, there is the risk of “cheap talk” which refers to a situation where statements being made by a side without any credible cost being incurred to it can rarely impact behaviours in high stakes settings (Jervis, 1978, pp. 171–172, pp. 183-186).

In the case of EU actions related to the situation in Gaza, we can observe actions that are related to the security dilemma. For example, when the EU makes statements that are related to international humanitarian law and the wellbeing of civilians, these can be interpreted as attempts for reassurance towards both sides. However, without any costs that can be linked to these statements, they are not taken into account during active operations (Jervis, 1978, pp. 171–172, 183–186). Another example is when the EU attempts to perform procedural diffusion by means of reviews or clauses imposed to parties. As Jervis explains, leaders tend to prioritise

measures that hedge against possible hostile intentions by their opponents over legal assurances. Therefore, these attempts are very likely to fail to produce any meaningful results (Jervis, 1978, pp. 172–176).

### 3.5.3 Relative gains

The relative gains argument posits that, under anarchy, states judge cooperation not only in absolute gains but also by who gains more from it, based on the thought that today's advantage can become tomorrow's leverage (Grieco, 1988, pp. 498–501). The logic behind this position assumes that in an anarchic international system where there's no reliable enforcer and state survival is dependent on self-help strategies, cooperation creates benefits and redistributes capabilities. In this situation, if a partner is expected to gain more from a cooperation, states will attempt to limit, condition or block it entirely (Grieco, 1988, pp. 487–488, 494–501). Since states don't only care about overall welfare but also their standing in the international system relative to other states, they look to the uncertain future in order to figure out how a surplus or a deficit in gains from a deal today can shift the power dynamics and bargaining positions tomorrow (Grieco, 1988, pp. 487–488, 498, 499–501). This arrangement leads states to set limits on co-operations where they stand to gain less than their partners or drives them to add additional clauses with a view to even out the net gains from a deal. It also leads to a preference for shallow, easily reversible commitments in sensitive areas (Grieco, 1988, pp. 498–501).

In the case of the EU's activities in Gaza, the relative gains argument could lead to some revealing observations. First of all, when it comes to legal clauses and reviews, member states could hesitate to implement sanctions, as those could impose asymmetric costs on their own economies and also reduce their relative position vis-à-vis key partners, such as Israel and the U.S (Grieco, 1988, pp. 498–500; Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 13–15). Secondly, the relative gains argument could present an explanation for the EU's lack of enforcement of their rhetoric and statements as taking costly action is resisted if it hands relative gains to adversaries or strains vital alliances (Grieco, 1988, pp. 492–494, 498–501).

### 3.5.4 Institutional scepticism

Institutional scepticism refers to the realist claim that international institutions have limited independent effects and that they are mostly reflections of underlying power relations and interests within the international system. Thus, when core security interests of big powers are at stake, compliance with the directives of international institutions is lacking. The underlying arguments behind this position start with the claim that international institutions may help with information and transaction costs among states but they do not have the capability of overriding the basic principle of self-help in an anarchic international system. Furthermore, Mearsheimer argues that the rules created by institutions are selectively enforced and can be bent when their enforcement is conflicting with interests of the enforcer (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 7–9). Lastly, Waltz presents the argument that the real limits to the capabilities of institutions are set by structural constraints of the system, such as its polarity and the distribution of capabilities.

Stemming from the above, the institutional scepticism claim can be used to make the following predictions relative to the case that the paper is analysing. To begin with, we can expect to find that when the enforcement of rules imposes real costs on the enforcer, such as in trade, technology or security ties, the legal clauses will not be enforced (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 7–9, 13–15). To add to this, unity within the enforcing coalition is a deciding factor when it comes to the effectiveness of legal clauses as institutions will default to the lowest common denominator in cases where their members are divided (Grieco, 1988, pp. 498–501; Waltz, 2000, p. 40). Lastly, Mearshheimer predicts that institutions will be used to signal values but cannot serve as coercive mechanisms towards valued partners in the case of high-stakes crises (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 13–15).

### 3.5.5 Balance-of-threat

The balance-of-threat realist claim argues that states align against the greatest threat, not simply the greatest power. The notion of threat perception relies on four factors that are calculated by the balancing actors: aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive capability and perceived intentions (Walt, 1985, pp. 7–8). When faced against a threat, actors can make one of two choices: to create a balancing coalition against the threat and to bandwagon with the threat, meaning that they fall into an alliance with the threatening actor. The later choice is likelier for weak, isolated or exposed states (Walt, 1985, pp. 16–18).

According to the above, it is expected that the EU will be found more likely to balance against Hamas and its allies than to balance against Israel. This is due to several factors, as Israel is a close ally to the US which is in turn the greatest security guarantor and ally of the EU through NATO. Also, Israel has strong trade and financial ties with the EU. Therefore, the intentions of Israel can be perceived as friendly, despite its notable military strength. Hamas on the other hand, is designated as a terrorist organisation by the EU and its allies, Iran, Yemen and Hezbollah are perceived as sources of regional instability (Council of the European Union, n.d.) (Drachenberg & Torpey, 2024).

### 3.6. Realist critique of NPE mechanisms in effect in Gaza

This section assesses four NPE mechanisms that are visibly in play in the EU's approach to Gaza, informational diffusion, procedural diffusion, transference, and the cultural filter, through the lens of the realist notions described above. Realism expects these instruments to be filtered by power asymmetries, relative-gains concerns, and alliance politics. Where such constraints dominate, normative tools deliver limited leverage even when they are deployed with consistency (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 7-9).

#### Informational diffusion

The EU has articulated and rhetorically upheld a two-state framework, humanitarian law obligations, and civilian protection, with repeated statements by the High Representative and the Commission Presidency since October 2023. From a realist perspective, however, such signals are “cheap talk” when they are not tied to credible costs. Under anarchy and uncertainty about intentions, words do not alter the objectives of a militarily superior actor engaged in a high-stakes campaign, especially when the coalition that is attempting to influence policy through rhetoric is divided (Jervis, 1978). In the case of Palestine and especially Gaza, the Union's rhetoric has outpaced its willingness to impose material penalties, weakening credibility and reinforcing a rhetoric–practice gap that realists predict (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp.2-4 ; Hyde-Price, 2008, pp. 31-33)

#### Procedural diffusion

NPE assumes that embedding norms in agreements can socialize partners. Realism instead expects rules to reflect power and to be enforced only when doing so serves the enforcer's interests (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 7, 47-49). The EU–Israel Association Agreement contains a human-rights “essential elements” clause, and the EU has launched a review of Israel's compliance, but the step from review to suspension has been blocked by the differing opinions of member states, the transatlantic alignment of the EU and the economic–technological value attached to EU-Israel ties (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). In realist terms, legalism codifies aspirations but cannot enforce behaviour on a valued partner without unity and material leverage; when structural incentives shift, rules bend or are ignored (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 47–49); Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp. 60–61, 66, 68, 72–73). A recent European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) brief underscores that respect for human rights is an “essential element” of the agreement and describes the still ongoing review process of the EU-Israel Association Agreement (EPRS, 2025). In the face of Israel's war crimes and crimes against humanity, as claimed by the UN's Human Rights Council (UNHCR, 2024), the same document also highlights the political conditions and procedures that make suspension of the trade agreement difficult due to lack of member state unanimity, confirming realist expectations that institutional remedies are filtered through cost–benefit calculations among states (EPRS, 2025), (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 47–49).

## Transference

The EU is the largest provider of external assistance to Palestinians, with humanitarian allocations and broader budgetary support scaled up after October 2023. Realists predict that side-payments rarely reconfigure hard security incentives of the stronger party as aid can ease suffering. At the same time, it can stabilize the status quo by relieving pressure without changing the occupier's calculus (Grieco, 1988). Across 2023–2025, the EU mobilized over €1.48 billion in humanitarian support funds and has committed to a €1.6 billion recovery program. The Commission describes the Union as the biggest external donor to Palestinians. ((Council of the EU, 2025; European Commission, 2025). This scale, however, has not translated into bargaining leverage vis-à-vis Israel's or Hamas's campaign decisions. In realist language, the EU risks being

the payer rather than the player. Its transfers mitigate humanitarian collapse but do not alter the unequal balance of capabilities or alliance structures (Mearsheimer, 1994/95, pp. 7, 47–49).

### Cultural filter

NPE's position is that sustained support to NGOs, media, universities, and people-to-people projects gradually socialises local actors into EU norms. While realists accept these local effects they argue that under occupation, repeated large-scale violence, and asymmetric control of territory and movement, domestic socialisation is dominated by coercive structures. In Gaza and the West Bank, civil-society support has delivered tangible local benefits but has not shifted the strategic behaviour of the principals to the conflict or insulated Palestinian governance from the power asymmetry that shapes outcomes (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024, pp. 60–61, 66, 72–74). This means that identity work cannot overcome material constraints as the actor with dominant capabilities determines the possible feasible outcomes (Grieco, 1988, pp. 499–502).

## 3.7 Brief table predicting analysis outcomes

With the table below, I'm attempting to give a succinct impression of what each of the two theories predict that the analysis observations will be in a number of dimensions, according to the theoretical concepts that have been presented in this chapter.

*Table 1(own design)*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Normative Power Europe</b>	<b>Realism</b>
<b>Primary warrant</b>	The discourse will justify EU positions primarily through legal-moral reasoning grounded in IHL, human rights, and the rule of law	The discourse will justify EU positions primarily through security–interest reasoning focused on threat containment, stability, and capability–cost calculations

<b>Gaza framing</b>	Gaza will be framed as a humanitarian–legal problem in which civilian protection, access, proportionality, and a pause into ceasefire into two-state pathway are foregrounded	Gaza will be framed as a regional security vector in which escalation risks, spillover dynamics, deterrence, and sea-lane/critical-infrastructure protection are foregrounded
<b>Instrument linkage</b>	Legal and humanitarian claims will be paired with procedures and safeguards, such as Article-2 conditionality, accountability mechanisms, and aid delivery architectures, so that norms are operationalised through concrete pathways	Security and interest claims will be paired with deployable tools—such as missions, sanctions reviews, conditionality for leverage, and logistical corridors—so that feasibility and cost govern instrument choice
<b>Venue/genre effect</b>	In contexts of humanitarian/diplomatic interest, the discourse will privilege legal references and protection language and will translate them into implementable institutional steps	In defence-industrial and strategic contexts, the discourse will privilege risk, capability, and alliance coordination and will translate them into deployable measures and calibrated timelines
<b>Rhetoric–practice alignment</b>	Alignment will be strongest where rights-based language is accompanied by named delivery mechanisms and verifiable follow-through on access and protection	Alignment will be strongest where security-focused language is accompanied by named capabilities, clear thresholds for action, and observable deterrent or protective effects
<b>Predicted net balance</b>	NPE dominates where humanitarian/legal delivery is central. Realist cues appear as enablers	Realism dominates where security/industrial agendas lead. NPE cues appear as secondary or symbolic

<b>What would falsify it</b>	Security/interest frames dominate even in humanitarian venues without legal anchoring or protection language	Legal-moral frames dominate defence/strategic venues and are backed by robust capabilities despite costs/risks
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## 4. Methodology

This study will be using a qualitative approach to research design in order to address the research question. The reasoning behind this rests on the fact that the research question tries to approach an ongoing and complex issue, such as the conflict between Israel and Palestine, and a qualitative approach is better suited to capture the perception of the EU's normative power through an intricate analysis of official statements by high ranking officials that construct the political discourse. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study investigates how the European Union's language and rhetoric construct political realities and influence power relations in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. By applying CDA to speeches and policy sources, this study aims to investigate how the EU formulates its normative power and builds up the perceptions of central actors in the conflict. This framework enables a thorough exploration of how the EU's normative power operates across theoretical debates and concrete actions within the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The subsequent sections provide a detailed account of the research design, the study's limitations, and the methods of data collection.

### 4.1 Research Design

The qualitative research design that this thesis will use is centered around Critical Discourse Analysis(CDA), particularly relying on two complementary approaches: the Discourse-Historical Approach and Fairclough's three-dimensional model. In combination, these methods provide the analytical framework for examining how the EU articulates and legitimises its positions in the context of the war in Gaza.

The Discourse-Historical Approach focuses on integrating texts within their general social, political and historical contexts. It is characterised by three dimensions of critique:

text-immanent critique, socio-diagnostic critique and prospective critique. Each one allows the researcher to detect inconsistencies, ideological framing and political consequences in political discourse (Wodak & Reisigl, 2009, pp.87-88). A central characteristic of DHA is that it is focused on intertextuality and interdiscursivity, connecting texts to other discourses, genres and historical references. This allows for a systematic way of positioning the rhetoric of the EU on Gaza in relation to past policies, international law and discursive traditions such as humanitarianism and security concerns. The approach is also reliant on sets of guiding questions that involve how actors and actions are named, what attributes are ascribed to them, what arguments are mobilised, from which perspective and with what intensity (Wodak & Reisigl, 2009, pp. 93–94). By applying these tools, this thesis investigates the ways in which officials construct images of Israel, Palestine and the Union itself, as well as the shifts in these constructions that are dependent on political pressures and historical analogies.

The other approach that is employed in combination with the above is Fairclough's three-dimensional model of analysis. This model complements DHA by providing a structured lens through which discourse is analysed at three interconnected levels: textual analysis, discursive practice and socio-cultural practice. The textual analysis level examines vocabulary, grammar and rhetorical devices in EU speeches. Discursive practice highlights processes of production distribution and consumption, in our case for example focusing on how the Commission speeches are recontextualised in media or parliamentary debates. Lastly, the socio-cultural practice level situates discourse within broader contexts of structures of power, ideology and social relations (Xing, 2024, p. 181; Fairclough, 1992). This framework is especially valuable for understanding how EU discourse simultaneously constructs meaning at the micro-level of language, circulates through institutional media channels and reflects geopolitical and normative struggles.

The integration of DHA and Fairclough's framework allows the thesis to capture both the immediate textual strategies and the wider historical and structural dynamics in EU discourse. DHA provides tools for examining intertextual connections, argumentative patterns, and historical references. Meanwhile, Fairclough's model ensures that these findings are systematically linked to the social practices and institutional settings that shape discourse. In combination, these approaches make it possible to trace how the EU deploys humanitarian, legal, and security-related rhetoric, how such discourse travels through different institutional arenas,

and how tensions are ultimately reflected between normative commitments and geopolitical realities.

## 4.2 Data selection

The analysis focuses on Ursula von der Leyen's speeches that were delivered at the European Parliament plenary sessions on the 28th of February and 21-22 of March 2024 and a speech at the EU Ambassadors Conference(2025). It also includes a speech written by the former EU High Representative/Vice President(HR/VP) Josep Borrell and delivered on his behalf by Elisa Ferreira on the 26th of November 2024. Finally, the analysis includes a speech from current HR/VP Kaja Kallas on the 18th of June 2025 EP Plenary topical debate, as well as the recent State of the Union Address by von der Leyen, given on the 10th of September 2025.

The selection of these particular speeches and statements was made for a number of reasons. They allow for a structured comparison across principals, venues and times, as they are stratified by EU role, venue and phase during the crisis. The last attribute also helps to position the analysis across the spectrum of the conflict's timeline and trace any changes in the EU's rhetoric, approach and actions but also to examine any divisions that might have appeared among the EU's midst over rhetoric and policy choices. To add to the above, the speeches are authentic, public and can be easily replicable, since they are official records. They are also easily comparable, as they are speeches from the very elite of dignitaries. The similarity of the sources keeps the genre similar and thus makes the comparative reliability of the coding stronger. All in all, elite speeches were chosen over other sources as they provide a uniform genre that is publicly available, verifiable and comparable across different attributes.

In order to flesh out the influence of the EU in the Israeli-Palestine conflict, the analysis also focuses on the relationship between the EU, Israel and Palestine, while also involving other international parties such as other states in the Middle East, the United States(US) and the United Nations(UN).

The chosen sources are essential to this thesis, as they reveal how EU leaders frame the Union's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its advocacy of a two-state solution. President Von der Leyen's speeches at the European Parliament are especially important, as they reflect the EU's official position on security, foreign policy, and the Middle East, while showcasing its normative power. These speeches make it possible to examine the rhetoric of EU leaders and

how it reflects the Union's wider political and diplomatic aims in the region, especially its commitment to a two-state solution.

In addition to the speeches, media articles from various international outlets are interwoven in the analysis, in order to provide accountability about claims as well as to provide valuable context regarding the content of the speeches.

### 4.3 Operationalisation

This operationalisation part aims to translate the thesis's theoretical language into empirically tractable categories for analysis. Normative Power Europe theory and Realism are used to provide explanatory frames for how the EU frames, legitimates and constrains its response to the war in Gaza. The goal is to identify within EU speeches and official texts the discursive work by which policies are justified and to document the conditions under which the logic from each of the theories I'm using get to dominate.

The codebook that is presented below attempts to translate the dual theoretical framework of the thesis into observable discursive categories that can be observed in speech. It uses a Critical Discourse Analysis(CDA) design that combines the Discourse-Historical Approach(DHA) with Fairclough's three-dimensional model. For each segment, that includes a sentence or a short paragraph, I identify the dominant topos of legitimation, that can be either legal/moral or security/interest based), and I assign a primary code accordingly. A secondary code can be also added if clearly present.

NPE-derived codes capture appeals to international law, human rights, humanitarian protection, peacebuilding and the two state solution and also claims of consistency with principles that include intertextual references to UN or EU institutions and treaties. On the other hand, codes derived from realism capture security, threat and stability framing. Also, interest based reasoning is included, such as the when referencing costs, capabilities and alliances, is portrayed. Then there is Intra-EU constraints coding that attempts to capture divergence in opinions, unanimity hurdles, competences, capability gaps and electoral pressures. Moreover, there are codes for great power alignment, prudential hedging of risk, and references to leverage or tools that can be used to achieve stated goals. Lastly, there are also cross-cutting codes that can be assigned to either theory after their detection, according to the general context and subtext of the examined text. These codes are related to responsibility, agency and blame for a situation,

the perception and reception of EU policies by other actors and the discrepancy between action and rhetoric that might be observed.

To ensure that the codes are not just labels without backing, I operationalise them with DHA prompts. The first of these prompts is nomination, which means who or what is named. Then there is predication, that pertains to the qualities that are attributed within the examined segment. Also, there is argumentation/ *topoi*, that warrants the linking of reasons to claims. To add to this, there is perspectivisation, that notes whose viewpoint is foregrounded, and lastly there is intensification/mitigation that tracks how commitments are strengthened or hedged (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 95). Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, each coded segment is then checked at two layers of context in addition to the textual cues. These layers include the discursive practice, that is related to the genre, the production and the audience that the analysed data is intended for, and the social practice, that is relevant to the situational, institutional and socio-political constraints that might be present in the context surrounding the data (Xing, 2024, p. 182). Genres are treated as “socially ratified ways of using language” tied to specific social activities (Fairclough, 1995a in Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, pp. 89–90). A code is then applied only when a specific textual cue clearly represents a corresponding DHA *topos* within the genre and context (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 95; see also their emphasis on studying genres and intertextual/interdiscursive relations, p. 94).

This way of operationalisation enables a systematic comparison of NPE to Realist dominance across the chosen corpus, making visible the conditions under which each logic prevails. The anchoring of codes in DHA *topoi*, textual indicators and Fairclough's contextual layers provide the analysis with transparency, replicability and theory faithfulness, while at the same time avoiding arbitrary reading of the data.

*Table 2: NPE-derived coding (own design)*

Code	Operational definition	Typical indicators	DHA <i>topoi</i>
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<p>NORMATIVE VALUES</p>	<p>Appeals to universal norms/“EU values” (human rights, IHL, rule of law, democracy, dignity)</p>	<p>-Mentions of Geneva Conventions, ICC/ICJ/UN resolutions; “international law must be upheld,” “European values”, democracy, human rights, UN Charter principles</p>	<p><b>-Topos of law &amp; right:</b> <i>If action follows law/rights, then it must be supported</i></p> <p><b>-Topos of dignity/humanity:</b> <i>If human dignity is at stake, then protecting it takes precedence</i></p> <p><b>-Topos of justice/equality before norms:</b> <i>If actors stand equally before law, then similar breaches warrant similar critique/sanction</i></p> <p><b>-Topos of responsibility:</b> <i>If an actor violates IHL/rights, then it bears responsibility and should face accountability measures</i></p>
<p>PEACEBUILDING / TWO-STATE</p>	<p>Frames EU as peace/mediation actor; calls for ceasefire, de-escalation, negotiations, reconciliation, two-state solution</p>	<p>“Immediate/lasting ceasefire,” “return to talks,” “EU mediation/facilitation,” “two-state solution.”</p>	<p><b>- Topos of peace/conciliation:</b> <i>If ceasefire/negotiations reduce harm and enable political solution, then they should be pursued/supported</i></p> <p><b>- Topos of viability of solution:</b> <i>If a two-state horizon is the only sustainable settlement acknowledged in law/diplomacy, then discourse should advance that horizon.</i></p> <p><b>-Topos of mediation competence:</b> <i>If the EU can convene/mediate, then it is warranted to propose/lead formats</i></p>
<p>HUMANITARIAN PROTECTION</p>	<p>Protection of civilians; aid access; proportionality; accountability for violations</p>	<p>“Unimpeded humanitarian access,” “protect civilians,” “respect proportionality,” “investigate violations.”</p>	<p><b>-Topos of protection of civilians:</b> <i>If civilians face disproportionate harm, then civilian protection and access must be ensured immediately.</i></p> <p><b>-Topos of proportionality:</b> <i>If</i></p>

			<p>means are disproportionate to ends, <i>then</i> they are illegitimate and must cease.</p> <p><b>-Topos of accountability for violations:</b> <i>If</i> credible allegations of IHL breaches exist, <i>then</i> investigation and accountability are required</p>
LEGAL-MORAL LEGITIMATION	Justifies EU stance by legal/moral principles and precedent	“Because international law...,” “our moral duty...,” cites UN/EU acquis or treaties.	<p><b>-Topos of legal precedent:</b> <i>If</i> precedent/treaty obliges X, <i>then</i> the EU should do X (or refrain from Y)</p> <p><b>-Topos of moral duty:</b> <i>If</i> moral duties (e.g., to protect life) are implicated, <i>then</i> action is justified beyond utility calculus.</p>
INTERTEXTUALITY (NORMATIVE)	Uses external legal/normative texts to bolster stance	“As per UNSCR...,” “EU Charter...,” “Rome Statute...”.	<b>-Topos of authority (legal-text):</b> <i>If</i> an authoritative instrument (UNSCR, ICJ order, EU Charter) says z, <i>then</i> z is a valid ground for the EU stance.
CONSISTENCY CLAIMS	Self-presentation as coherent/principled over time and cases	“Our consistent position...,” “as we have always maintained...”.	<b>-Topos of precedent/consistency:</b> <i>If</i> the EU has consistently held position P across cases, <i>then</i> maintaining P now is warranted

Table 3: Realism-derived codes (own design)

Code	Operational definition	Typical indicators	DHA topoi
SECURITY / THREAT / STABILITY	Prioritises security, counter-terrorism, escalation control, regional spillover, border protection	“Security of Israelis/Palestinians/Europe,” “counter-terrorism,” “prevent regional spillover”, “freedom of navigation”	<p><b>-Topos of danger/threat:</b> <i>If</i> X poses (regional/European) security risk, <i>then</i> measures to contain X are justified</p> <p><b>-Topos of</b></p>

			<p><b>stability/spillover:</b> <i>If</i> action reduces destabilisation/spillover, <i>then</i> it should be prioritised</p>
<p>INTEREST-BASED LEGITIMATION</p>	<p>Justifies positions via interests, costs, capabilities, alliances, energy/trade</p>	<p>“Immediate/lasting ceasefire,” “return to talks,” “EU mediation/facilitation,” “two-state solution.”</p>	<p><b>-Topos of usefulness/advantage:</b> <i>If</i> a measure serves core interests (security, trade, energy), <i>then</i> it should be adopted</p> <p><b>-Topos of consequence (negative/positive):</b> <i>If</i> doing/omitting X leads to serious (economic/strategic) consequences, <i>then</i> prefer the alternative with better outcomes</p> <p><b>-Topos of numbers/capacity:</b> <i>If</i> the numbers (casualties, capabilities, aid tonnage) demonstrate urgency/limits, <i>then</i> policy should match those quantitative realities</p>
<p>INTRA-EU CONSTRAINTS</p>	<p>Member-state divergence, competence limits, capability gaps, electoral pressures</p>	<p>“We must remain united...,” references to vetoes/splits/competences</p>	<p><b>Topos of feasibility/competence:</b> <i>If</i> EU legal competences/unanimity/capabilities limit options, <i>then</i> positions must be calibrated to what is feasible</p> <p><b>-Topos of unity/credibility:</b> <i>If</i> unity is necessary for effectiveness, <i>then</i> moderate the position to keep member-states</p>

			aligned
GREAT-POWER CONTEXT	Deference/coordination with the U.S. or balancing in wider geopolitics	“With our allies,” “transatlantic coordination,” “avoid escalation with...”	- <b>Topos of alliance coordination:</b> <i>If</i> coordination with allies is required to be effective/avoid escalation, <i>then</i> align timing/instruments accordingly  - <b>Topos of balance/escalation-avoidance:</b> <i>If</i> an act risks wider escalation, <i>then</i> restraint or de-escalatory steps are warranted
HEDGING / AMBIGUITY	Modal/conditional language signalling risk management or feasibility concerns	“May/could/when conditions allow,” “as far as possible,” open-ended timing	<b>Topos of uncertainty/risk management:</b> <i>If</i> outcomes are uncertain or risks high, <i>then</i> conditional/gradual commitments are justified
			<b>Topos of instrumentality/leverage:</b> <i>If</i> specific tools (sanctions, missions, conditionality) can change behaviour, <i>then</i> deploying/reviewing them is warranted; <i>if not</i> , signalling limits of leverage justifies restraint
CONSISTENCY CLAIMS	References to tools, conditionality, sanctions feasibility, or limits of leverage.	“Review instruments,” “targeted measures if...,” “limited leverage”	<b>Topos of realism/pragmatics:</b> <i>If</i> past attempts show limits of EU leverage, <i>then</i> pragmatic calibration now is warranted

Table 4: Cross-cutting codes(own design)

Code	Operational definition	Typical indicators	DHA topoi
RESPONSIBILITY /	Who is assigned	“ Hamas must...,”	<b>Topos of</b>

BLAME / AGENCY	agency/blame; active vs passive voice; naming vs “both sides.”	“Israel must...” , “war in Gaza,” “loss of life”	<b>responsibility/culpability:</b> <i>If</i> actor A initiates/violates, <i>then</i> A bears blame and obligations to remedy
INTERTEXTUALITY / INTERDISCURSIVITY	References to past EU lines, UN/EU law, media/parliament recontextualizations.	Text cites UNSCR/EU acquis or shows circulation into media/EP debates.	<b>Topos of authority &amp; recontextualization:</b> <i>If</i> prior texts/genres establish frames (UN/EU law; Council conclusions; allied statements), <i>then</i> reusing them legitimates current stance
RHETORIC–PRACTICE DISCREPANCY	Gaps between speech and action; or explicit acknowledgment of constraints	Unanimity hurdles; reviews without suspension; aid scale without leverage; “payer not player” risk.	<b>Topos of credibility/effectiveness:</b> <i>If</i> rhetoric is not matched by feasible tools or outcomes, <i>then</i> adjust commitments/tools to maintain credibility
PERCEPTION / RECEPTION	Mentions of how others see EU stance/credibility	Reactions from UN/NGOs/states; media portrayals; allied/partner readings.	<b>Topos of recognition/uptake:</b> <i>If</i> third-party reception (UN/NGOs/states) validates or challenges EU credibility, <i>then</i> adapt discourse/tools accordingly

#### 4.4 External validity

This thesis achieves external validity by way of analytic generalisation. The methodology is theory-driven and auditable and the corpus is stratified across EU principals, venues and crisis phases so that inferences are made from patterned discourse to theory (Yin, 2009, pp. 38–41). The above elements are not specific to the case of Gaza or EU institutions. They can be applied to any actor, crisis, or policy domain where discourse and instruments exist, as long as the sources examined are directly comparable in genre.

Furthermore, the coding scheme is portable, with indicators and topoi tied to NPE and Realist logics. Its categories are defined by linguistic and argumentative features that appear across languages and settings and different researchers could modify this scheme to suit their own examined material and chosen theories. Venue and genre analysis is another feature that contributes to generalisation, as organisations of similar kind tend to formulate decisions through similar discursive arenas (DiMaggio, Powell, 1983, pp. 147).

Findings are triangulated with policy outputs contemporary to the corpus and evaluation of third party reception as a means of establishing generalisability when random sampling is not possible (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002, pp. 101–103). Finally, a robust description of scope and conditions, in addition to transparency regarding the rules behind the decisions made in choice of theory, methods and coding, aim to bolster transferability and replicability.

## 4.5 Limitations

The present research presents limitations with regards to the data that is available as well as the possibility of data selection bias, as it is solely reliant on official speeches by official figures like Von der Leyen, Kalas and Borrell. The analysis can also potentially be limited by omissions or gaps in the statements that can be accessed and are included in the analysis. To add to this, speech analysis is interpretive by nature, which in turn introduces subjectivity to the research. Choice of theories is yet another area that presents limitations, as this research uses a framework that relies on normative power theory and realism. These theories allow for multiple readings and can be complemented or challenged by perspectives such as liberalism or constructivism.

When it comes to limitations that the data selection presents, the chosen corpus has a range of strengths and weaknesses. The official speeches selected can be verified to be authentic and can be traced easily by anybody, since they are official records. This is something that enables replication and enhances the legitimacy of the sources. Furthermore, the corpus texts are deeply embedded in the context of the situation that the thesis examines, as they are high stakes political texts that carry intertextual references, institutional roles and historical resonance. To add to this, the corpus contains texts that are of very similar nature, meaning official statements and addresses by high-ranking dignitaries. This allows for effective comparison across texts and for systematic coding of rhetorical strategies. Lastly, the material that is analysed is able to provide a

view of the issue that spans the entire timeframe of the conflict examined, allowing for tracking of how the frames of discourse shift over time.

There are also quite a few that need to be noted. To begin with, the documents represent elite positions that may overlook differing views or backstage negotiations. Moreover, the material is composed of speeches, which are often for specific audiences and therefore might blend normative claims with political framing or employ ambiguous rhetoric that complicates the inference of genuine intent. To add to the above, speeches that make promises or use claims may not match subsequent policy implementation and thereby may not be suitable for making claims about the causal effects of the statements. Lastly, reliance on elite texts runs the risk of overrepresenting institutional discourse at the expense of other narratives.

## 4.6 Transparency

Transparency in the thesis is achieved in four ways. First, the selection and comparability of data is made explicit. Only official, public speeches from specified venues and dates are used as the primary analysis subject, so any reader can independently retrieve the data and make comparisons. Second, it operationalises the theory into auditable codes. By presenting a codebook tied to DHA topoi and Fairclough's levels, it creates specific and transparent rules that tie textual cues to codes and then to inferences made from them. Third, the thesis documents the efforts it makes to achieve analytic generalisation and provide for easily replicable results and the application of its methods in different cases. Finally, specific limitations are acknowledged, such as genre, interpretive subjectivity and data selection constraints, so that readers can weigh the findings of the thesis accordingly.

## 5. Analysis

This chapter will examine President Ursula von der Leyen's speeches at the European Parliament Plenary: on strengthening European defence in a volatile geopolitical landscape (28 February 2024), on preparations for the European Council meeting (21–22 March 2024), and at the EU Ambassadors Conference (2025). Also included in the analysis are a speech written by Josep Borrell (26 November 2024), Kaja Kallas on the 18th of June 2025 EP Plenary topical debate and Von der Leyen's State of the Unions Address (10 September 2025). The chapter will also assess the explicit positions articulated by the European Commission and its president,

Ursula von der Leyen, in these speeches. The analysis is split into topics of both theoretical and political interest and it follows no specific chronological order.

## 5.1 Warrants and Instruments: Reading EU Gaza Discourse through Normative Power and Structural Realism

This part of the analysis will give emphasis on dissecting selected speeches and related literature in order to explore the way that NPE and the realist perspectives are represented in them. The section analyzes the EU's stated interests and objectives in the speeches, framed within the NPE vs Realism context. By applying this lens, the analysis reveals how core realist principles and normative claims influence the EU's engagement in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict context. The objective is to uncover how such elements guide EU decision-making and to highlight the broader significance of the EU's actions and self-perceptions in contemporary international politics. The use of realist theory here serves as a key counterpoint to the idea of the EU as a normative power. By applying realist theory, the discussion is better equipped to critically evaluate both the scope and character of the EU's normative influence. The comparison provides a more nuanced grasp of the complex dynamics at play, showing where EU actions align with or diverge from realist principles and thereby providing a clearer picture for its role as a normative power.

28 February 2024 - von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on strengthening European defence in a volatile geopolitical landscape:

“The continuing war in Gaza and the large-scale destabilisation in the Middle East point to an era of insecurity and conflict in the region and beyond. And we are also seeing the continued rise of aggressive economic competition and distortion, which brings with it some very real European security risks.... ‘Europe has to wake up.’ And I would add: urgently. We all know there is so much at stake here – our freedom and our prosperity. And we have to start acting like it. We need to start working on the future of European security architecture. In all of its dimensions and with all of the speed and political will that is required...Just last week, the naval mission Aspides was launched to protect against the direct threat to the freedom of navigation ... in one of the world's most critical waterways.” (Von der Leyen, 2024)

The above speech was part of a plenary address in the European Parliament on strengthening European defence. Gaza was referenced once, being embedded in a list of threats that “point to an era of insecurity and conflict” across the Middle East (Von der Leyen, 2024). The formulation of the reference is agentless, meaning that there’s no reference to actors involved, and shifts attention from responsibility to effects (regional destabilisation). This activates the Security/Threat/Stability code rather than the Responsibility/Blame one. The primary warrant is a security topos rather than a legal/moral claim, that expresses that if regional turmoil elevates risk, a defensive posture is justified. In direct relation to this reference, Von der Leyen cites the launch of EUNAVFOR Aspides to counter a “direct threat to freedom of navigation” in “critical waterways” (Von der Leyen, 2024). This supplies interest based legitimation (trade/ energy sea-lanes) and instrumentality (specific capability) in support of expanding EU defence and maritime protection roles. It can be noted that the Gaza passage does not trigger any NPE indicators, as there are no mentions of international humanitarian, civilian protection, proportionality or language related to the two-state solution. This suggests that, in a defence centered context, Gaza functions primarily as a security referent that legitimates capability and procurement agendas rather than an incentive for a rights based discourse.

This speech is an example of a rhetoric-practice alignment on the security axis. It names a specific mission and links it to European economic interests, while leaving the normative axis inactive in relation to Gaza. Within the limits of this paper's operationalisation, this is a case where realism effectively overshadows NPE, due to the intended agenda of the speech. As a defence-industrial pitch to the Parliament, the speech prioritises danger, consequence and instrumentality over law, dignity and peacebuilding.

12 March 2024 - von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the preparation of the European Council meeting of 21-22 March 2024:

“But in the current circumstances, aid alone will not solve the crisis. Of course, Israel has the right to defend itself, and fight off Hamas. But the protection of civilians must be ensured at all times, in line with international law. And right now, there is only one way to restore an adequate flow of humanitarian aid. The people of Gaza need an immediate humanitarian

pause that would lead to a sustainable ceasefire. And they need it now.”(Von der Leyen, 2024)

At the European Council–prep plenary of 12 March 2024, von der Leyen places Gaza at the centre of a humanitarian-legal narrative and pairs it with a concreted aid delivery mechanism. This section opens by announcing a maritime corridor from Cyprus to Northern Gaza, described as an “unprecedented international cooperation” with Cyprus, UAE, US and the UK and as a prospective “lifeline” once in full operation (von der Leyen, 2024). Von der Leyen proceeds to list the instruments activated, with the EU Civil Protection Mechanism activation, an EU coordination team in Cyprus, calls for Member States’ assets, and EUR 250m in EU aid. The accountability/ credibility code is activated as the Commission links UNRWA funding to an internal investigation, an independent review and an external audit, releasing EUR 50m immediately and applying conditionality on further funding. This move establishes leverage and due diligence instruments within a humanitarian context.

In this speech, the normative focus is overt. Passages like “protection of civilians must be ensured at all times, in line with international law,” combined with a sequence of “immediate humanitarian pause” leading to a “sustainable ceasefire” and eventually to a “two-state solution” keeps in line with standard EU legal and diplomatic priorities. The argumentation relies on topoi of law/rights, such as international humanitarian law compliance, topoi of protection, such as protection of civilians from harm and starvation, and topoi of peace/conciliation, such as pause and ceasefire. This argumentation is embedded with specific instruments such as the humanitarian corridor and UNRWA funding, with alliance coordination claims also being present.

Realist elements are secondary but still present. Danger and deterrence instrument topoi are activated when warnings about escalation in Lebanon and preparedness for the contagion of Iran with sanctions are spoken.

All in all, NPE-derived codes, such as Humanitarian Protection, Legal-Moral Legitimation and Peacebuilding/Two-State are dominant in this speech. In contrast to security centered events, the Council preparation context enables the Commission to foreground humanitarian and legal warrants while operationalising them through allied logistics and EU instruments. This supports

the thesis claim that the venue and task of the speeches shapes which legitimation basis becomes primary in the EU's Gaza discourse.

It is interesting to note that the humanitarian tool of the “maritime lifeline” hailed as an “unprecedented international cooperation”, was barely consequential to alleviating the humanitarian situation in Gaza and was dismantled after 20 days of operation that were plagued with various practical and operational adversities, according to international news outlets (Barakat & Kaminara, 2024; Ali, Kambas, & Lewis, 2024).

In this excerpt, von der Leyen attempts to calibrate the EU's alliance signaling, as the passage simultaneously reassures Israel by projecting the self-defence argument while also attempting to constrain it with references to respecting international law. This again embodies the realist problem of deterrence vs reassurance, with the speaker avoiding to push Israel into a corner yet also imposing costs for non-compliance in the form of reputational and audience costs (Jervis, 1978).

The passage can also be seen to function as an attempt to seek intra-alliance coordination by creating a focal point of action for the actions of the member-states, in the form of presenting the “only one way” of humanitarian relief in Gaza to be the arrangement of a humanitarian pause (Snyder, 1997).

## 5.2 The European Union on the two-state solution: Signaling and tools

This section examines two excerpts where von der Leyen links the actions of the EU currently and in the future, to the long-standing position of the EU on achieving a two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. The analysis of these parts reveals how both NPE and Realist incentives are the drivers behind EU actions.

12 March 2024 - Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Preparation of the European Council Meeting:

“This is a time to redouble our efforts, together with member states. So that the hostages can get home. And the people of Gaza can get not only humanitarian relief, but also a ray of hope, towards a two-state solution”(Von der Leyen, 2024)

In the closing section of von der Leyen's reference to Gaza, she binds humanitarian delivery to a political horizon ("a ray of hope, towards a two-state solution") through an explicit collective EU frame ("together with Member States"). The primary legitimation basis is legal-moral/humanitarian. Civilians are nominated as beneficiaries ("people of Gaza") and the topos of protection warrants urgent relief, while the topos of peace/conciliation correlates relief to a recognised end-goal, the two state solution. At the same time, the clause "together with Member States" presents unity as a feasibility precondition, turning intra-EU coordination from a background constraint into an enabler of humanitarian and political delivery instead of a reason to dilute normative claims. Read against the rest of the speech, this passage is an example of the operationalised NPE pattern that is expected in venues that are preparatory to the EU Council. We can observe calls for immediate protection articulated with a credible process horizon and collective action framed as a path from discourse to implementation.

The mention of the two-state solution serves as to embed an endpoint of de-escalation in the political horizon. As a rhetorical tool it is used to reduce incentives for maximalist strategies and as a signal of assurance to Arab partners that the EU is still committed to the existence of a Palestinian state.

February 4, 2025 - Speech by President von der Leyen at the EU Ambassadors Conference 2025:

"My message today is that Europe is ready to play its part across the world. I believe that Europe must play its role to the fullest – for example in the Middle East. Hope – albeit fragile – has started to return. And Israelis, Palestinians and people across the region deserve for that hope to lead to stability, peace and prosperity and the two-state solution. There is a lot that Europe can do. Just last week, Member States agreed to lift some of our sanctions on Syria and restart our monitoring mission at the Rafah border crossing. We are the leading donor to the Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian people, and we have already increased our humanitarian aid across the region. We are now ready to step up our engagement and look into reconstruction needs. The future of this region is being rewritten today. And it is in Europe's

core interest to shape it, together with our partners. So we must be there. On the ground” (von der Leyen, 2025).

During an address to the Union's diplomatic corps, the President links a normative horizon (“peace ... and the two-state solution”) to delivery mechanisms (“restart our monitoring mission at the Rafah border crossing,” “increased humanitarian aid,” readiness to assess reconstruction (Von der Leyen, 2025). At the same time, the speech explicitly casts the region's trajectory as a matter of “Europe's core interest.” (Von der Leyen, 2025). In the operational terms of this thesis, the passage is primarily NPE dominated, as it activates Peacebuilding/Two-State and Humanitarian Protection codes. At the same time, the NPE priorities are legitimated through realism-based codes and the Union's core interests are also highlighted, showing a strong Realist element that serves both as legitimation for NPE-arguments and also stands on its own accord as an incentive to mobilise EU resources towards its interests. Interest-Based reasoning is triggered and it's framed as an advantage for the EU to participate in the "rewriting" of the region's future (The future...we must be there. On the ground) (Von der Leyen, 2025). The Hedging code is also activated in a prudential mode (“albeit fragile” hope; “ready to step up”), signaling risk management in a fluid theatre (Von der Leyen, 2025).

The above pattern seems to align closely to what the theories predicted in the theory chapter. In humanitarian/diplomatic contexts we anticipated legal-humanitarian frames to be paired with instruments and feasibility language instead of security discourse. In this case, the link between instruments is made explicit and the rhetoric-practice gap narrows insofar as specific tools are positioned as the means that lead from discourse to effects. Meanwhile, the phrase “core interest” marks a Realist end-goal. The humanitarian-legal telos is prioritised because its framed as strategically beneficial for the EU and not just as a moral imperative.

Two more features can be noted in the segment. Firstly, the text avoids blame assignment in the Gaza paragraph and focuses instead towards future-oriented enablement. The Responsibility/Agency code is therefore latent while the Interdiscursivity code is strong, owing to the pattern of aid into reconstruction into dispute settlement prospect. Secondly, the call for presence on the ground and to restart monitoring in Rafah points to a reactivation of NPE's

“overt presence” diffusion mechanism in a limited way, marking a will to add a fifth conduit of influence in the region.

### 5.3 Internal divisions in EU leadership

During the first days after the October 7th 2023 attack, Von der Leyen visited Israel along with the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola. Her visit, along with her statements, sparked an intense debate among member-states and EU leadership, centered around the representativeness of the visit and the statements.

13 October 2023 - Von der Leyen's statement with President Metsola and Israeli President Herzog:

-“Thank you very much for receiving us here. And indeed, we are friends of Israel. And when a friend is under attack, we have to stand together. We stand by you.”

-“This morning, we have been in Kfar Azza... The atrocious attacks from Hamas... These are acts of war. Therefore, Israel has the right to defend itself... and even the duty to defend and protect its people.”

-“Our call... is to release the hostages and stop taking people as human shields. Hamas is a threat not only to Israel, but also to the Palestinian people.” (von der Leyen, 2023)

Von der Leyen's statements from Jerusalem are an example of crisis solidarity discourse. The presentation on the EU as “friends of Israel” and having to “stand together”, as well as the assignment of “atrocious attacks” and “acts of war” to Hamas, activate a Security/Threat/Stability warrant and a consequence/usefulness warrant tied to alliance cohesion, meaning the standing together when a partner is attacked. While we can observe the presentation of a legal-moral claim to Israel's right to defend itself, the speech omits characteristic NPE language that is present in later communications, such as respect for international humanitarian law and civilian protection (von der Leyen, 2023).

In DHA terms, responsibility/blame is unambiguous, with Hamas as the culprit and Israel as the rights holder. Topoi of danger and solidarity are foregrounded and interdiscursivity is minimal. All in all, the text is almost completely oriented towards Realist logic, with NPE being used to support Realist claims.

The above speech was met with this comment by the HR/VP, made during an interview with the news outlet EL PAÍS:

From Josep Borrell

“That trip by Von der Leyen, with such an absolutely pro-Israeli stance, without representing anyone but herself in a matter of international politics, has had a high geopolitical cost for Europe,”(Pérez, 2024, 26 February)

This criticism focuses again on realist arguments. Its primary warrants are the topos of authority/representation and the topos of consequence/usefulness, focused on legitimacy through a collective mandate and a legitimation of actions if they minimise geopolitical cost. This statement also directly triggers the Intra-EU Constraints/Unity code, as it is implied that representativeness of Von der Leyen's statements were weakened due to a lack of consensus from member-states and EU institutions. Also, the allegation of “high geopolitical cost” triggers the Interest-Based legitimation code, as the standard of evaluation is the effect that Von der Leyen's statement will have on the EU's geopolitical position rather than adherence to legal-moral values.

In general, the EC president's addresses have been criticized for highlighting the importance of international law yet failing to adequately acknowledge Israel's breaches since October 2023. Notably, in the same month, Borrell publicly criticized Von der Leyen for failing to reference international law in the context of Israel's actions. Direct mentions of international law surfaced in her discourse only after Israel's large-scale assaults on Gaza. Gaza's longstanding dependence on humanitarian assistance is important to note, as Israeli policies have repeatedly intensified the difficulties confronting Palestinians in an already dire context (Malingre, 2023, October 24).

While Von der Leyen tries to present a decisive and coherent EU front, there have been numerous criticisms from member states that claim that she makes unilateral decisions that lack their consent and the unanimity required to support them. Specifically on the case of the war in

Gaza, both member states and EU staff expressed their strong disagreement to what they believed to be a biased pro-Israel stance by Von der Leyen, that was expressed on her first trip to Israel after the attacks on October 7, 2023 (Jacqué, 2023, October 23) (Malingre, 2023, October 23). The Commission's response was the following:

“Asked about the criticism of her trip on Monday, the Commission's chief spokesperson Eric Mamer said Von der Leyen was merely representing the Commission, not the position of the 27 EU member countries.”, meaning her trip to Israel immediately after the October 7, 2023 attacks. (Cook & Casert, 2023, October 16)

From the above parts of the analysis we can observe that a cohesive stance of the EU about the war in Gaza is not a given but a continuous struggle among high-ranking officials, member-states and institutions. However, the basis of the arguments in the examined parts leans heavily towards realism, showing a preponderance towards prioritising the EU's interests rather than its moral and legal values.

## 5.4 The EU's shift in rhetoric and the imposition of potential sanctions

Across late-2024 to 2025, the EU's approach started shifting from declaratory concern and limited humanitarian relief efforts to a harder mix of emergency action and potential sanctions. The policy shift appears to reflect pressures from the public as well as legal concerns, as concerns about the unanimity required for high-impact actions maintain the policies at a hypothetical stage (McNeil, 2025). This part of the analysis focuses on a speech by former HR/VP Borrell in late 2024 defending UNRWA, a speech from current HR/VP Kaja Kallas in June 2025 that included mentions of the review of Israel's compliance with Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and the most recent State of the Union address by Von der Leyen in September 2025. The time span between the three speeches is important to the analysis as it can show the evolution of EU discourse towards operational emergency tools and more explicit sanctions signaling, while showcasing policy splits within the Union.

28 November 2024 - Josep Borrell on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the West Bank and UNRWA's role in the region

The HR/VP's speech portrays the Gaza crisis as an "Unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe" that culminates in famine risk (Borrell,2024). It constructs the EU's stance through legal-moral warrants such as the defence of the rules-based order, the protection of UN personnel and agencies and a call for an immediate ceasefire coupled with the release of the hostages. In terms of the operationalisation of the thesis, the speech is primarily configured around NPE, with Humanitarian Protection(famine/healthcare attacks), Legal-Moral Legitimation (UN authority, rules-based order) and Peacebuilding(ceasefire) codes being activated. The speech also embeds intertextual authority by insisting that there is "no alternative to UNRWA", elevating the UN's mandate as the decisive legal warrant for operations in Gaza and as an object to be shielded from Israel's restrictive legislation that designates UNRWA as a terrorist organisation (Borrell,2024).

At the same time, realist-coded enablers, such as money, numbers and allied pressure from the EU to Israel, are used to quantify the consequences of UNRWA's absence from the region and support the NPE centered argument for the organisation's continued operation. This observation is in line with what the theory predicts about secondary realist arguments used as enablers of NPE-focused primary arguments.

There are two discourse mechanics that are worth noting. First, accountability is coupled with conciliation, as Israel is urged to stop attacks against the UN while demands for the release of hostages remain part of the de-escalation sequence. Second, the speech's focus on specific numbers converts rights language into operational metrics, supporting the logic of a discourse that is focused both on normative and instrumental elements to construct the EU's argument.

18 June 2025 - Kaja Kallas, EP Plenary topical debate:

-“Israel has a right to defend itself. And Hamas should immediately release the remaining hostages. But Israel's use of force in Gaza... goes beyond self-defence... cannot be justified under humanitarian and international law.”

-“A majority of Member States were in favour of opening a review of Israel's compliance with Article 2 of our Association Agreement... This review is now underway.”

-“We are still the largest international donor... humanitarian funding for this year is €170 million... since October 2023, the EU has helped transport close to 5,000 tonnes of humanitarian cargo into Gaza.”

-“In Gaza... military means will not provide the solace the Israeli people are looking for... [they have] endangered the entire population of Gaza, causing unjustified human suffering... The EU must push for diplomacy and meet humanitarian needs.” (Kallas, 2025)

In this speech, current HR/VP Kaja Kallas advances a legal-humanitarian argument that both criticises Israel's behaviour and converts norms into procedures and tools. The argument starts with the usual affirmation that Israel has a right to self-defence, to then immediately shift to the position that “what we see in practice ...goes beyond self-defence” (Kallas, 2025). Kallas goes on to describe numerous humanitarian breaches, such as aid obstruction, use of disproportionate force, striking civilian infrastructure, unacceptable civilian death toll, mass displacement of population and a declared objective by Israeli officials to control Gaza (Kallas, 2025). In coding terms, the above trigger the Legal-Moral Legitimation and the Humanitarian Protection codes, with a brief mention elsewhere in the speech that triggers the Two-State code. Thus, NPE is the basis for the arguments presented here.

The speech then proceeds to close the rhetoric-practice gap through proceduralisation and instrumentatisation. First, Kallas confirms that a formal review of the EU–Israel Association Agreement's Article 2 is underway, translating normative claims into treaty-based leverage and marking the first instance where treaty-based coercive measures are being considered against Israel within the material analysed so far. Second, she documents aid delivery by the EU, as the largest aid donor, and provides specific aid numbers. Third, she lists nine individuals and five entities that the EU has already adopted sanctions against, with more being considered. Lastly, Kallas admits that the unanimity that is required for the approval of sanctions is lacking and that member states ultimately decide (Kallas, 2025). The above describe a Realist instrumentality of specific numbers and measures presented as well as an appearance of Intra-EU Constraints, indicating that the primary NPE-based argument is both supported and limited by Realism-based elements.

10 September 2025 - von der Leyen's State of the European Union speech

-“What is happening in Gaza has shaken the conscience of the world.”

-“Because what is happening in Gaza is unacceptable... Europe must lead the way... Our financial support and humanitarian aid far outweigh that of any other partner... Our commitment to a viable Palestinian Authority is keeping a two-state solution alive.”

-“Europe needs to do more... I will propose a package of measures... We will put our bilateral support to Israel on hold... We will propose sanctions on extremist ministers and on violent settlers... and a partial suspension of the Association Agreement on trade-related matters.”

-“We will set up a Palestine Donor Group next month – including a dedicated instrument for Gaza reconstruction... with regional partners.”

-“Europe’s goal... Real security for Israel and a safe present and future for all Palestinians... hostages must be released... unrestrained access for all humanitarian aid... there must be an immediate ceasefire... the only realistic plan is two States.” (von der Leyen, 2025)

During the 2025 State of the Union, Von der Leyen reframes the situation in Gaza as a humanitarian and a legal emergency, stating that “man-made famine can never be a weapon of war... this must stop”, and then moves from presenting the Unions values to presenting the instruments that will embody the values (von der Leyen, 2025). In the speech, the President sets two linked moves. First, the EU’s position is anchored in NPE logic, with Humanitarian Protection, Legal-Moral Legitimation and Peacebuilding/Two-state codes triggered as the speaker mentions the protection of civilians and aid access, an immediate de-escalatory horizon (hostages/ceasefire), and a threat in two-state solution end-goal, in the form of a new Israeli settlement project that would cut off East Jerusalem from the occupied West Bank. Second, the rhetoric-practice gap is bridged by naming a specific toolkit to achieve the goals mentioned previously, stating that the Commission will withdraw bilateral support to Israel, propose sanctions on extremist ministers and violent settlers and also propose the partial suspension of trade-related provisions of the EU–Israel Association Agreement. Throughout the points made, Von der Leyen outlines the core constraint of finding it “difficult to find majorities” that are required for the imposition of meaningful sanctions, calling for shared responsibility across Parliament, Council and Commission and making unity in the Union the decisive factor that is required for taking action(von der Leyen, 2025). As with the other two speeches examined in this chapter, the arguments are NPE-primary. Realist instruments and rhetoric are then used as enablers and limiting factors to the primary argument.

It is interesting to note that the Commission did not take more than a week to convert its declarations from speech to a specific policy pathway, showing commitment to its choices and highlighting the urgency of the situation (European Commission, 2025).

This speech by Von der Leyen is a keystone observation for this chapter and for the entire course of the analysis, as it is a culmination of a two years of evolution in the EU Commission's rhetoric on the subject of Gaza, starting from unequivocal support for Israel's right to self-defence, with a de-facto carte blanche for the invasion of Gaza, and ending up with the Commission proposing sanctions against Israel, under the weight of facts on the ground and international criticism. Regardless of the feasibility difficulties that the EU's voting structure imposes on meaningful action, these moves appear to be an attempt to belatedly align the EU's normative values with meaningful measures that go beyond rhetoric.

## 6. Discussion

This discussion part aims to not only present and discuss the results of the analysis but to also provide the necessary context and background on internal EU working and politics when it's necessary. This is done in order to place the findings in a frame that makes their indications clearer.

### 6.1 Key actors and institutions that affect EU diplomacy

The European Union's external action is anchored in an institutional design that combines technocratic initiative with political coordination. At the center of this design, the European Commission sets the agenda, oversees its implementation, provides key funding lines and maps out guidelines on how to turn its mandates into operational policies. In the context of conflicts, the ability to initiate proposals, track compliance and mobilise programs constitutes a form of leverage that determines which tools the Union can bring forward and how quickly it gets to use them (European Commission, n.d.).

The link between these capacities and high-level diplomacy is the double role of High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP). As HR, the holder of the office conducts the EU's foreign policy on behalf of the member states. As VP, he or she coordinates across all portfolios of the Commission so that external messaging, sanctions design and assistance policy all work in

unison toward a common goal. This institutional model is implemented in order to give the EU the ability to respond coherently in rapidly evolving crises, as it concentrates agenda-setting, brokerage among capitals and program steering in one single decision-making center (Cini & Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, 2016, pp. 125-130).

Ursula von der Leyen's term as Commission President illustrates authority and political priority-setting intersect in EU governance. Her agenda has relied on the Commission's capacity to propose, coordinate and finance large multi-sectoral programmes while managing the divergent preferences of member-states. In international forums she presents the Union's self-image as dedicated to democracy, human rights and the rules based order, linking internal regulatory projects with external credibility. This results in a style of leadership that couples initiative at the EU level with ongoing brokerage among EU capitals, positioning the Commission as both a policy engine and a diplomatic negotiator in a system of shared sovereignty (von der Leyen, 2024).

Internally, the EU works to create a cohesive and inclusive community aligned with its founding ideals. Among its central goals is ensuring peace and citizens' well-being, consistent with its origins as a post-war stability and cooperation initiative. By removing internal borders, the EU promotes freedom and mobility, while at the same time implementing external measures to oversee asylum, immigration, and crime prevention. Rooted in solidarity and collective responsibility, these policies also prioritize social justice, equality between men and women, and the protection of children's rights, underscoring the EU's aim of creating an equitable community. These goals underscore the Union's role beyond politics and economics, emphasizing its function as a normative force that safeguards dignity, equality, and rights among its members (European Union, 2024).

Within the Union, integration is framed as a community-building project anchored in the post-war settlement of peace, welfare and social cohesion. The abolition of internal borders institutionalises free movement, while common frameworks on asylum migration management and internal security have the goal of governing the external borders without discounting openness within. Policy narratives give emphasis on solidarity and shared responsibility that translates into commitments like social protection, gender equality and the protection of

children's rights. All together, these instruments mark an ambition that exceeds the regulation of the common market and intergovernmental coordination. They signal an ambition to set norms that protect dignity, equality and rights among its members (European Union, 2024).

## 6.2 General findings of the analysis

Throughout the corpus that was analysed, the situation in Gaza is presented both as a legal-moral issue and on occasion, as an incentive for the mobilisation and expansion of the EU's capabilities. The effect of the venue and genre on the content of the material is clear. In settings that were more defence and alliance coordination oriented, as well as in speeches that were not intended for wide communication, it was observed that the issue of Gaza was framed with more Realist-dominated tones and NPE elements used to provide an ethical aspect to the arguments. On the other hand, in cases where the signaling was in more public venues and with a wide-reaching target audience, the arguments were anchored in NPE language, with Realism-based elements used as enablers or limiting factors.

Another crucial factor that surfaced in the analysis was the implicit and explicit acknowledgement that the unity of the EU coalition is the crucial limiting factor that shapes the Union's calibration of rhetoric and actions. This indicates that, even though a large part of the rhetoric examined and actions documented had an explicit goal of serving NPE-related priorities, the final outcome is still dependent on Realist constraints, such as capability limits, alliance dependencies and intra-EU divergence.

## 6.3 Theory implications: NPE vs. Realism under constraint

Regarding the theoretical aspect of the thesis, the findings of the analysis suggest that NPE is not displaced by Realism but rather that NPE arguments are made as maximal goals and then filter through capability limits, alliance commitments and internal EU politics. Actions are observed to be taken with the intention of closing the rhetoric-practice gap but only as long as costs are low and politics allow it. This seems to produce a systematic condition where the translation of rhetoric into practice is a function of EU decision rules, instrument availability and alliance balancing.

The effects of venue and genre on the material are consequential. In humanitarian and parliamentary venues normative language is amplified whereas defence and intra-organisational setting favour Realist arguments.

Under the constraints described, notions of agreement conditionality are put on the table reluctantly and under enormous public and international pressure, while the design of sanctions is fragmented and incremental. The leverage that appears to be missing to achieve the declared goals is substituted by aid efforts that are blocked at the border or whose feasibility is questionable. At the same time, the consistency of NPE language appears to shape expectations and frame options for the future, as the corpus indicates the EU's position and instruments appear to slowly shift with the passage of time. Therefore, we can observe that while Realism sets the constraints on specific points in time, persistent NPE language sets the discursive and procedural frame that can achieve the intended goals, if and when the conditions allow it.

## 6.4 How are NPE diffusion mechanisms implemented in practice

The four NPE diffusion mechanisms are all present throughout the analysis, revealing both how the rhetoric presents them in the case of Gaza and also what kind of limitations their implementation faces in the real world.

Within the corpus, informational diffusion is repeatedly found in declaratory diplomacy contexts, tying Gaza to international humanitarian law, civilian protection and the scheme of humanitarian pause into ceasefire into two-state solution arrangement. These principals are used by the EU to define appropriate conduct and future expectations in the Gaza case. In practice, actions on these signals are constrained by Intra-EU unity and EU credibility as the enforcement tools that were implemented were not influential and divisions within the EU's ranks slowed both rhetorical and practical escalation.

The pathway of procedural diffusion was explicitly activated with the review of the EU–Israel Association Agreement Article 2, in an effort to translate norms into obligations and potential measures. However, it was also made explicit during the speeches that this pathway is limited by unanimity requirements, alliance coordination and cost-risk calculations.

Transference is also explicit, with specific reference to donation sums and amounts of aid being sent to Gaza and used to support UNRWA. While mitigating harm on the ground, this aid was frequently stonewalled by practical limitations on the ground as well as political decisions

by the EU's close ally, Israel. While efforts were made to change its ally's decisions, they were not effective, showing that in this instance the EU is more "payer" than a "player" in the economy of the conflict.

Lastly, the cultural filtering mechanism does not feature promptly in the material that was analysed.

The above observations showcase that all of the NPE mechanisms that were present in the analysis were in some way constrained by causes that were predicted by the Realist notions that were described in the theory, thereby confirming their predictions.

## 6.5 Venue/genre effects and argument/instrument linkage

Across the corpus, when the venue is humanitarian/diplomatic, there are consistent moves observed from legal-moral warrants to specific institutional procedures and humanitarian actions, such as where von der Leyen links humanitarian protection with the review of the EU-Israel Association Agreement. The general trend falls in line with the predictions of the table presented in the theory section.

In contrast, in defence centered venues, the issue of Gaza is anchored with security, threat and stability themes and the tools proposed are interest and capability focused, again in line with the expectations outlined in the theory section.

It is interesting to note that on the occasion of von der Leyen's speech at the EU Ambassadors conference, the EU's goal of humanitarian protection and reconstruction is not only presented as a legal-moral obligation but also as a core strategic interest for the EU. This argument presents the only occasion observed where Normative and Realist interests were presented as intertwined.

## 6.6 Intra-EU constraints and alliance dynamics

Throughout the analysed material, we can identify three limiting factors when it comes to escalating normative warrants into hard measures.

The first factor is the hurdle of the unanimity required in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) for the suspension of association agreements. In a nutshell, the unanimity rule means that, even when legal procedures for sanctions are activated, moving from review to suspension of an agreement requires the agreement of all 27 of the member states, based on Article 31 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU). As a European Parliament study notes,

CFSP still runs on specific rules and procedures that include the requirement of unanimity on important issues and that have produced vetoes, threats of vetoes and delays in the past (IPOL Study, 2022, p. 9; see also pp. 16–17, 56–59).

The second factor identified in the corpus are competence boundaries on the authority of the Commission, meaning the institutional and legal limits on who may initiate, decide and oversee external action by the EU. The implementation of propositions or position signaling by the Commission or the High Representative is contingent on decisions by the Council, meaning that every proposal is subject to potential delays or outright cancellation.

Lastly, the third factor that limits potential hard measures is the domestic politics inside Member States. EU foreign policy has been repeatedly influenced by internal politics, with the most visible trend being Euroscepticism, which third parties are able to instrumentalise in order to shape outcomes (Pardo & Gordon, 2018, pp. 408–410). This aspect, combined with CFSP unanimity rules, can be a deciding factor in stalling or canceling the EU's normative aspirations (IPOL Study, 2022, p. 9).

Overlaying these internal EU friction is the aspect of alliance dynamics. The EU's security posture still rests heavily on the United States, making European room for coercive moves against a close U.S. partner structurally limited (ECFR, 2024, pp. 3–5). To add to this, the EU and Israel have deep economic and technological interdependence, as their Association Agreement creates a free-trade area and formal cooperation in research and technology (EPRS, 2025, p. 1). At the same time, the EU maintains a sanctions framework against Hamas, and lists it as a terrorist entity, aligning EU practice with U.S. counter-terrorism priorities. This shifts balancing against Hamas and its backers rather than toward direct coercion of Israel, even when humanitarian law arguments are strong (Council of the EU, 2025). In this sense, the realist argument that rules shape aspirations but their enforcement falters but alliance priorities and relative gains get in the way seems to hold true (Grieco, 1993, pp. 729–731).

## 6.7 Rhetoric–practice discrepancy and credibility

In the documents analysed, there were cases observed where prospective instrument delivery was shown to lag, affecting the credibility of the EU's rhetoric and commitments. The clearest case is the much-touted maritime “lifeline”. Framed as a flagship humanitarian corridor from Cyprus, it never scaled to needs, that the UN benchmarked at around 500 trucks per day. It was

repeatedly halted and reworked and operations finally stopped after 20 days (USAID OIG, 2024, p. 9).

The sanctions that were proposed on September 17th, invoking Article 2 conditionality on the EU-Israel Association Agreement, were immediately put under threat of unanimity rules, with only measures that can be voted through qualified majority deemed feasible (von der Leyen, 2025). Even though the initial response of the EU Commission showed promise, talks of sanctions were paused after the US-brokered peace deal was unveiled, marking a sharp turn away from the potential coercive action that the Union declared on normative grounds, just days after its announcement (Rettman, 2025).

Put together, these events substantiate the thesis finding that EU discourse often promises more than the venue-bound instruments and collective decision rules can deliver, eroding external credibility precisely where NPE claims rest on consistent legal-humanitarian enforcement (Diez, 2005, pp. 624)

## 6.8 How does the thesis answer the research question

This thesis attempts to answer the research question: *How does EU diplomacy balance NPE and Realist rhetoric about the war in Gaza and how does this balance reflect on its actions.* By employing a detailed critical discourse analysis of high-level EU speeches, this paper indicates that the EU does not have any fixed stance between NPE and Realist rhetoric, shifting between them on the basis of context, venue and instrumentality. It is shown that in humanitarian and diplomatic settings NPE derived justifications are presented, while in security focused venues Realist arguments are employed, with an emphasis on stability, alliance coordination and material interests. The rhetorical balancing is not only discursive but also observable in the different instruments that are employed. In humanitarian venues, normative claims are linked to EU capabilities, such as funding and civil protection mechanisms, whereas in security contexts capabilities are framed as risk-management tools that don't need normative justification.

The effectiveness of the tools that are foregrounded is found to be entirely contingent on Realist constraints in both NPE-primary and Realist-primary warrants, making the EU's rhetoric-practice gap explicitly apparent and confirming Realist hypotheses about how NPE gets implemented in practice.

Thus, the thesis shows evidence of a patterned linkage between venue, legitimation basis and tool invocation, revealing that the EU's foreign policy in Gaza is shaped not only by moral commitments but also, and most crucially by internal constraints and alliance dynamics. In the end, the above dynamic produces a selective, piecemeal and ineffective translation of norms into actions.

## 6.9 Future research

NPE and Realist interests intertwined could extend the thesis's findings by enlarging the corpus to include Council Conclusions, individual member-state statements, and media recontextualisations of EU discourse. This could examine the consistency of the venue-conditioned discursive patterns with a bigger variety of speakers and other EU institutions other than the Commission. To add to this, data regarding the reception of EU rhetoric could be incorporated in the analysis, such as from public opinion, NGOs and diplomatic responses. This could help determine the effects of rhetoric on credibility. Finally, the operationalisation model could be applied to other cases of conflicts where the EU has had a part to play. This would help to evaluate the portability of the codebook and confirm whether the observed patterns hold across crises and regions.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has explored how EU diplomacy navigates the tension between its identity as a Normative Power and the constraints imposed by realist considerations, in the context of the war in Gaza, answering the research question: *How does EU diplomacy balance NPE and Realist rhetoric about the war in Gaza and how does this balance reflect on its actions?*

The analysis of the data has shown that normative claims remain central to EU discourse but their application is conditional, fragmented, and often strategically instrumentalised. The EU does not abandon its values, but rather reshapes them in relation to the venue, political constraints and alliance dynamics. This ultimately reveals a diplomacy that is simultaneously idealistic in expression and pragmatic in operation.

Two patterns emerge from the analysed discourse. First, the effect of venue on rhetoric is clear, as in humanitarian and legal-oriented platforms the normative vocabulary of human rights, international law and the two-state solution gets prioritized. At the same time, security venues emphasize operational risk and unity preservation. Second, this pattern is systemic, meaning that it is embedded in the structure of EU foreign policy-making, where action is filtered through consensus rules, capability limitations, and alliance interdependencies. The practical outcome is a rhetoric–practice gap that is most visible where legal claims are not matched by credible costs or enforcement pathways. Across the studied corpus, these dynamics reproduce a pattern of NPE framing arguments anchoring signalling and realist logic bounding implementation.

In the theory front, the paper makes observations that refine both sides of the argument. The findings support a “bounded normative power” view, as the normative effects of the arguments are bound to the realist notions of member-state consensus, alliance balancing and instrumental capability. On the Realism side, findings are consistent with expectations about alliance management, relative gains and institutional scepticism. The predicted rhetoric-practice gap is confirmed by the analysis and holds along all the speeches that were analysed, eroding EU credibility in the process. At the same time, NPE seems to be shaping the menu of legitimate actions and not the other way around, even when the final results are modest. This implies that NPE can explain why certain claims are made and which tools are available while Realism explains which of these tools can be selected and to what extent they can be used.

The methodology part's design made two things possible. Firstly, the combination of the DHA with Fairclough's model allowed detailed and transparent coding that translates textual cues to observable practices. The same codebook can be used across principals and settings, strengthening internal coherence. Secondly, the methodology's analytic tool can be generalised in order to make sense of the behaviour of other institutions in different settings, provided that the coding is modified by the potential user. The design still presents limitations, as it relies only on the genre of elite speeches, on the subjective interpretation of the material by the researcher and on the subjective selection of the data that is used to provide context to the analyzed corpus.

In future research the corpus can be broadened to include official speeches and documents from other EU institutions as well as member-states. Potential research can also incorporate data from third-parties, to test whether the venue patterns and credibility effects are valid beyond speech centered around the EU. Lastly, applying the operationalisation to other contemporary

wars and crises would be invaluable in comparing the EU's approach in different scenarios and to further assessing the portability and boundaries of the methodology.

To conclude, this study sheds light on when and how the EU's normative commitments are translated into practice, while also clarifying the mechanisms behind selective enforcement and credibility costs. In the selected case of the Gaza war, the EU's normative language and the tools it could deploy in the end showcased that the Union was little more than a bystander to the preventable suffering of millions, while at the same time it has proved that, when interests are aligned, it can protect and shelter millions of civilians and refugees. As also shown in the study, the realist constraints that bound EU's normative rhetoric are the very ones that ultimately undermine not only its credibility to its international partners but also the very core of its ontology. The craft of creating a cohesive union begins with upholding the very fundamental values it was created for. If the Union fails so spectacularly, time and again, to prevent the very acts that it was created to prevent then nothing more remains than a glorified cartel that can be pulled apart by the competing interests of the forces that comprise it.

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