

# EuropeListening

## Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long envisioned itself as a global champion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, projecting an identity of ‘normative power’ that underpins its foreign policy and international engagement (?). This self-image is reflected in key policy documents such as the European Democracy Action Plan in 2020 and the Defence of Democracy package in 2023, both framing the EU as a ‘force for good’ and a committed promoter of democracy. Central to this vision is the EU’s aspiration to be viewed as a legitimate and credible actor, with its influence largely derived from its soft power and the appeal of its values (?). However, historical examples highlight a disconnect between the EU’s self-perception and its external image. In Tunisia, for instance, post-2011 EU democracy promotion was criticized for neglecting local visions and priorities (?), while in the Eastern Partnership countries the EU’s agenda has sometimes alienated local elites as neo-imperialist (?).

Scholarly research supports that some political elites outside Europe do not necessarily share the EU’s positive self-image (??; ??; ?). Such misperception can undermine EU initiatives, leading to resistance, strained relations, and limited policy uptake, ultimately affecting the EU’s legitimacy and its ability to promote and defend democracy (??; ?). It is reasonable to assume that EU personnel involved in external relations are aware of how their policies are perceived in target countries and might adjust their practices to maximize influence. However, existing research has focused almost exclusively on how the EU is perceived by political elites and citizens outside Europe, leaving a significant gap in understanding how EU representatives themselves perceive the EU’s external image and how these perceptions shape their (preferred) actions. This knowledge gap persists despite long-standing calls by International Relations (IR) scholars (e.g., ??; ??; ?) for more systematic study of both the psychological and operational environments of policy actions. As (?) noted, there are still “few systematic empirical studies centering on decision makers’ perception of their own nations”. Understanding how meta-perceptions shape EU democracy promotion practices can potentially help to improve the alignment between EU objectives and the realities on the ground, thereby enhancing democracy support.

In this paper, we examine how EU officials and representatives from key institutions (‘EU representatives’) perceive the EU’s external image (that is, how they believe the EU and its foreign policy are viewed by their counterparts in partner countries) and how these meta-perceptions shape the diplomatic practices they consider appropriate for promoting democracy abroad. Rather than focusing on the substance of the democratic model the EU seeks to export or on the actual implementation of EU policies, we investigate the preferences of EU representatives regarding specific diplomatic instruments. In doing so, we shift the analytical focus from high-level policy formulation, typically driven by political leaders, to the ground-level perspectives of the EU’s diplomatic staff, public servants and members of parliament involved in advancing and supporting democracy promotion (cf. ?). Our interest lies in how their preferences are shaped by their interpretations of how the EU and its democracy promotion is perceived externally. In particular, we ask whether shared perceptions of the EU’s external image give rise to “communities of practice” (?), in which groups of EU representatives converge around similar understandings of what constitutes appropriate and legitimate democracy promotion. The central research question guiding our analysis is thus: *How do EU representatives’ understandings of the EU’s external image influence democracy promotion practices they prefer to be used towards partner countries?*

The literature on EU external perceptions paints a complex and often critical picture of how the EU is viewed from the outside, highlighting several key challenges for legitimate and effective foreign policy. First, EU external action receives little media coverage and remains largely unknown among the general public outside the EU [N. Chaban & Holland (?)]. ‘Europe’ is more often associated with individual member states or the geographic continent than with the EU as a political actor. Second, the EU is typically perceived as an economic giant prioritizing security and economic interests rather than as a principled foreign political leader (?). Third, its external actions are often viewed as inconsistent and inefficient, undermining its credibility and impact (?). In this study, we ask whether EU representatives are aware of these challenges, and how such perceived limitations shape their understanding of what diplomatic practices are appropriate in their interactions with external counterparts.

Furthermore, the existing literature on EU external perceptions has long been criticized for being predominantly descriptive, with increasing calls for more explanatory approaches (e.g., ?). While recent work has begun to address this gap, it largely continues to focus on how perceptions are formed rather than on their consequences for the EU’s foreign policy legitimacy and effectiveness. A notable exception is emerging research in EU climate and environmental diplomacy, which shows that external perceptions can shape EU foreign policy outcomes, either by generating expectations that constrain effectiveness when unmet (?), or by creating uncertainty and reducing coherence when internal and external views diverge (?). At the same time, scholarship associated with the sociological ‘practice turn’ in International Relations (IR) (e.g., ?) emphasizes how diplomacy is constituted through habitual, socially embedded practices, but often overlooks how perceptions or reputational considerations feed into these practices. By examining how EU representatives’ perceptions of the EU’s external image shape their preferred diplomatic practices, our study brings these two strands of research into productive dialogue.

In the next section, we formulate hypotheses on the link between meta-perceptions and preferred practices drawing on the psychologically-informed literature on (meta-)perceptions and diplomatic practices. We test these hypotheses using original data from one specific case: EU officials and representatives from key institutions in charge of relations with the Eastern neighborhood countries. We use a modified version of Q-methodology to identify how these EU representatives think the EU is perceived by their counterparts and explore how their views shape their practices based on a quantitative survey. Q-methodology is particularly suited to produce a comprehensive view of an individual’s viewpoint and to uncover subjective understandings (e.g., ?; ?; ?), but has been underutilized in the field of international relations and social sciences more broadly. In the specific context of our study, the method prevents EU officials and representatives from key institutions from repeating official policy lines, which is a limitation in previous research about belief systems and external images. Overall, this paper adds the perceptual and practical perspectives of “those agents involved in the quotidian unfolding” (e.g., ?) of democracy promotion, in an attempt to identify the micro-foundations of effective, legitimate European democracy support that can inform concrete recommendations for the development of democracy promotion advocacy coalitions between the EU and the Eastern neighborhood region.

## External perceptions and diplomatic practices

The study of international relations and foreign policy has traditionally focused on general patterns of conflict and cooperation, often emphasizing system-level variables such as power dynamics, security concerns, and economic interdependence. However, beneath these observable patterns lies the critical role of individual decision-makers who often act “based less on their objective circumstances than their perceptions of those circumstances” (e.g., ?). This insight underpins cognitive process models, which stress that foreign policy choices are shaped more by how actors interpret and process information than by any ‘objective’ reality.

Early work in this tradition emphasizes the cognitive foundations of decision-making in foreign policy (e.g., ?; ?). Building on these classics, Shapiro & Bonham (e.g., ?) argues that it is individual perceptions, rather than the actual geopolitical environment, that drive behavior. Along similar lines, K. Holsti (e.g., ?) introduces the concept of national role conceptions, which refers to decision-makers’ understanding of their nation’s role in the international system. Encompassing beliefs about a nation’s responsibilities, commitments, and obligations, K. Holsti (e.g., ?) asserts that these conceptions play a fundamental role in guiding foreign policy decisions. They not only shape how states see themselves but also how they engage with others. Overall, early IR scholars argue that policy- and decision-makers are influenced not by the ‘objective’ facts of the situation, whatever they may be, but by their own ‘image’ of it (e.g., ?).

Closely linked to insights about role conceptions is the concept of reputation. In international affairs, marked by uncertainty and incomplete information, reputation serves as a critical guide for strategic behavior. As Dafoe, Renshon, & Huth (e.g., ?) observes, states and organizations

often make strategic decisions based on how others are perceived to view them, particularly because direct knowledge of intentions is limited. Reputation extends beyond an ‘objective’ record of past behavior; it reflects beliefs and judgments within the international community about an actor’s identity, trustworthiness, and predictability (??). This subjective nature of reputation makes it a powerful tool in international diplomacy, influencing negotiations, cooperation, and conflict resolution. A strong reputation, as Keohane (?) highlights, “makes it easier for a government to enter into advantageous agreements,” while a tarnished reputation imposes costs by complicating the process of reaching agreements. A favorable reputation is cultivated not merely by adhering to national interests and values, but also by demonstrating an understanding of foreign politics and cultures (??). Effective reputation management therefore requires more than acting on interests and values; it also involves responding to how external actors believe foreign audiences interpret their actions. We contend that these insights apply not only to foreign policy goals but also to the practices used to pursue them, and not just to states but also to supranational actors like the EU.

We assume that EU representatives’ perceptions of how the EU is viewed by external counterparts cluster around distinct understandings of the EU’s external role and reputation. These meta-perceptions may emphasize either the EU’s institutional credibility and internal functioning or its normative ambition and external impact. Existing research on external perceptions supports this assumption, revealing a wide spectrum of how the EU is viewed beyond its borders. Much of the literature on the EU as a global actor has focused on its capacity to act cohesively and the nature of its actorhood (??), often stressing the internal fragmentation between EU institutions and member states (?) and questioning its effectiveness as a coherent foreign policy actor (?). Perceptions have been shown to differ from country to country, but recurring themes include the perception of the EU as a leader in trade (?) and a secondary actor in high politics (?). Some portray the EU as a distinctive, normative power committed to values such as democracy and rule of law (?), while others describe it as a self-interested political player (?) or even neo-colonial actor that patronizes its partners (??). This diversity of external views provides a solid empirical basis for examining variation in how EU representatives themselves interpret the EU’s external image, and for understanding how those interpretations shape what diplomatic practices they see as appropriate.

We argue that EU representatives are not only aware of how the EU is perceived abroad, but actively reflect on how those perceptions should guide their diplomatic engagement. Like firms or agencies engaged in public-facing work, they face reputational incentives that influence how they signal priorities, allocate resources, and choose among available instruments. Drawing on insights from reputation-sensitive organizational behavior (??), we expect EU representatives to act in ways that preserve the Union’s credibility, mitigate reputational risks, and avoid actions that might further undermine external trust. In practice, this means that meta-perceptions of the EU’s external image can constrain or legitimize particular forms of engagement. When EU representatives believe the EU is seen as lacking coherence or credibility, they may retreat from confrontational tools and prefer practices that are less politically assertive or reputationally costly. Conversely, when the EU is seen as normative, effective, and

principled, representatives may feel emboldened to use more visible or assertive instruments. This logic leads to our first, general hypothesis:

**H1:** EU officials adjust what diplomatic practices they prefer according to how they perceive the EU to be perceived by their counterparts.

Building on our general proposition, we further theorize that EU representatives' meta-perceptions influence which types of diplomatic practices they prefer, particularly regarding the degree of assertiveness or cooperation these practices imply. When EU officials believe the EU is perceived externally as lacking strategic coherence, bureaucratically rigid, or normatively overbearing, they may be more cautious about favoring assertive or punitive tools that could reinforce such negative images. In this view, reputational sensitivity leads to a preference for more restrained or dialogical forms of engagement that are less likely to provoke resistance or reputational backlash. For instance, if EU representatives believe that their counterparts see the Union as patronizing or domineering, they may be inclined to avoid confrontational instruments such as diplomatic sanctions or public condemnations. Instead, they may emphasize more cooperative practices, like information exchange, technical assistance, or joint platforms for dialogue, that promote co-ownership, trust, and mutual understanding. This reasoning leads to our first sub-hypothesis:

**H1a:** EU representatives who believe the EU is perceived externally as lacking credibility or coherence are less likely to prefer non-cooperative diplomatic instruments.

By contrast, cooperative diplomatic practices tend to be viewed as constructive, relationship-oriented, and normatively uncontroversial. Such practices are not only central to the EU's self-image as a consensus-oriented actor but are also more likely to be perceived as legitimate and effective across a wide range of reputational contexts. Even when external perceptions of the EU are critical, cooperative tools may be seen as appropriate strategies to restore trust, signal openness, and foster shared goals. Thus, we expect cooperative instruments to enjoy broad support among EU representatives, regardless of their interpretation of the EU's external image:

**H1b:** EU representatives consistently prefer cooperative diplomatic instruments, regardless of how they believe the EU is perceived externally.

## Empirical Approach

We test our hypotheses using original data from an online elite survey of EU officials and representatives from key institutions ('EU representatives') who deal broadly with issues related to democracy support in the Eastern Neighborhood countries (ENCs, i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine). The region, which has gained renewed strategic importance in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, is critical for the EU in several respects: ensuring energy security (including access to gas and oil and investment in renewable energy), securing maritime and air routes, and maintaining stable agricultural trade flows,

especially in key commodities such as grain. Conversely, the EU is important to the ENC, not only as a major economic partner but also through longstanding political, social, and cultural ties. Nonetheless, skepticism about the EU’s credibility persists in parts of the region, particularly among certain state-level veto players (?). Acknowledging such concerns, the (?) emphasized that its revised approach to neighborhood relations would be “developed by listening, not only to the requests for support from partner governments, but also to demands expressed by civil society.” This complex relationship makes the Eastern Neighborhood an ideal setting for examining how EU representatives’ perceptions of how the EU and its democracy promotion efforts are viewed by external actors shape the ways in which they engage, formulate policy, and implement democracy support practices.

We conducted the online survey between November 2024 and May 2025, administered in English, French and German through a newly developed, open-access, open-source platform that integrates restricted choice sorting (Q-sorting) . As elites are a hard-to-survey population, purposive sampling is widely used to efficiently capture relevant individuals (?; ?). We identified 1,043 EU representatives through the WhoisWho EU directory, including staff from the European Commission (N = 375), the European External Action Service (EEAS, N = 153), the European Parliament (N = 454), the Council of the EU (N = 46), and the European Investment Bank (EIB, N = 15). To maximize the response rate, we employed multiple recruitment strategies, including cold-email invitations, follow-up reminders, phone calls, and direct outreach. For instance, we organized a webinar with European Commission staff and emphasized the survey’s endorsement by Dr. Othmar Karas, former Vice-President of the European Parliament. In total, 61 EU representatives completed the survey, resulting in a response rate of approximately 5.8 percent. While modest, this figure aligns with expectations for elite survey research; studies targeting members of parliament report similarly low or declining response rates (?; ?; ?). To mitigate social desirability bias and encourage candid participation, all responses were collected anonymously.

### **Key independent variable: EU external images**

The key independent variable in our analysis is the perception of EU representatives of the external image of the EU, that is, how they believe that the EU and its foreign policy are seen by their counterparts in the European Neighborhood countries. To capture this, we use a modified version of Q-methodology, a mixed-method approach originally proposed by Stephenson (?) and later refined for social science research by Watts & Stenner (?). In essence, Q-methodology inverts the logic of conventional (R-method) factor analysis: whereas traditional factor analysis identifies relationships between variables across a population of individuals, Q-methodology identifies shared viewpoints by correlating individuals based on restricted choice ranking of a common set of statements. These shared views are our ultimate key independent variable.

Drawing on academic, policy, and media sources, we identified a diverse set of 42 statements that capture the full range of possible understandings of how the EU could be perceived from the outside (see Table 1 in the Appendix). Our primary source for identifying the statements was the emerging literature on external perceptions of the EU, which examines how elites and the general public in third countries view and interpret the Union (?; ?). To complement these

academic insights, we incorporate the self-representation of the EU in official speeches, policy documents, and foreign policy strategies, and consult experts with specialized knowledge of EU external relations and the Eastern Neighborhood. Furthermore, survey respondents were invited to propose any further statements they believed were missing, allowing us to capture perspectives beyond those identified through the literature review and pilot study. We asked the respondents to evaluate the 42 statements by sorting them on a scale from  $-5$  (strongly disagree) to  $+5$  (strongly agree), with 0 as a neutral midpoint. Specifically, respondents placed each statement on a quasinormal distribution grid resembling a bell curve, based on the assumption that most statements would elicit moderate agreement or disagreement, while only a few would provoke strong reactions (?). They were invited to watch an animated video explaining the procedure on how to rate the EU external images in the survey.<sup>1</sup>

To minimize acquiescence bias, each statement was formulated in a positive and a negative version. The respondents were randomly assigned positive or negative wording for each item, with the overall number of positive and negative worded statements balanced across the respondents. To our knowledge, this randomized polarity design, in which respondents receive randomly assigned positive or negative versions of each item, represents a novel methodological contribution to the Q-methodology. It enhances the validity of the data by reducing the influence of framing effects and ensuring that agreement reflects genuine evaluative judgments rather than a default tendency to affirm statements (?).

This approach is particularly suited to our research goals. First, it not only reveals what the respondents agree with, but also what they prioritize, making it particularly effective for capturing subjective and internally consistent belief systems (?; ?). Second, because participants must compare even broadly agreeable statements, the method discourages the mere repetition of official policy lines and helps reduce social desirability bias. Third, unlike experimental methods such as conjoint analysis, our approach elicits stated perceptions in context, rather than relying on hypothetical scenarios. This provides a more grounded understanding of how EU representatives interpret the reputational environment in which they operate. Finally, the technique enables us to statistically identify clusters of shared perception, which we use as the main independent variable in testing how different views of the external image of the EU shape foreign policy practices (?).

To identify the shared perception clusters of the EU’s external image, we uncover latent structures in the rankings of the respondents. After standardizing the responses to ensure comparability, we perform a hierarchical cluster analysis using the Ward method, which groups the respondents by minimizing the variance within the cluster at each step. This approach generates a nested tree of similarity, visualized through a dendrogram (see Figure 1 in the Appendix), which allows us to detect clusters of EU representatives with similar viewpoints. Based on the dendrogram’s shape and the pattern of merging distances, we identify a two-cluster solution that captures the most salient divide in respondents’ interpretations of the EU’s external image. A principal component analysis (PCA) projecting high-dimensional Q-

---

<sup>1</sup>The video is available on YouTube.