Europe in listening mode? How the EU’s perception of its external image informs its practices of democracy promotion\*

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Abstract

Foreign policy is shaped not by objective reality, but by how decision-makers perceive it. The European Union (EU) is no exception. Yet little is known about how EU officials and institutional representatives believe the EU and its foreign policy are perceived by external counterparts, and how these meta-perceptions inform their diplomatic preferences. We examine that link in the context of democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighborhood. Drawing on original survey data and a modified version of Q-methodology, we find that when officials believe the EU is seen externally as lacking strategic coherence or normative authority, they are less supportive of assertive or confrontational diplomatic instruments. These findings suggest that EU representatives are not only attuned to how the EU is viewed abroad, but also see these perceptions as shaping the legitimacy and effectiveness of its foreign policy practices.

**Key words:** Democracy support, diplomacy, European eastern neighborhood, EU external relations, reputation management, Q-methodology[[1]](#footnote-20).

# 1     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 ([Manners, 2002](#ref-manners2002normative)). 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 ([Nye, 2004](#ref-nye2004soft)). 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 ([Pace, 2014](#ref-pace2014eu)), while in the Eastern Partnership countries the EU’s agenda has sometimes alienated local elites as neo-imperialist ([Delcour, 2013](#ref-delcour2013meandering)).

         Scholarly research supports that some political elites outside Europe do not necessarily share the EU’s positive self-image ([Natalia Chaban & Kauffmann, 2007](#ref-chaban_east_2007); [Elgstrom, 2007](#ref-elgstrom_outsiders_2007); [Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2007](#ref-scheipers_normative_2007); [Schlipphak, 2013, p. 590](#ref-schlipphak_action_2013)). 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 ([Smith, 2011](#ref-smith2011enlargement); [2014, p. 209](#ref-smith2014european)). 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., [K. Holsti, 1970](#ref-holsti1970national); [Jervis, 1976](#ref-jervis1976); [Sprout & Sprout, 1957](#ref-sprout1957environmental)) for more systematic study of both the psychological and operational environments of policy actions. As ([Wish, 1980, p. 532](#ref-wish1980foreign)) 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. [Cooper, Heine, & Thakur, 2013, p. 2](#ref-cooper2013oxford)). 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” ([Bicchi & Bremberg, 2018, pp. 9–10](#ref-bicchi2018)), 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 ([2008](#ref-chaban2008))}. ‘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 ([Elgstrom, 2007](#ref-elgstrom_outsiders_2007)). Third, its external actions are often viewed as inconsistent and inefficient, undermining its credibility and impact ([S. Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010](#ref-lucarelli2010)). 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., [Sonia Lucarelli, 2014](#ref-lucarelli_seen_2014)). 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 ([Torney, 2014](#ref-torney2014external)), or by creating uncertainty and reducing coherence when internal and external views diverge ([Delreux & Pipart, 2021](#ref-delreux2021ego)). At the same time, scholarship associated with the sociological ‘practice turn’ in International Relations (IR) (e.g., [Adler & Pouliot, 2011](#ref-adler2011)) 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 ([Brewer, Selden, & Facer, 2000](#ref-brewer2000); [Steven R. Brown, Durning, & Selden, 2008](#ref-brown2008); [Stephenson, 1953](#ref-stephenson1953)), 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” ([Pouliot, 2010, p. 1](#ref-pouliot2010)) 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.

# 2     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” ([Renshon & Renshon, 2008, p. 511](#ref-renshon2008theory)). 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 ([Hermann & Hermann, 1967](#ref-hermann1967attempt); [O. Holsti, 1962](#ref-holsti1962belief)). Building on these classics, Shapiro & Bonham ([1973](#ref-shapiro1973cognitive)) argues that it is individual perceptions, rather than the actual geopolitical environment, that drive behavior. Along similar lines, K. Holsti ([1970](#ref-holsti1970national)) 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 ([1970, p. 243](#ref-holsti1970national)) 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 ([Boulding, 1959, p. 120](#ref-boulding1959national)).

         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 ([2014, p. 365](#ref-dafoe2014reputation)) 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 ([Dafoe et al., 2014](#ref-dafoe2014reputation); [Jervis, 1989](#ref-jervis1989logic)). This subjective nature of reputation makes it a powerful tool in international diplomacy, influencing negotiations, cooperation, and conflict resolution. A strong reputation, as Keohane ([2005/ 1984, pp. 105–106](#ref-keohane2005after)) 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 ([Cooper et al., 2013, p. 2](#ref-cooper2013oxford); [Mercer, 2018](#ref-mercer2018reputation); [Tetlock, 1998](#ref-tetlock1998social)). 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 ([Bretherton & Vogler, 2005](#ref-bretherton2005); [Sjöstedt, 1977](#ref-sjostedt1977)), often stressing the internal fragmentation between EU institutions and member states ([Bretherton & Vogler, 2005](#ref-bretherton2005)) and questioning its effectiveness as a coherent foreign policy actor ([Thomas, 2012](#ref-thomas2012still)). Perceptions have been shown to differ from country to country, but recurring themes include the perception of the EU as a leader in trade ([Elgstrom, 2007](#ref-elgstrom_outsiders_2007)) and a secondary actor in high politics ([Natalia Chaban & Elgström, 2014](#ref-chaban2014role)). Some portray the EU as a distinctive, normative power committed to values such as democracy and rule of law ([Manners, 2006](#ref-manners2006)), while others describe it as a self-interested political player ([Hyde-Price, 2008](#ref-hyde2008tragic)) or even neo-colonial actor that patronizes its partners ([Andretta & Doerr, 2007](#ref-andretta_imagining_2007); [Bayoumi, 2007](#ref-bayoumi_egyptian_2007)). 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 ([Carpenter & Krause, 2012](#ref-carpenter2012reputation); [Coombs & Holladay, 1996](#ref-coombs1996communication)), 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.

# 3     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 ENCs, 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 ([Dimitrova & Dragneva, 2013](#ref-dimitrova2013)). Acknowledging such concerns, the ([Commission, 2011](#ref-eucom2011)) 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 ([Khoury, 2020](#ref-khoury2020hard); [Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017](#ref-walgrave2017surviving)). 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 ([Bailer, 2014](#ref-bailer2014interviews); [Deschouwer & Depauw, 2014](#ref-deschouwer2014representing); [Hoffmann-Lange, 2008](#ref-hoffmann2008studying)). 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 ([1935](#ref-stephenson1935technique)) and later refined for social science research by Watts & Stenner ([2012](#ref-watts2012doing)). 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 ([N. Chaban & Holland, 2008](#ref-chaban2008); [Sonia Lucarelli, 2007a](#ref-lucarelli_european_2007)). 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 ([Steven Randall Brown, 1980](#ref-brown1980)). They were invited to watch an animated video explaining the procedure on how to rate the EU external images in the survey.[[2]](#footnote-24)

         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 ([Schuman & Presser, 1996](#ref-schuman1996questions)).

         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 ([Brewer et al., 2000](#ref-brewer2000); [Steven R. Brown et al., 2008](#ref-brown2008)). 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 ([Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2008](#ref-dryzek2008discursive)).

         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-sort data (i.e., the 42 statement rankings) onto two principal dimensions supports these two clusters (see Figure 2 in the Appendix).

[Table 1](#tbl-clusters) lists the 15 statements with the largest differences in average rankings between the two groups of EU representatives in how they believe the EU is perceived by external actors. Based on the statements each cluster ranks most positively or negatively (highlighted in bold), we identify two distinct groups with differing meta-perceptions. The first group (‘Cluster 1’) believes the EU is viewed externally as falling short of its normative ambitions and objectives, but still seen as a competent institutional actor, capable of balancing internal dynamics and strategically leveraging its economic power. In contrast, the second group (‘Cluster 2’) sees the EU as perceived by its counterparts more broadly as a credible, effective, and principled international actor that delivers on its commitments and promotes stability, democracy, and development.

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| Table 1: Meta-perceptions of the EU’s external image   | Statements (No.) | Cluster 1 | Cluster 2 | Min | Max |  | | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | | 09: EU operates efficiently | -2.64 | **1.55** | -2.64 | 1.55 | 4.19 | | 40: EU protects territorial integrity | -1.57 | **1.82** | -1.57 | 1.82 | 3.39 | | 36: EU supports civil society credibly | **2.29** | -1.05 | -1.05 | 2.29 | 3.33 | | 24: EU provides humanitarian aid | -1.50 | **1.68** | -1.50 | 1.68 | 3.18 | | 30: EU offers new market opportunities | -1.43 | **1.50** | -1.43 | 1.50 | 2.93 | | 07: EU balances power of member states | **3.00** | 0.09 | 0.09 | 3.00 | 2.91 | | 16: EU promotes free trade for poverty/peace | **2.50** | -0.36 | -0.36 | 2.50 | 2.86 | | 12: EU promotes democracy/rights credibly | -**2.43** | 0.32 | -2.43 | 0.32 | 2.75 | | 14: EU uses economic sanctions effectively | **2.86** | 0.14 | 0.14 | 2.86 | 2.72 | | 27: EU is politically stabilizing | -1.36 | **1.14** | -1.36 | 1.14 | 2.49 | | 04: EU respects cultures | 0.71 | -1.59 | -1.59 | 0.71 | 2.31 | | 38: EU promotes national sovereignty | **2.36** | 0.18 | 0.18 | 2.36 | 2.18 | | 39: EU mediates conflicts | -1.29 | 0.82 | -1.29 | 0.82 | 2.10 | | 37: EU conditionality interferes | -1.36 | 0.45 | -1.36 | 0.45 | 1.81 | |

*Note:* Average statement scores by cluster, based on PCA, = 61. Bolded values highlight statements most relevant for interpreting Cluster 1 and Cluster 2, respectively. Statement wording is abbreviated and shown in positive form only. indicates the absolute difference between clusters.

         In more detail, Cluster 1 reflects a critical, institutionalist perception of how the EU is viewed externally. EU representatives in this group believe that foreign counterparts perceive the EU as falling short of its normative ambitions, particularly in areas such as democracy promotion [Statement no. 12], humanitarian aid [24], and the protection of territorial integrity [40]. In their view, external actors see the EU as geopolitically constrained and rhetorically ambitious but practically inconsistent [19], casting doubt on its ability to deliver on its stated values. At the same time, respondents in this cluster believe the EU is viewed more positively in terms of its internal institutional functioning, especially its capacity to balance member state power [7], strategically leverage economic tools [14, 16], and support civil society [36] and their partners’ national sovereignty [38]. While they affirm the EU’s structural potential and institutional setup, they perceive skepticism among their counterparts regarding its ability to translate this potential into consistent and credible international action [12, 19]. Thus, Cluster 1 represents a group of EU representatives who believe that external perceptions are primarily shaped by the EU’s institutional coherence, strategic autonomy [14, 16], and operational follow-through. In this view, foreign counterparts are seen as assessing the EU’s credibility not only through its normative agenda-setting (e.g. on human rights or development) [12, 30] but also through its structural integrity and capacity for consistent policy delivery [9, 27]. Overall, Cluster 1 reflects a belief that the EU is evaluated externally as a competent institutional actor, one with clear ambitions but limited effectiveness in turning rhetoric into action on the global stage.

         Cluster 2, in contrast, reflects a confident, normative perception of how the EU is viewed externally. EU representatives in this group believe that their counterparts perceive the EU as a largely credible, principled, and effective international actor. In their view, the EU is seen as living up to its normative ambitions, particularly in promoting democracy [12], delivering humanitarian aid [24], protecting territorial integrity [40], and contributing to regional stability [27]. Respondents in this cluster also believe that external actors see the EU as efficient [9], consistent in its actions, and capable of offering concrete benefits such as market access [30] and development support. While they acknowledge the EU’s normative goals, what stands out in this cluster is the belief that those goals are actually seen as being realized in practice. The emphasis, then, is on an EU that is perceived as delivering on its promises and playing a constructive and stabilizing role in its neighbourhood. Overall, Cluster 2 represents a view of the EU’s external image defined not by its perceived reliability and normative influence.

**Dependent variable: Practices of Democracy Promotion**

Our dependent variable captures EU representatives’ preferred diplomatic practices in the EU’s relations with its eastern neighbors, and the extent to which these can be considered cooperative. Rather than examining the substance of EU policy, we focus on the instruments respondents believe the EU should use to implement its external objectives. To distinguish these preferences from institutional constraints or routine professional behavior, we also ask which instruments respondents personally use in their work and how they typically experience meetings with counterparts in the ENCs, where applicable (see Table 5 in the Appendix). This approach has two advantages. First, by asking multiple, clearly differentiated questions about diplomatic practices, we can distinguish respondents’ preferences from their professional routines, thereby improving construct validity ([Fowler, 2013](#ref-fowler2013survey)). Second, it allows us to abstract from the diverse institutional roles and responsibilities of EU representatives, as well as from structural limitations inherent in EU foreign policy-making, notably intergovernmental constraints and fragmented competencies.

         To measure EU representatives’ preferred practices of democracy promotion in the ENCs, we ask respondents to evaluate a set of typical foreign policy instruments, drawn from established typologies in the literature, most notably Smith’s categorization of EU instruments in foreign policy ([Smith, 2014, pp. 54–59](#ref-smith2014european)). Foreign policy instruments refer to the tools policymakers employ to influence the behavior of international actors in line with their objectives. The EU possesses traditional state-based instruments, such as aid, election monitoring, and sanctions, as well as distinct tools like the conditional offer of membership. Although the EU increasingly utilizes a broad range of tools, including soft military instruments (e.g., peacekeeping and training missions), its democracy promotion primarily relies on diplomatic and economic instruments ([Kotzian, Knodt, & Urdze, 2011](#ref-kotzian2011instruments)). Consequently, we focus on a targeted selection of 14 diplomatic and economic instruments that capture the core methods of EU engagement relevant to democracy support, including high-level visits, diplomatic statements, conditional financial assistance, and travel/visa bans.

         These foreign policy instruments for democracy promotion are frequently classified in the literature along a positive–negative dimension, distinguishing between rewarding measures that incentivize democratic reform and punitive measures aimed at discouraging anti-democratic behavior ([Burnell, 2000, p. 6](#ref-burnell2000democracy); [Kotzian et al., 2011, p. 999](#ref-kotzian2011instruments)). ‘Positive’ instruments, such as association agreements, financial assistance, and technical expertise, reflect cooperative practices grounded in mutual engagement, support, and incentives. Conversely, ‘negative’ instruments, such as diplomatic sanctions, travel restrictions, and visa bans, represent non-cooperative practices intended to exert pressure, signal disapproval, or penalize non-compliance. Building on these distinctions, we use the labels ‘cooperative’ and ‘non-cooperative’ to better capture the relational character of diplomatic engagement between the EU and its partner countries, rather than focusing solely on the presence or absence of incentives and penalties.

         We conducted a principal component analysis (PCA) with oblique rotation (direct oblimin) to discern the components of cooperative and non-cooperative practices. We observe a strong correlation between the two extracted components (*r*=.64). [Table 2](#tbl-instruments) provides the factor loadings for each instrument. Instruments were assigned to one of the two components if they loaded at least .50 on the target component while loading less than .40 on the contrasting component. All instruments loaded distinctly onto either the cooperative or the non-cooperative component. The cooperative practices component explained 59% of the total variance, whereas the non-cooperative component explained 17% of the variance. The factor scores for each component are used as dependent variables to examine how meta-perceptions relate to respondents’ diplomatic preferences.

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| Table 2: Diplomatic practices of democracy support   | Instrument | Cooperative | Non-coop. | | --- | --- | --- | | Association agreement, including reference to jointly agreed actions | **0.88** | 0.04 | | Declarations/statements expressing the EU’s position (condemnation, concern, or support) | **0.82** | 0.04 | | Diplomatic sanctions, including suspending high-level contacts or withdrawing technical experts | 0.13 | **0.78** | | Election monitoring | **0.75** | 0.11 | | Financial and technical assistance as an incentive for reform | **0.81** | 0.18 | | High-level visits | **0.96** | -0.11 | | Incentive of visa facilitations or promise of such | 0.39 | **0.56** | | Prospect of EU membership and associated intermediate steps | **0.73** | 0.20 | | Providing expertise and knowledge (e.g., water governance, migration) | **0.97** | -0.05 | | Requesting further information on policies | **0.95** | -0.06 | | Requesting support for EU positions in international fora, including conferences and summits | **0.68** | 0.10 | | Sponsoring thematic conferences | **0.90** | -0.14 | | Support of other international organizations, notably UN agencies | **0.69** | 0.19 | | Travel/visa bans or the threat of such | -0.04 | **0.97** | |

*Note:* Factor loadings from PCA, *N* = 61. Sampling adequacy: average Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) = .91. Average item communality: .77. Bolded values indicate instruments’ primary loadings onto the cooperative and non-cooperative dimensions, respectively.

# 4     Empirical Analysis

In what way do the meta-perceptions of how EU representatives interpret the external image of the EU shape what kind of EU’s diplomatic practices they prefer? Does a more confident, normative perception of the EU’s external image relate more to a preference of cooperative instruments? In other words, do EU representatives united by a certain understanding of how the EU is perceived by their eastern partners, as suggested by the Q-methodology analysis, constitute communities of practice, thus share diplomatic practices ([Bicchi & Bremberg, 2018, pp. 9–10](#ref-bicchi2018))?

         We run a regression analysis to test our hypotheses regarding the link between meta-perceptions and EU representatives’ preferences for diplomatic practices. To account for potential ideological influences, we move beyond conventional left–right distinctions and, following scholars such as Hooghe, Marks, & Wilson ([2002](#ref-hooghe2002does)), control for respondents’ economic and cultural orientations. Economic views are measured on a continuum from support for state intervention in the economy (‘left’) to support for free-market policies (‘right’). Cultural views are measured on a scale ranging from liberal positions emphasizing personal freedoms and equal rights (‘liberal’) to conservative positions emphasizing traditional values and social order (‘conservative’).

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| Table 3: Regression results   | Variable | Model 1: Non-cooperative practices | Model 2: Cooperative practices | | --- | --- | --- | | Constant | 5.170\*\*\* | 4.155\*\*\* | | Meta-perception (reference: institutionalist) | -1.216\*\* | 0.168 | | Cultural Views | -0.246 | 0.061 | | Economic Views | 0.536\*\* | 0.063 | | R-squared | 0.321 | 0.330 | |

*Note:* Coefficients shown with significance levels: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001, *N* = 61.

         The regression results displayed in Table 3 show a statistically significant association between meta-perceptions and preferences for non-cooperative diplomatic practices, but no such association for cooperative ones. Specifically, EU representatives who believe the EU is perceived externally as lacking strategic coherence and normative authority (Cluster 1) are significantly less likely to support non-cooperative instruments such as travel bans, diplomatic sanctions, or suspending high-level contacts. This suggests that when EU representatives believe the EU’s reputation is fragile or inconsistent, they tend to retreat from more assertive or confrontational forms of engagement.

         By contrast, preferences for cooperative practices, such as providing technical expertise, offering assistance, or supporting multilateral initiatives, do not differ significantly across meta-perceptions. These tools appear to be broadly accepted as legitimate and useful, regardless of how the EU is thought to be perceived by external partners. Their consistently high support suggests that cooperative engagement forms a stable core of EU diplomacy, less sensitive to fluctuations in perceived external image.

         Taken together, the findings support our central argument: meta-perceptions, that is: how EU representatives think others see the EU, shape their preferences of diplomatic practices, particularly when it comes to more assertive forms of engagement. When the EU is thought to lack credibility or cohesion, representatives appear more cautious, opting for restrained and less politically charged instruments. This suggests that even in the absence of direct reputational feedback, EU representatives anticipate how the EU’s external image might constrain or legitimize particular practices, an insight that advances our understanding of how perceived international reputation conditions the execution of democracy promotion.

# 5     Conclusion

This study set out to explore how EU representatives’ perceptions of the EU’s external image (so-called meta-perceptions) inform their preferences for specific diplomatic practices in the context of democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighborhood. While much has been written about how the EU seeks to project itself externally, we know far less about how its own representatives think the EU is viewed by foreign counterparts, and how these beliefs shape their understanding of appropriate foreign policy instruments. Drawing on Q-methodology and an original survey of EU officials and institutional actors, we identify shared clusters of meta-perceptions and examine their relationship to preferences for cooperative and non-cooperative diplomatic practices.

         Our findings show that meta-perceptions matter: EU representatives who believe the EU is seen externally as lacking strategic coherence and normative authority are significantly less likely to favor non-cooperative practices such as sanctions or travel bans. Conversely, preferences for cooperative practices, like offering technical expertise or supporting multilateral dialogue, remain consistently high regardless of the specific perception cluster. These results advance our understanding of the reputational dimensions of EU democracy promotion.

         Like any study, ours is not without limitations. The sample focuses on officials engaged with questions related to democracy support in the Eastern Neighborhood, which may limit generalizability to other regions or policy fields. Furthermore, while we capture preferences rather than behavior, future work could investigate how these preferences are translated into diplomatic action. A particularly promising direction for future research is to examine the extent to which EU representatives’ meta-perceptions align with how external counterparts actually view the EU and what they expect from it, and how such (mis)alignments shape the effectiveness of EU democracy promotion. Nonetheless, by demonstrating that EU representatives’ beliefs about how the EU is perceived abroad shape their preferred diplomatic tools, this study opens new avenues for research on the cognitive foundations of foreign policy and the role of internalized reputational considerations in shaping international engagement.

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# 6     Appendix

**Appendix 1. Key independent variable: EU external images**

To structure the concourse of statements, we grouped them into four higher-order dimensions that reflect distinct aspects of how the EU may be perceived as an external actor. These dimensions -how the EU acts, what the EU does, who the EU is, and what the EU achieves- are derived from the substantive content of the statements and align with key analytical lenses in research about EU foreign policy and its external image ([Natalia Chaban, Elgström, & Holland, 2006](#ref-chaban_european_2006); [Jørgensen, 2009](#ref-jorgensen2009european); [Sonia Lucarelli, 2007b](#ref-lucarelli_external_2007)). The first dimension captures perceptions of the EU’s mode of interaction with its partners, including its respectfulness, responsiveness, and willingness to engage in dialogue. The second focuses on the policy objectives and normative commitments the EU is seen to pursue abroad. The third addresses the EU’s identity as an international actor, including its autonomy, coherence, and attractiveness. The fourth considers the perceived effectiveness and consequences of the EU’s external actions. This framework ensures that our statement set comprehensively covers the breadth of possible external images of the EU.

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| Table 4: Grouped statements on EU external images   | How the EU acts | What the EU does | | --- | --- | | 1. The EU treats its eastern neighbours with respect / The EU disrespects its eastern neighbours. | 10. The EU acts consistently with its principles and values / The EU acts inconsistently with its principles and values. | | 2. The EU actively seeks understanding with its eastern neighbours / The EU shows little interest in reaching an understanding with its eastern neighbours. | 12. The EU credibly promotes human rights, rule of law, democracy, and good governance / The EU’s promotion of human rights, rule of law, democracy, and good governance lacks credibility. | | 3. The EU manages to engage in proper dialogue with its eastern neighbours / The EU fails to engage in proper dialogue with its eastern neighbours. | 13. The EU credibly promotes multilateralism and diplomacy / The EU’s promotion of multilateralism and diplomacy lacks credibility. | | 4. The EU respects the cultures of its eastern neighbours / The EU disregards the cultures of its eastern neighbours. | 15. The EU engagement against climate change is credible / The EU’s engagement against climate change lacks credibility. | | 5. It is easier to talk to the EU than to other external actors / It is harder to talk to the EU than to other external actors. | 16. The EU credibly promotes free trade to alleviate poverty and to foster peace / The EU’s promotion of free trade to alleviate poverty and to foster peace lacks credibility. | | 9. The EU operates efficiently / The EU is too bureaucratic. | 17. The EU respects the freedom of religion / The EU disrespects the freedom of religion. | | 11. The EU acts in the interests of its eastern neighbours / The EU prioritizes its own interests over those of its eastern neighbours. | 18. Natural resources have a minimal impact on the EU’s relationship with eastern neighbours / The EU policy is primarily motivated by the natural resources of its eastern neighbours. | | 20. The EU uses its market power responsibly / The EU abuses its market power. | 19. Answered objectives remain unaffected by geopolitical considerations / Geopolitical considerations take precedence over agreed objectives. | | 21. The EU takes its eastern neighbours’ concerns about migration seriously / The EU is ignoring its eastern neighbours’ concerns about migration. | 34. EU enlargement policy is consistent, coherent, and fair / EU enlargement policy is inconsistent, incoherent, and unfair. | | 32. EU aid is distributed fairly / EU aid is unfairly distributed. | 36. The EU credibly supports civil society organisations / The EU’s support of civil society organisations lacks credibility. | | 37. EU conditionality attached to financial aid interferes in domestic affairs / EU conditionality attached to financial aid respects domestic affairs. | 40. The EU sufficiently protects respect for territorial integrity / The EU’s protection of respect for territorial integrity is inadequate. | | 39. The EU takes the initiative in mediating or resolving conflicts with others / The EU leaves the initiative in mediating or resolving conflicts to others. |  | | 41. The EU reacts consistently to violations of international law / The EU is inconsistent in its response to violations of international law. |  | |  |  | | **Who the EU is** | **What the EU achieves** | | 6. The EU acts autonomously from its member states / The EU is fully bound by the decisions of its member states. | 14. The EU effectively employs economic sanctions to promote compliance with international norms / The EU’s use of economic sanctions fails to achieve the desired results. | | 7. The EU effectively balances the power of its member states / The EU is overshadowed by its powerful member states. | 23. EU development aid effectively combats corruption / EU development aid increases corruption. | | 8. The EU acts autonomously from other international actors / The EU fails to act autonomously from other international actors. | 24. The EU provides appropriate humanitarian aid (e.g., in the event of natural catastrophes) / The EU provides insufficient humanitarian aid (e.g., in the event of natural catastrophes). | | 22. The EU is a role model for regional cooperation / The EU is no role model for regional cooperation. | 25. The EU is an important actor in building peace / The EU plays no role in building peace. | | 28. The EU is highly visible in its eastern neighbours / The EU is hardly visible in its eastern neighbours. | 26. EU investment in infrastructure effectively contributes to development in its eastern neighbours / EU investment in infrastructure hinders development in its eastern neighbours. | | 29. The EU is an attractive model that its eastern neighbours want to join / For the eastern neighbours, the EU is an unattractive model that they do not want to join. | 27. The EU is politically stabilising its eastern neighbours / The EU is politically destabilising its eastern neighbours. | | 33. The EU is led by strong personalities / The EU lacks leading personalities. | 30. The EU offers opportunities to expand into new markets for its eastern neighbours / The EU restricts opportunities for its eastern neighbours to expand into new markets. | | 42. The EU stands up to major powers such as China and Russia / The EU is showing weakness in the face of major powers such as China and Russia. | 31. The EU effectively implements its strategy to achieve gender equality / The EU fails to effectively implement its strategy to achieve gender equality. | |  | 35. The EU delivers what it promises / The EU only talks and does not act. | |  | 38. National sovereignty is being promoted by the EU’s neighbourhood policy / National sovereignty is being eroded by the EU’s neighbourhood policy. | |

*Note*: In a next version we will provide the sources for each of the statement.

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| Figure 1: Hierarchical clustering dendrogram, based on standardized survey re- sponses using Ward’s method. |

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| Figure 2: Cluster Visualization, based on PCA. |

**Appendix 2. Dependent variable: Practices of Democracy Promotion**

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| Table 5: Survey items of diplomatic instruments   | # | **Q4: Meeting Experience** | **Q5: EU Instruments** | **Q6: Personal Actions** | | --- | --- | --- | --- | |  | How do you experience a typical meeting with your counterparts? Please treat the following list as suggestive and complete it with features that are important to you. | In principle, the EU has a wide range of diplomatic instruments at its disposal. Which of the following instruments do you personally think the EU should use in its relations with its eastern neighbours? | And which of the following actions do you personally undertake in order to carry out your duties in relation to the european neighbouring countries? | | 1 | Allows us to learn how our partners tick.appendix | Declarations/statements expressing the EU’s position (condemnation, concern, or support) on a particular situation. | I monitor developments and contribute to the drafting of declarations/statements expressing the EU’s position (condemnation, concern, or support) on a particular situation. | | 2 | Enables us to build trust between our counterparts and us. | High-level visits. | I meet and consult with relevant stakeholders from the eastern neighbouring countries at diplomatic visits. | | 3 | Makes it possible to clarify our mutual expectations. | Support of other international organizations, notably UN agencies. | I express my support or actively support the activities of other international organizations, notably UN agencies. | | 4 | Allows differences to be expressed and discussed. Diplomatic sanctions, including suspending high-level contacts, or withdrawing technical experts. | I support the imposition of diplomatic sanctions where appropriate and necessary. |  | | 5 | Increases the chances that our objectives and policies are understood. | Travel/visa bans, or the threat of such. I support the imposition or threat of a travel/visa ban where appropriate and necessary. |  | | 6 | Provides us with a platform to pursue our interests. | Requesting further information on policies. | I request further information on policies or reforms. | | 7 | Allows for the exchange of information. | Requesting support for EU positions in international fora, including conferences and summits. | I take part in or prepare activities to support EU positions at international conferences and summits. | | 8 | Allows for expressing concerns about developments. | Incentive of visa facilitations, or promise of such. | I support granting (or promising to grant) visa facilitation to encourage reform where appropriate and necessary. | | 9 | Allows us to communicate our position on a particular situation. | Association agreement, including reference to jointly agreed actions. | I refer to the possibility of association agreements to promote or support reforms where appropriate and necessary. | | 10 | Allows our partners to learn how the EU ticks. | Prospect of EU membership and associated intermediate steps. | I refer to the prospect of EU membership in principle and the associated interim steps to provide incentives for reform where appropriate and necessary. | | 11 | Allows us to see if we share similar values. | Sponsoring thematic conferences. | I organize and/or contribute to thematic conferences. | | 12 | Others, please specify. | Election monitoring. | I support the free and fair conduct of elections (e.g., by advocating for the presence of EU observers). | | 13 |  | Providing expertise and knowledge to address policy problems (e.g., water governance, migration). | I invite or propose to invite experts in certain areas and technologies (e.g., water governance, migration). | | 14 |  | Financial and technical assistance as an incentive for reform. | I use and advocate financial and technical assistance to encourage reform where appropriate and necessary. | |

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1. Corresponding author: <tina.freyburg@unisg.ch> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
2. [The video is available on YouTube.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2NmxqHpt8g) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)