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“Zeitenwende” as coming of age? EU foreign & security policy through war & peace*

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ABSTRACT

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought war back to the European continent and led to considerable change in EU member states’ foreign policies. The consequential degree of EU foreign policy unity, as well as shifts in long-lasting national and collective security and defence taboos, has represented a significant departure from past practices. We use these processes of change as a starting point to set the scene for this special issue and to inform its main research question: in what manner, if at all, has the EU come of age as a foreign and security actor during Russia’s war on Ukraine? This introduction situates the main question of the special issue into the wider scholarly debates on actorness and the EU’s geopolitical ambitions. It conceptually develops the analogy of “coming of age” to examine a prospective maturation process of the EU as a foreign and security actor. In doing so, it not only interrogates what the EU as a mature foreign and security actor would look like, but it also develops the framework, identifies four maturation processes and reflects on necessary caveats for drawing inferences about the state of maturation of the EU as foreign and security actor.

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1. Introduction: an EU Zeitenwende?

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought war back to the European continent, just as the European Union (EU) has reached the 30th anniversary of the creation of its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The EU’s ambitions to become a strong, united and effective foreign and security actor may now be coming of age during another European

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war. This follows their genesis during the disastrous collective European response to the wars in the Western Balkans 30 years ago.

At the level of member states, radical shifts in national foreign policy positions have been self-described and categorized as a factor in a wider-European “Zeitenwende”. Most notably, German chancellor Olaf Scholz declared on 27 February 2022 that the European continent was undergoing a “Zeitenwende” when facing the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, national foreign policies have undergone dramatic changes and a recalibration over the last two years – from the rise of national defence budgets and spending (in 18 member states) to the reconsideration of cooperation in different European and transatlantic security frameworks, i.e. Denmark (in ending its absence from participation in CSDP), Finland and Sweden (swiftly seeking NATO membership). A narrative that the degree of the collective EU response alongside shifts in the security culture of member states have been mutually reinforcing to translate into a turning-point that could be styled as an EU *Zeitenwende*.

This special issue explores the notion of an EU “*Zeitenwende*” – a turning point in its collective foreign policy actions with the key catalyst of this *Zeitenwende* being Russia’s war on Ukraine. Russia’s war provides a point from which to interrogate in what manner, if at all, the EU has come of age as a foreign and security actor. The EU’s reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine surprised many observers, making use of a larger set of new instruments and established foreign policy tools including sanctions, military support including a military training mission, the use of the European Peace Facility to supply military equipment, committing to the delivery of artillery munitions via the ASAP programme, financial and budgetary support and humanitarian and other forms of emergency assistance. The scale and scope of the EU response has given rise to the assertions of EU leaders and commentators that this is a new moment in the Union’s collective capacity for foreign and security policy actions. And further there has been satisfaction taken in the degree to which a shared collective stance of the EU emerged despite there being differing interpretations and views held amongst the member states (Börzel 2023, Maurer *et al.* 2023).

To explore this EU *Zeitenwende* we use the analogy of “Coming of Age” to examine a prospective maturation process of the EU as a foreign and security actor and as an organising metaphor to be able to interrogate the nature of the EU as a foreign and security actor today. We use “maturity” as our morpheme and our short form for the notion of the EU coming of age. We translate “maturity” into the EU context as a means for understanding the state of the EU as a collective foreign and security actor. The notion of a mature EU can be contrasted with a sense of the lack of an EU capacity for foreign or security policy. It also infers an evolution over a process of prolonged development to a new status. A key research question for the contributors of this special issue is if, how and with what implications the EU has been becoming of age. The special issue approaches this question from different perspectives on processes of maturation. What does maturation mean in regard of an international actor like the EU? What characteristics and developmental identity processes would we expect?

The special issue uses maturation as a tool to look at the quality of the EU foreign and security evolution process and to interrogate what it means to be a full-blown, mature, contemporary international actor. It uses the 30-year anniversary of the CFSP as well as the EU response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a focusing moment to take stock of the EU as a foreign and security actor. It also traces the coming of age of the EU as

global actor in this 30 years since the entry into force of the Treaty of European Union with its provisions on foreign, security and defence cooperation. It does so in consideration of the different contexts, in which the EU and its member states aim to shape global politics: after the peaceful end of the cold war in Europe of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the failure of the EU to respond to the Yugoslav Wars had been a first warning sign to bolster the institutions and processes shaping EU foreign policy coordination. Over the subsequent three decades the EU has confronted multiple events that have challenged its capacity for collective foreign policy making. It has also wrestled with acute challenges to the European integration process that have included, notably, the Eurozone, Brexit and Covid crises. Russia's war on Ukraine, however, represents the most significant foreign and security policy crisis to have confronted the EU in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

The consideration of this special issue therefore is whether an EU *Zeitenwende* is an event in a more continuous "coming of age" process of development of a foreign policy actor taking place over an extended duration. It assesses the evolved EU foreign and security identity as maturation processes over time, where the focus is not on what the EU is (or not), but what it might be able to do (or not) after "coming of age". If there has indeed been a qualitative shift of the EU towards greater maturity as international security actor, we aim to examine if this EU *Zeitenwende* represents an abrupt break with the past, as reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or if recent developments are more explicable as the produce of an evolution during the past 30 decades.

In order to trace and empirically showcase EU maturation degree, process and implications the special issue offers different perspectives from the realm of EU foreign and security policy. The contributions share the conceptual framework of this introduction, but then critically examine the depth of EU maturation and focus either on the processes leading to these state of affairs and/or its effect. This introductory article proceeds as follows. First, to develop the notion of the EU coming of age we explore the concept of maturation. We introduce four distinct types of maturation processes and four pathways towards maturity from the political psychology literature and adapt them to our study about how, if at all, the EU has been coming of age. The introduction next explains why coming of age and maturation are in our view useful concepts to assess the EU as foreign and security actor and how the examination through a maturation lens brings an added value to the existing scholarship and our understanding of the EU as foreign and security actor. It then considers necessary caveats, before we introduce the set-up of the special issue and conclude with a short synthesis of the key findings of its constituent articles.

2. Coming of age and maturation – a conceptualisation

"Coming of age" colloquially refers to the attainment of prominence, respectability, recognition (Webster Online dictionary). These concepts in International Relations and foreign policy analysis are often more generally associated with "actorness". While actorness has indeed become a useful concept to assess the EU in its "performance", "capability" or "effectiveness" (Gehring *et al.* 2013, Niemann and Bretherton 2013, Schunz and Damro 2020; for an excellent overview see Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019) the concept has been proven less useful to assess gradual undercurrents and developments which contribute to the making of actorness over time. It is exactly this zooming in on the "identity" and "mindset" of the EU and, respectively, alternating "mindsets" over time in

the history of the last 30 years of CFSP/CSDP, which has made us shift attention and focus on the insights of political psychology and extrapolate them to the EU. Of course, the EU is not a human being, but understanding the complexity of organizational behaviour from the perspective of political psychology is, as we argue in this Special Issue, a possible way to explain how making, shaping and changing of the CFSP/CSDP identity came about.

In political psychology the concept of maturation encapsulates several processes towards a state of maturity as *“the ability to deal effectively and resiliently with experience and to perform satisfactorily in developmental tasks”* (American Psychological Association [APA] n.d.). Inherent to this definition is the ability to reflect on one’s own journey, to learn and to adjust to new circumstances, but to also remain resilient in regard of one own’s core identity. Maturation, according to psychologists, is therefore a key process of identity development and identity formation that goes through different stages and is both an individual and social phenomenon (Adams and Marshall 1996). Major milestones happen during “adolescence” or “emergent adulthood” (Arnett 2000), during which Erikson (1968) suggested that the adolescent discovers one’s unique self but also what one has in common with others. If one fails to do so, an *“identity crisis”* is likely. Three inter-linked processes are taking place: first it is about solving the identity versus role confusion crisis; secondly, about the construction of one’s own unique sense of identity and thirdly about finding the social environment where one can belong to and create meaningful relationships (Ragelienė 2016, referring to Erikson 1968). In its importance for identity formation maturation is *“a distinct period demographically, subjectively, and in terms of identity explorations [... with] years of profound change and importance”* (Arnett 2000, p. 469). Performing satisfactorily in development tasks thus includes *“the ability to make own, informed decisions, to display a more stable identity status and a more stable cultural orientation as well as the establishment of increasingly salient relations”* (Klimstra et al. 2009, p. 898).

We use these definitions to delineate four distinct EU maturation processes for a mature EU foreign and security identity (Table 1) along two set of categories: the reflection of own experiences and journey on the one hand, and the satisfactory performance in development tasks on the other hand. These four maturation processes provide together a definition of a mature foreign and security actor. Key here is that it is not about capabilities (as e.g. in the actorship debate) that the EU needs to have, but it is about the performance of particular practices, i.e. the identified maturation processes. A mature international actor can be recognised in its ability to perform these four practices. In this regard, our definition of a mature foreign and security actor takes inspiration from the relational turn in IR (Kavalski 2017, Jackson and Nexon 2019, Kurki 2022, 2020) and European Studies (see e.g. Lovato and Maurer 2022, Wolff et al. 2022), where perceptions of others about one’s abilities matter and were practices and therefore processes play a key role. Our definition of maturity therefore is about the EU’s ability to perform the four maturation processes listed in Table 1.

The first type of EU maturation contains processes of self-reflection, learning and resilience in regard of its own identity. It is about the ability and the possibility to collectively reflect on the EU’s journey, to learn from past experiences and to be able to adjust to new circumstances without losing sight of one’s core identity.

The second maturation process is about the ability to make own informed decisions. These decisions should be made in a timely manner, reflect the ability to decide in a

Table 1. Defining a mature foreign and security actor: four maturation processes.

Four EU maturation processes (derived by authors)	Maturation processes according to political psychology (Klimstra <i>et al.</i> 2009, 2012, APA n.d.)
Reflect own experience and journey	
Maturation Process 1: Self-reflection, learning and resilience in regard of own identity	Reflect on one's own journey, learn and adjust to new circumstances Remain resilient in regard of one own's core identity
Perform satisfactorily in development tasks	
Maturation Process 2: Ability to make own informed decisions	Make own informed decisions
Maturation Process 3: Developing a stable identity status	Display stable identity and stable cultural orientation: construction of stable set of norms, values and commitment
Maturation Process 4: Developing salient relations	Develop increasingly salient relations

sovereign manner, but also be informed in that they are based on relevant insights and analysis of potential outcomes, benefits and risks associated to the available options. For the EU as foreign and security actor, this also includes the ability to be able to assess the possible impact of choices made for the whole of the EU, i.e. across the different policy areas or policy arenas, but also in terms of their impact across all EU member states and for their peoples.

Developing a stable identity status is a third possible maturation process, which is based on the construction of a stable set of norms, values and commitments. Stability in this context does not mean that commitments or even norms and values are not prone to change but being mature in one's identity means to be self-assured and resilient to critique, opposition or even counter-measures. The discussion thus is not only if the EU is a normative, ethical, liberal, market power, etc. but if the EU pursues its chosen identity in a coherent, stable and confident manner. A stable identity status is thereby not just about the objective but also the manner in which these objectives are pursued.

Next to these actor-specific maturation processes, there is also a fourth relational process relevant for maturation: the development of increasingly salient relations. While on the one hand, this is about how the EU approaches its interactions with third parties, it is also about how third parties perceive the EU as cooperation partner and how important they consider the relationship with the EU.

These four maturation processes as shown in [Table 1](#) provide us the ideal threshold definition of a mature foreign and security actor, although the psychology literature also warns that maturing towards a stable identity does not automatically imply that there are no tensions, ambiguities or back and forth left for matured actors. Quite on the contrary, Doldor (2017, p. 679) points to increased tolerance to ambiguity, the recognition of complexity as well as a more sophisticated approach to problem-solving as key associations with maturity. Also, it is not about stubbornly choosing one's identity and then sticking to it, but identity formation is a process of back and forth, what is also showcased in current identity formation models. Building on the seminal work by Marcia, Klimstra *et al.* (2010) identified the three-dimension model of identity formation as the most appropriate model to identify three stages of identity formation. This identity formation model suggests that maturation happens through different stages: (1) being committed to one's choice of identity; (2) in-depth exploration of chosen commitment, reflection,

seeking of additional information and discussion of current commitments with relevant others and (3) reconsideration of commitment by comparing with possible alternatives (Klimstra *et al.* 2010, pp. 151–152). Again, it is about finding the balance between making an informed decision about, e.g. one’s core values, while also being adaptable and remaining flexible for reconsideration.

Next to providing a useful definition of maturity, the social psychology literature also identifies different physical, mental and social pathways that lead to maturity. Translated to the EU context that means that for understanding the state of the EU as a foreign and security actor today, we must interrogate how it got there. We need to understand its growth (physical and institutional changes), its development (functional and behavioural changes), its learning ability (adaptation to environmental conditions) as well as its traits development (endogenous characteristics) to assess its development towards a mature identity. For the EU these maturation pathways (see [Table 2](#)) need to happen across the multi-locational governance system that mark its foreign policy identity: these processes need to be conducted across EU institutions and between member states, but also foster a collective understanding across the EU about the core features of the EU as a foreign and security actor.

The four pathways are interdependent, because structural changes (“growth”) might be a necessary condition for behavioural changes, development and learning. At times, it might also be possible for the EU to overcome structural shortcomings and still develop or learn, but it would take a lot more effort and political energy to do so. An illustration from the past is, for example, the double positions of HR and Commission for external relations, which worked under some constellations, but proved difficult when other people held these posts. The difference between development and learning is that the former refers to internal learning processes (e.g. lesson learning from CSDP mission), whereas learning as pathway refers to the ability to adapt to changing external conditions. The development of endogenous characteristics in the EU means also that all different parts of EU foreign policy machinery agree on key features of the EU as foreign and security actor. There might be a back and forth, but overall there is a collective consensus on what the underlying norms of EU foreign policy are to be.

The four pathways listed in [Table 2](#) lead the EU towards maturity, i.e. towards the ability of performing the four maturation processes listed in [Table 1](#). Without growth, development, learning or trait development the EU is not able to achieve maturity. The EU can

Table 2. Four pathways towards maturity.

Maturity pathway	Necessary changes	Pathways towards maturity for EU as foreign and security actor
1. Growth	Physical and Institutional Changes	Institutional adjustments to be able to deliver on four maturation processes in Table 1 : adjustment of formal and informal structures and processes
2. Development	Functional and Behavioural Changes	Functional and behavioural adjustments to be able to deliver on four maturation processes in Table 1 : adjustment of cognitive and mental processes in collective identity
3. Learning	Adaptation to Environmental Conditions	Development of ability for continuous learning, where lessons-learned inspire growth and development, while also safeguarding EU core collective identity
4. Trait Development	Development of Endogenous Characteristics	The attainment of a stable identity requires the development of key endogenous characteristics

only develop and learn while keeping resilient in terms of its identity, if beforehand it developed key traits that are considered endogenous characteristics that constitute the EU's identity as foreign and security actor.

Now that we have provided a clearer definition of maturity and coming of age and the pathways towards maturity as used in this special issue, we next reflect on the added value of using maturation as a key concept in assessing the EU as foreign and security actor.

3. The added value of maturation as key concept for the assessment of the EU as foreign and security actor

The European Union is still considered an odd international actor. Its foreign policy cooperation represents an extreme form of international multilateral cooperation, which has led commentators to regard it as an international system within the wider system of international relations (see, for example, Smith 2003). But it is also notably different, as no other interstate forum offers the kind of intensified exchange on foreign policy issues (Maurer *et al.* 2023) that has evolved in the past 30 years within the framework of the CFSP and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Taking its critics seriously, the EU has been working hard in these past 30 years to overcome the shortcomings of not being a state in its international dealings by strengthening its diplomatic recognition (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016, Bicchi and Maurer 2018, Duquet 2018), continuously upgrading its foreign policy toolbox (Góra 2021, Hackenesch *et al.* 2021, Meissner and Portela 2022, McNamara 2023) and harmonising its internal and inter-institutional processes for decision-making (Sjursen 2011, Amadio Viceré 2016, Fabbrini and Puetter 2016, Riddervold 2016, Juncos and Pomorska 2021, Maurer and Wright 2021b). Even in terms of implementation of CSDP, the EU has been recognized as a uniquely comprehensive security actor (Gebhard and Martin Norheim-Martinsen 2011, Borrajo and de Castro 2016, Rieker and Blockmans 2019), especially when compared to other security organizations, in that it has been able to combine tools across the whole arsenal of EU external action – spanning CSDP civilian and military capacities with, for example, trade policy, development cooperation and humanitarian aid instruments. It is against this background that the continuing critique of the shortcomings of the EU as an international actor should not overshadow the fact that the CFSP and the CSDP have evolved and developed considerably in the past 30 years.

The special issue is relevant for our assessment of the EU as foreign and security actor and its potential *Zeitenwende* in two ways. First, in empirical terms, it interrogates if this new EU foreign policy behaviour constitutes a radical break or if it is the culmination of a process that has been in the making for the past 30 years. While achieving the landmark of 30 years of CFSP cooperation, critiques of the shortcomings of EU foreign policy have continued across that period. Over these first three decades, the EU arguably gave the impression of an international actor very much in the making, searching for a sense of its foreign policy self, puzzled, overly normative, naïve, inconsistent, overwhelming dependent on inconstant Member States. And yet, perhaps sometimes unnoticed, the EU progressively widened the pool and increased the arsenal of instruments in CFSP, turning itself not only into a foreign policy actor, but also adding capabilities for security and defence and employing new instruments to deal with security crises both in Europe

and beyond (notably in Asia and Africa). Hence, when looking at whether the EU is at a major turning point today, this has to be considered against the backdrop of the three-decade making of a collective security actor. Secondly, in conceptual terms, the special issue tackles the longstanding question on how to assess the EU as foreign and security actor and offers a novel perspective that accepts the EU as unique political system attempting to shape foreign and security policy in its own terms. While 30 years of scholarship keep highlighting the peculiarity of the EU as international actor, the conceptual tools and theoretical approaches still are either borrowed from comparative politics, which sets states as the unattainable standard for the EU, or from International Relations, which does not do justice to the “process of state transformation” (Bickerton 2011, 2013) among member states.

In its empirical and conceptual contribution, the special issue builds and contributes to the three distinct debates on EU actorness, identity construction and ontological security. First, a longstanding conceptual debate and empirical focus in the scholarship on EU external relations has been the degree to which the EU has gained capacity as an international actor. This special issue breaks away from the traditional actorness debates, which concentrates on fixed, internal and external characteristics and capabilities of an actor. Rather we focus on the capacity of the EU as a collective to act in certain ways (Maurer *et al.* 2023, Laffan 2024). Through our focus on maturation processes the special issue examines how, if at all, the EU has come of age, i.e. how the EU over time struggled or learnt to engage with challenges, adapt and become resilient in times of crises. To put it succinctly, has the EU managed to turn from a youthful, ingénue dreamer into a prospectively principled yet mature “grown-up” in its capacity for international action and where has it failed to achieve maturity? In thinking about maturation and coming of age, we define the key characteristics of the contemporary EU foreign policy system.

Secondly, constructivist research of CFSP/CSDP has contributed valuable insights to understanding CFSP/CSDP action through the impact of norms/values based on existing identities on the level of EU member states and Europeanisation (Tonra 2003, 2017, Wong and Hill 2011, Jacobs 2012, Pomorska and Wright 2013) or the explanation of the importance of socialisation processes in forging collective foreign policy responses, supported by an intensified institutional framework (Juncos and Pomorska 2006, Juncos and Pomorska 2021). While this literature has undoubtedly made a mark on the study of CFSP/CSDP over the last decade, it is the study of possible maturation processes within the EU – be it on the level of the member states or even EU institutions – that can generate important complementary insights drawing on the political psychology literature. This focus on the EU’s maturation implies, however, the possibility of explaining changing identities in light not only of endogenous identity-formation (internal identity formation), but also due to an ever-changing international environment of crises and security threats (external identity formation). It is exactly this zooming in on the “identity” and “mindset” of the EU and, respectively, alternating “mindsets” over time in the history of the last 30 years of CFSP/CSDP, which has made us shift attention and focus on the insights of political psychology and extrapolate them to the EU. Of course, the EU is not a human being, but understanding the complexity of organizational behaviour from the perspective of political psychology is, as we argue in this Special Issue, a possible way to explain how making, shaping and changing of the CFSP/CSDP identity came about.

The third scholarly debate that this special issue builds upon and hopes to push forward is the discussion on the EU's ontological (in)security. Ontological security scholars like Mitzen suggest that "physical security is not the only kind of security that states seek", but that they "need to feel secure in who they are, as identities or selves" and that ontological security is a key prerequisite "in order to realize a sense of agency" (2006, p. 342). Mitzen explains that "agency requires a stable cognitive environment [... and that] deep uncertainty renders the actor's identity insecure" (2006, p. 342). Similarly, Flockhart emphasises that ontological security provides

a sense of order in relationships and experiences. Without such a sense of order and biographical continuity, individuals will become overwhelmed by anxiety and will be unable to undertake reflective action outside of ingrained habits and basic needs for survival. (Flockhart 2020, p. 4)

Our maturation framework in its focus on identity construction therefore adds a nuanced take on the question of how, if at all, the EU evolved towards a more stable identity over time. We share the relational focus on processes and practices with the ontological security scholarship, and we follow Kinnvall *et al.*'s (2018) suggestion that ontological security "allows for a more psychosocial understanding of security". The focus on maturation and maturity, however, allows us to take our examination a step further in that we do not only aim to understand those identity processes only, but we assess them in terms of how they impact the EU as a foreign and security actor over time.

4. Necessary caveats

After outlining our contribution to the scholarly literature, it is time to consider a few necessary caveats, which also allow us to further refine the research focus of this special issue through four sub-questions.

4.1. *Can maturation of the EU as foreign and security actor happen partially?*

Maturation is not a linear process, and it happens at different lifespans and in different manners. In applying the concept of maturation to the EU we need to consider the multi-level, multi-location and multi-mode characteristics of its foreign and security cooperation system. Despite the attempts of the past 30 years via treaty and institutional reform processes to further streamline and coordinate the various aspects of external action, the various sub-policies come with their specific dynamics and legacies, and it is likely that some have been able to mature more than others.

In regard to its CFSP and its CSDP we must also acknowledge the diversity of member states, and the question remains if the EU can be coming of age as collective EU foreign and security actor without taking all its member states with it. Furthermore, member states are not stable, monolithic entities, but changing governments and national politics create circumstances of prospective change in approach towards EU foreign policy cooperation. Therefore, it is realistic to expect an uneven process of change by member states (i.e. similar to how we see variation in support for integration among EU member states), but overall we assume that EU maturity in foreign and security policy is also about allowing a certain amount of dissonance between member states as long as they agreed to move with a broadly common purpose in the same direction.

This said, the special issue also examines in what areas the EU matured more and in which aspects maturation has not even started. There is also a danger for actors like the EU to “mature in niche”, i.e. that the EU becomes very capable and mature in areas that are very specific and where it can show efficacy and effectivity, but that these areas are not the most salient anymore.

4.2. What is/is there an end-goal to the EU’s maturation?

The second consideration relates to the peculiar nature of the EU and its identity. The EU is often (implicitly or explicitly) compared to states, but should the end-goal of the EU’s maturation be to behave like any other state? While one can easily point to the fact that statehood in terms of a federal Europe is not the aim that most member states work towards, one still needs to dwell on the question how else one would set the standard for what EU maturity implies. While maturation is a suitable tool to avoid talking in binaries, it still implicitly incorporates different notions of what type of finalité one ascribes to the EU. The question about the ideal threshold of maturity therefore refers to foundational and constitutive characteristics, and more importantly to the question of who defines those.

Maturity is associated with a stable identity but also the ability to be adaptive, and how this balance is struck might be assessed differently from respective viewpoints. Yet, one common feature of mature actors in international politics seems to be that one shows a certain degree of stability in responding to events rather than just reacting randomly. Stability should therefore adhere to one’s defined identity, but still allow this necessary reflection and reconsideration for adjusting in a purposeful manner.

There are three more fundamental questions to consider here. First, if states nowadays are still the most appropriate governance structures to deal with global problems in the twenty-first century. Slaughter (2020) suggests that traditional state structures – like foreign ministries or diplomatic services – need to be reinvented as they still think in old worldviews rather than in the necessary networked mode of today’s world. Even if one would not go so far to suggest that states are not the most effective actors anymore for solving global problems, one – secondly – still needs to question if maturity in security questions is even still possible nowadays, as the discussion around resilience (Joseph and Juncos 2019) suggests. The implications for maturation is that it is a process that would never end, but that a mature, international actor would keep reinventing itself around its core identity features. Thirdly, maturation theory does not necessarily tell us if this process of identity formation follows the previous path-dependent developments or rather develops into a break with the past. Both assumptions are possible, and our empirical investigation is further going to assess in what areas we see continuity and where maturation led to a considerable shift in identity formation.

4.3. Does the EU mature, does the EU feel mature or do others perceive the EU as mature?

The third caveat for consideration is a paradigmatic one: while rational choice scholars see maturity as the quality of the EU’s development of becoming of age, constructivists more

strongly focus on how – if at all – the EU’s development and change *is perceived* as maturation by its constituent parts (i.e. member states, institutions, citizens) or by the EU’s interlocutors. In practical terms the two elements are, of course, connected: Being confident in one’s self-chosen identity and having the grit to also externalize these choices is a necessary first step, which also connects strongly to self-perception.

States do not necessarily have to go through this phase to the same extent: their existence and their identity as governance structure is not questioned. Their possible strategic reorientation might raise eyebrows or be criticized, but it is the prerogative of their governments to make these choices accordingly. For the EU the picture looks differently. In its foreign and security endeavours, the EU is a Union that set objectives in the treaties, but it is a collective community that during the past thirty years had been on a path to define its collective identity and in many areas still is on this path or has not even begun to clearly delimit what type of international actor it aims to be. This is not to say that states always made this decision purposefully or are very explicit about their international identity, but due to the EU’s undefined finalité and its distinct collective governance structure its identity question is much more of concern.

The EU has gone through several rounds of redefining key identity concepts in the past 30 years. While institutional, vertical or horizontal coherence were the catchphrases of the early 2000s, the EU global Strategy introduced buzzwords like “principled pragmatism” and “resilience”. Yet, as Joseph and Juncos (2019) emphasize, it is absolutely necessary to distinguish more carefully between EU rhetoric and the adaptation of practice on the ground. They show that “the resilience turn is largely about projection” (Joseph and Juncos 2019, p. 1009), where resilience as key concept is used to present “a more coherent and united approach to external action” (Joseph and Juncos 2019, p. 1003), even though, in practice, different elements of the EU foreign policy system still interpret the meaning of the concept and adjust the adoption of resilience to their previous practices and worldviews. If Borrell’s repeated call for the EU to “learn quickly to speak the language of power” or the new-found obsession with “strategic autonomy” (Barrinha and Christou 2022, Helwig 2023, see also Michaels and Sus 2024, this special issue) is indeed a mere rhetorical device or does indeed have an impact on the identity formation of the EU will need further examination in the years to come.

4.4. Can maturation also go backwards? When or how has maturation gone too far?

Maturity is a key concept to think about the identity formation of individuals, but it is also a quality definition for systems, e.g. in economics, IT, etc. Maturity here does not imply fixed or stable systems, as mature cybersecurity systems illustrate that they are adaptable while still achieving their core objective. Maturation in this regard would go too far, if maturity would mean that one does not adapt to a changing environment anymore, does not attempt to learn, or that one is stuck in the past and is not willing to let go of previously successful processes or procedures.

This points to the creative tension of maturation processes: for systems like the EU the development of institutional structures is necessary, but too much institutionalisation and

the creation of too rigid structures can also lead to the inability to change and adapt. Joseph and Juncos (2019) show this “decoupling” in regard of the resilience turn, where there has been a strong attempt to integrate new principles in EU external action, but path dependency and the complicated institutional set-up of the EU watered down the meaning of resilience so that in reality practices on the ground only changed marginally. Finally, there is also a normative dimension to consider: is maturation always good, or can it go too far? Can you become over-mature in terms of professionalising processes and procedures so far that they lose sight of the overall objective and become the end goal instead of the means to an end?

The research presented in this special issue is not going to be sufficient to provide comprehensive answers to these key questions about maturation, but it aims to kickstart a prospective new research agenda for reconsideration of the evolution of the EU foreign policy making ecosystem.

5. Examining EU maturation processes: the set-up of this special issue and key findings

This special issue enquires in what manner, if at all, the EU has come of age as a foreign and security actor during Russia’s war on Ukraine. Although all contributions build upon the conceptual definitions of maturation processes and maturation pathways developed above in this introduction, they were chosen according to the main focus they put in their inquiry into maturation. The first set of contributions ask how, if at all, the EU has matured, where the first three papers (Bicchi *et al.* 2024, Michaels and Sus 2024, Morgenstern-Pomorski 2024) provide an “inside-looking out” perspective and focus on endogenous maturation processes within the EU (i.e. institutional and EU member states). Morgenstern-Pomorski (2024) applies two traditional institutional tests (“capabilities-expectations gap” and “who speaks for Europe”) to examine the possible maturation of the endogenous institutional quality of EU foreign policy structures. It shows that in 2023 the EU has matured institutionally, even if it still lacks core constitutional powers in foreign and security policy. Brusselisation has continued with scope and speed, and the possible tension between foreign policy and external relations has not been resolved but acknowledged. Nowadays the EU can set foreign policy priorities, while being very much aware of its political limitations and the need to consider both the national and European levels. Bicchi *et al.* (2024) examine the interplay of the maturation of the EU’s identity as an international foreign and security actor with the institutionalisation of its foreign and security architecture. By assessing the maturation around the Council, the Commission and the EEAS, it shows that the relative maturation of the EU’s foreign and security identity since the Lisbon Treaty is not so much linked to formal institutional change (“maturation by design”), but rather to changing informal institutional practice and the selection and use of respective instruments (“maturation by practice”).

Michaels and Sus (2024) trace the evolution and development of the concept of strategic autonomy and conclude that in regard of the EU’s approach to strategic autonomy some maturation processes have been taking place, reinforced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but that the EU is only halfway in terms of the stages of maturation. The EU’s

approach to strategic autonomy has moved from the first stage of maturation of internal discovery and reflection until 2013 to the second stage of identity formation and experimentation. Empirically the paper demonstrates that despite prevailing differences in underlying national beliefs, perceptions and goals about security and defence, which have hampered and are still hampering discussions of European strategic autonomy, significant progress has been made regarding both ideational and material aspects of EU security and defence policy. However, maturation between EU institutions and across member states takes place mostly in collective arenas in Brussels, whereas there are little signs of maturation in regard of strategic autonomy discussion in national discourses. This is also one of the main reasons, the authors suggest, why the process of maturation in terms of strategic autonomy is ongoing and why a coherent vision and the ability to effect change in the external environment – both features of the final phase of maturation – are still missing.

We then switch the perspective and look from the outside-in to consider the exogenous dimension of an EU maturation process, i.e. geopolitical challenges and the question for more meaningful relations (Drieskens *et al.* 2024, Müftüler-Bac *et al.* 2024). Here we ask specifically about the degree to which maturation processes have been shaped by the effects of broader geopolitical and geoeconomic change processes. Drieskens *et al.* (2024) investigate the extent to which EU–China relations have been crucial for the EU’s coming of age as a geopolitical actor in global politics. By building on the concept of “Dragon Power Europe” they argue that the achievement of a solid, yet hybrid international identity is the result of the integration of different identity traits, which they then showcase on the case of health information standardization. Müftüler-Bac *et al.* (2024) then focus on a key tool of EU foreign action in the past decades and examine possible maturation processes in the EU’s engagement with strategic partners. In their analysis, they show that maturation of EU foreign policy in the post-2019 global context takes place, even if to varying degrees. Maturation processes are not fully developed, but in terms of self-reflection and learning (maturation process 1) and developing a stable identity (maturation process 3) the EU made progress, especially in accepting the natural tension between norms and interests in selecting strategic partners and in proactively selecting global players for cooperation. It is the proactive presentation of cooperation opportunities that also shaped the development of salient relations (maturation process 4). There has also been a certain degree of maturation in terms of the EU’s ability to make own informed decisions through a proactive management of divisions among EU institutions and member states over the modalities of these partnerships.

The second set of papers takes maturation as a starting point to focus also on the effect of possible EU’s maturation processes on different areas of EU security policies (Fernández 2024, Pye 2024, Riddervold and Rieker 2024). Fernández (2024) interrogates the EU as a global health actor on the one hand, but also offers a careful consideration of the interlinkage between securitisation and maturation. His analysis shows that the EU matured as a health actor mainly through the “growth” and “learning” pathways, which refer to institutional changes and contextual adaptation. Pye (2024) analyses the lack of maturation in one of the key areas of the EU’s CSDP, the EU’s CSDP mission in Africa on the example of the EU’s mission in Mali. The analysis shows that maturation

processes of learning and internal reflection are not taking place in the right manner and there are no adjustments to new circumstances (no maturation process 1). Therefore there is also no process towards a stable identity construction (no maturation process 2), which would go beyond a focus on CSDP lesson-drawing for EU purposes and acknowledge the EU's colonial past sufficiently. The paper also shows that there is no development of salient relations (no maturation process 4) and therefore no ability of the EU to influence its environment in Mali.

Last but not least, Riddervold and Rieker (2024) look at the implications of the ongoing war in Ukraine for the EU's coming of age as a security actor with a particular focus on the relationship between EU and NATO and the US in the emerging European security structure. It shows that across the three dimensions investigated the indeed is becoming more mature, in a process that started well before the Russian full-scale invasion but has escalated since then: With its broad response to the war on Ukraine, the EU has shown an ability to take quick decisions, provide resources and combine various instruments in response to a crisis (increased decision-making ability); it is taking on a clearer foreign policy role/identity as a principled pragmatist and crisis manager (more stable identity status); and this plays out in its bilateral relations to the US and in clearer relationship and division of labor between the EU and the other main European security provider, NATO (more salient and defined relations).

6. Conclusion: how maturation provides novel perspectives on the EU as a foreign and security actor

Coming of age or maturation for the EU implies to find the necessary balance between staying adaptable and agile in the twenty-first century but also being sure of its own identity and having the willingness to influence its environment according to its own world-views. But why is it possible and desirable to use the concept of maturation in order to understand the EU as a foreign and security actor?

The special issue contends that maturation is a useful conceptual lens in order to assess the development of the EU's foreign policy system in the past 30 years due to three reasons. First, the EU's foreign and security policies are strongly tied to the peculiar identity of the EU. The EU's foreign and security policy evolved into an intense and unique cooperation system, where there is neither a federal-like hierarchy due to supranationalisation nor traditional intergovernmental negotiations (Sjursen 2011) but where the interplay between member states and institutional support structures are key features (see e.g. Maurer and Wright 2021a). Using the concept of "coming of age" allows us to assess the development of the EU as this peculiar foreign and security actor without the overbearing constant reference to statehood. We do not expect states to change considerably in a timespan of 30 years, except maybe for the expected impact of national elections, a potential shift in the ideology of governments or the current fear of populism spreading in European politics. Yet in contrast to these long-term trends, we aim to examine in this special issue how – if at all – the EU as a foreign and security system has purposefully matured, and maturation provides us an open lens to investigate such shifts empirically and conceptually without an implicit theoretical Westphalian straitjacket.

Secondly, while lots has been said and written about the evolution of the EU as foreign and security actor, the notion of “coming of age” pushes our understanding to go beyond descriptions of institutional and procedural developments. Maturation not only asks if the EU is able to do more of the same, but if what the EU does is now qualitatively different from before. The type of change that we examine 30 years in therefore is not about building EU actorness anymore, but about being able to act according to the EU settled identity.

Thirdly, coming of age does not prescribe one possible and expectable outcome, but the EU’s unidentified finalité and its ambiguous international identity also make it likely to expect different maturation expectations. The added value of such an open approach is that we do not beforehand prescribe which type of maturation we are empirically looking for, but we are able to situate our quest for understanding maturation processes in the existing literature on the EU’s international identity and EU actorness. A key aspect to consider in this respect is that the EU is not a monolithic governance entity, but *“European foreign policy is situated in a ‘policy space’ where many of the boundaries are unclear, and in which the political opportunity structure carries both strong incentives to collective action and significant obstacles to it”* (Smith 2003, p. 558). Member states in particular over time might not always agree on this one vision forward for the EU as foreign and security actor, and we must allow dissonance and constant negotiation in what the EU is meant to be as international actor. Yet, this dissonance is inherently built into the EU foreign and security cooperation system, where *“navigating and managing disagreement is a core component of the policy-making process”* (Maurer and Wright 2021a, p. 385), and it must not be mistaken for a sign of increased contestation in the CFSP or CSDP.

Yet, for our thinking about maturation, it also means that we must not beforehand assume that all agents that are part of the EU foreign and security system aim for the same type of maturation. It might well be that (some) member states do not want an EU foreign and security maturity that is distinct and independent of the maturity of its principles, i.e. the EU member states. Our engagement with the state-of-the-art needs to explore these different, alternative expectations for EU maturation. Furthermore, it is a useful empirical exercise to inquire if shifts in the portrayal of what the EU as international actor should be/become is mostly wishful rhetoric or actually translates into altered action on the ground. Joseph and Juncos (2019) have shown in their analysis of the resilience turn that just because a term becomes more popular in EU documents does not automatically mean it is translated as such in EU practices. In his introduction to the 2022 published strategic compass Borrell, for example, suggests that the EU has *“demonstrated that ‘geo-political Europe’s is not just a slogan but increasingly a reality”* (EEAS 2023, 4–5) but the question needs to be asked if this indeed translated into different EU action across different policy subfields and towards third parties.

The contributions to this special issue (see overview in Table 3) examine maturation processes and/or maturation stages in different manners and distinct degrees, but they also engage with some of the key caveats discussed here and illustrate why a critical examination needs to be aware of the shortcomings of a maturation lens in assessing the EU’s coming of age.

Table 3. Key findings of the special issue in terms of EU maturation processes.**Maturation Process 1: Self-reflection, learning and resilience in regard of own identity**

- Strategic autonomy has moved from the first stage of maturation of internal discovery and reflection until 2013 to second stage (Michaels and Sus 2024)
- In EU strategic partnership approach there has been a continuous tension between norms and interests. The EU learnt over time that it can do both but also how to identify global players (Müftüler-Bac *et al.* 2024)
- No learning of EU in treating CSDP missions not just as own laboratory. Furthermore not sufficient consideration of local needs and third parties present (Pye 2024)
- After COVID-19, some policy entrepreneurs doubled down on the securitisation card to bolster the EU's global health actorness and advanced a narrower, more short-sighted conception of the EU's self-interest. The EU matured as a health actor mainly through the "growth" and "learning" pathways (i.e. through institutional changes and contextual adaptation), but this change was not accompanied by development or trait development. Therefore this shift was neither widespread nor enduring (Fernández 2024)

Maturation Process 2: Ability to make own informed decisions

- The EU matured to set European interest across two levels (National and European), while acknowledging limitations of this process (Morgenstern-Pomorski 2024)
- Some signs of maturation in strategic autonomy approach on collective EU level, but not yet comprehensively developed as main differences about US role prevail (Michaels and Sus 2024)
- In terms of managing strategic partnerships here progress although still some leeway for improvement in terms of aligning EU institutions and member states over modalities of partnerships both (Müftüler-Bac *et al.* 2024)
- Increased maturity in terms of making timely decisions; also due to clearer and more stable identity (Riddervold and Rieker 2024)

Maturation Process 3: Developing a stable identity status

- EU identity developed in a stable manner if assessed in comparative manner over time instead against statehood (Morgenstern-Pomorski 2024)
- Some signs of maturation in strategic autonomy approach on collective EU level, but not yet comprehensively developed as main differences about US role prevail (Michaels and Sus 2024)
- No learning and also no development of stable identity that goes beyond own experimentation and acknowledges colonial past in CSDP in Africa (Pye 2024)
- Security and defence show more stable identity with a clearer foreign policy role as principled pragmatist and crisis manager (Riddervold and Rieker 2024)
- The EU's identity as a global health actor is not becoming more stable and easily recognisable (Fernández 2024)
- Maturation can also be conceptualised as a matter of hybridization, thus not just as a process that takes place *within* separate power types but also *beyond* and *between* them. The EU's coming of age could be thought of as a process in which multiple identity traits are integrated and even strategically incorporated, what nevertheless can lead to a coherent, stable and confident position in international (Drieskens *et al.* 2024)

Maturation Process 4: Developing salient relations

- Some signs of maturation in strategic autonomy approach on collective EU level, but not yet comprehensively developed. However, improvement of EU-NATO approach (Michaels and Sus 2024)
- Over time EU learnt to offer strategic partnerships in a way that they are also salient for third party (Müftüler-Bac *et al.* 2024)
- No development of salient relations and therefore also no influence on environment in CSDP missions (Pye 2024)
- Clearer relationship and division of labour between EU and other main European security providers (Riddervold and Rieker 2024)

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