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Crisis windows and reversible empowerment in the EU's common foreign and security policy

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ABSTRACT

External crises have often been framed as moments of 'geopolitical awakening' for the European Union, yet what follows rarely lives up to that promise. Rapid coordination gives way to re-fragmentation and renewed national control. This paper conceptualises this pattern as reversible empowerment – the informal granting and withdrawal of operational autonomy to supranational actors within fixed institutional arrangements, distinct from formal, treaty-bound delegation. Drawing on the competence-control framework, I argue that external shocks temporarily raise the marginal value of EU-level competence, prompting member states to relax control constraints and empower the High Representative, the EEAS, and the Commission. Once immediate pressure subsides or distributional conflicts re-emerge, member states reassert control through veto exercise, bilateral activism, and procedural recalibration. Empirically, the paper employs process tracing and content analysis of 37 Foreign Affairs Council statements and 16 European Council conclusions (2022–2025). The findings show that CFSP is configured for reversible empowerment. Competence expands in acute phases of external crises and contracts as perceived urgency declines, though each cycle may leave institutional residue that shifts the baseline for subsequent episodes. Within protracted crises, new escalatory events trigger bounded mini-cycles of re-empowerment that do not reach prior peaks. Reversibility seems to be the system's equilibrium.

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External crises have repeatedly been described as moments of geopolitical awakening for the European Union (Borrell, 2023; Matthijs & Meunier, 2023). The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and the election of Donald Trump for a second term in the United States, for instance, have been read as shocks that should push member states toward a stronger, faster and

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more unified Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Demirci *et al.*, 2025; Kelemen & McNamara, 2022; Tonra, 2025). In the first hours and days of these crises the EU often did look more geopolitical (Beach & Smeets, 2020). The High Representative spoke quickly, EU coordinated messages, sanctions or restrictive measures were prepared at unusual speed, and member states signalled readiness to act collectively. Yet a few months later the picture becomes more familiar. Positions diverge on the depth and scope of sanctions, and on how to balance transatlantic, neighbourhood and Southern priorities. What first looks like a qualitative jump in foreign policy empowerment of EU supranational institutions on foreign and security policy matters ends up looking like another temporary surge. This cyclical pattern is puzzling when considering existing theoretical explanations from the literature.

Most explanations for the uneven performance of CFSP point to institutional and legal constraints (Genini, 2025; Wessel, 2016). The unanimity rule, the special status of CFSP in the Treaties, the fragmented external competences between the Council, the EEAS and the Commission, and the continued primacy of member states in security questions are said to make the policy field slow, under-institutionalized and vulnerable to vetoes (De Baere & Wessel, 2015; Latici, 2021). A second line of argument stresses the gradual normalisation of CFSP, especially through practice and Court of Justice case law, and suggests that many limitations are being eroded in day-to-day work (Carrozzini & Lonardo, 2021; Saurugger & Terpan, 2015; Szép, 2024). A third view argues that outcomes are primarily a function of political will in capitals (Genini, 2025; Helwig, 2013). These arguments are all partially correct, but they leave one thing underspecified. They do not tell us why the EU can sometimes act very quickly with the same legal framework and the same actors, only to fall back into fragmentation later. They treat the empowerment of the EU supranational bodies only in terms of institutional or regulatory delegation, as a single, once and for all act, while in practice it is repeatedly loosened and tightened within the same dossier without any formal, regulatory delegation of authority to the supranational level. However, this leaves unexplained a temporal pattern we recursively observe in practice.

To address this gap, I develop a theoretical account of temporal variation by integrating the competence-control theory of indirect governance with the growing empirical scholarship on the evolution and functioning of Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) during moments of crisis (Abbott *et al.*, 2020; Riddervold *et al.*, 2020). Member states face a recurring choice between exploiting the informational, coordinative, representational, financial, and procurement *competence* of EU supranational actors and keeping those actors on a short political leash. Crises, I argue, alter the relative value of these two objectives. When external pressure is high and speed is crucial, the value of EU supranational level competence rises and states are

willing to reduce control, for example by letting the High Representative speak on their behalf, by allowing the EEAS to lead drafting of key statements of positions, or by accepting the bundling of instruments by the Commission. Once the immediate phase of the crisis passes, two things happen. Urgency declines, which lowers the marginal value of supranational competence. At the same time, distributional, identity or geopolitical disagreements that were initially suppressed come to the surface, which raises the marginal value of national control. The result is a pattern of *reversible empowerment*. Operational discretion granted to EU supranational actors spikes in the acute phase, then is partially or fully clawed back. CFSP is therefore best understood as structurally prone to short-lived empowerment of supranational actors.

To probe the plausibility of this argument, I adopt an event structured case study research design, leveraging process tracing as my main within-case method (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). I study a case that matches concerns with unprecedented external challenges: the EU response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Empirically, the analysis reconstructs the sequence of decisions over agenda setting, drafting authority, external representation and instrument choice, relying on Council and European Council conclusions, HR/VP statements, EEAS press releases, Official Journal acts on sanctions and restrictive measures, and secondary reporting from Brussels based outlets. This is complemented, where available, with member state statements and national foreign ministry briefings, to identify moments of reasserted national control.

The empirical findings show a relatively consistent pattern. Initially, we observe an empowerment spike. Supranational actors receive more room to frame the issue, to speak externally and to bundle instruments. This produces the public impression that CFSP has finally become geopolitical. Yet in the subsequent months, as disagreements on recognition, conditionality, burden sharing or regional alignments become visible, member states reassert control. Drafting moves back to the Council machinery, more statements are issued in national formats, references to sensitive third parties are softened or bracketed, and EU level representatives are instructed to narrow their mandate. The same legal framework thus generates two distinct modes of foreign policy making, one crisis driven and *competence seeking*, the other routine and *control seeking*. The fact that the system can swing between them with no treaty change – and, thus, no formal and permanent delegation of authority – indicates that the central variable is *political control*, not formal authority.

Theoretically, the paper contributes to three bodies of literature. First, it adds a temporal dimension to principal-agent and empowerment analyses of EU foreign policy by showing that the relevant variation is often over time within the same issue rather than across issues. Second, it speaks to

work on the institutionalization and normalisation of CFSP by specifying the conditions under which practice can in fact overwhelm formal rules and when it cannot. Third, it engages the broader debate on the EU as an international actor by explaining why it can display moments of high actorness without consolidating them into a permanent foreign policy role. The competence-control lens clarifies that what looks like institutional weakness is often a product of deliberate, reversible choices by member states.

The rest of the paper proceeds in four steps. The next section reviews the existing institutional, legal and political economy explanations of limited CFSP performance and shows where they underspecify the dynamics of empowerment. Section three develops the competence control framework and derives expectations for crisis and post crisis phases. Section four sets out the research design and the sources. Section five presents the empirical evidence in the Ukraine case. The final section draws the implications for institutional reform debates and for how we should interpret calls for a more geopolitical EU.

The puzzle of the competent yet constrained CFSP

The EU can act fast, collectively and with an apparently 'geopolitical' profile at the onset of major crises by informally delegating authority to supranational actors – which I call 'empowerment' to distinguish the *informal* delegation from the formal, treaty-bound process of delegation – yet within the same legal and institutional framework it later reverts to fragmented, slow and member state-conditioned CFSP practices (Riddervold & Rieker, 2024). This suggests that variation in EU foreign policy performance cannot be attributed only to static rules. Something else must explain why, under intense external pressure, member states tolerate more action by the High Representative, the EEAS or the Commission, while in the consolidation phase they reassert control (Lepeu, 2025). Existing EU-specific scholarship offers three broad explanations for CFSP's limits, but none of them fully captures this temporal and reversible pattern.

The first and oldest strand stresses the institutional and legal constraints built into CFSP. Early analyses of European Political Cooperation and later of CFSP/CSDP highlighted the essentially intergovernmental nature of the policy domain, the prevalence of unanimity, the marginal role of the European Parliament, and the weak justiciability of CFSP acts (Nuttall, 2000; Smith, 2004a, 2004b; Wagner, 2003). Later work after Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon confirmed this assessment: CFSP was designed as a member state preserve, with the Council and European Council retaining agenda and decision control, and only carefully delimited roles for the Commission and the High Representative (Cremona, 2008; Koutrakos, 2013, 2017; Morillas, 2018). In this view, limited EU foreign policy performance follows straightforwardly

from institutional design. If national governments hold the veto, if there is no general legislative procedure, and if financing instruments are fragmented, then policy will be underpowered. This literature is important because it documents precisely where the Treaties place brakes on supranational action. Yet it tends to treat those brakes as fixed and uniformly binding. It does not explain why, in 2022 for example, the EU could adopt multiple sanctions packages at high speed and speak with one voice on Ukraine despite the same unanimity rule that later produced diluted statements on Gaza. A strictly institutional-legal reading therefore accounts for chronic limits but not for sudden raise in the degree of empowerment (or discretion exercised by) EU supranational institutions on foreign and security policy.

A second strand has argued almost the opposite, namely that CFSP has undergone a gradual process of ‘normalisation’ or ‘communitarization by practice’ through the interaction of day-to-day Council work, horizontal instruments and the Court of Justice (Carrozzini & Lonardo, 2021; Genschel & Jachtenfuchs, 2016; Hillion, 2014; Lonardo, 2021; Szép, 2024). Here the claim is that the original special status of CFSP has been eroded in at least three ways. First, external action more broadly conceived increasingly relies on procedures and instruments from the Community/EU method, which blurs the line between CFSP and other external policies (Bendiek & Bossong, 2019; Freudlsperger & Meunier, 2024). Second, the Court has on several occasions expanded its jurisdiction to CFSP-related acts when they had clear legal effects, thereby pushing CFSP toward greater legalization (Chawla, 2024; Eckes, 2016; Verellen, 2021). Third, the EEAS and the HR/VP have, through practice, carved out a more central coordinating role than the Treaties strictly spelled out (Helwig, 2013; Krause, 2003; Lepeu, 2025; Miadzvetskaya, 2025). On this reading, what looks like institutional rigidity is in fact being ‘overwhelmed by practice.’ This perspective is valuable because it captures the dynamism of EU foreign policy institutions and shows that member states have accepted, sometimes tacitly, more supranational involvement than they initially planned. Its limitation, however, is that it tends to be one-directional. If practice and case law keep pushing CFSP toward normalisation, why do we still observe recurrent renationalization and blockage on politically sensitive files such as Middle East diplomacy or China–EU relations? A practice-driven account can tell us how the system stretched, but not why it *snaps back*.

A third, very influential, strand shifts the explanation away from rules and toward politics. It holds that CFSP outcomes are primarily a function of member-state preferences and political will (Ginsberg, 2001; Hill, 2015; Tonra & Christiansen, 2004). According to this view, when the big capitals agree and when the European Council chooses to lead, the EU can act; when preferences diverge, no amount of institutional engineering will deliver unity. This position was reinforced after the eurozone and migration

crises, when scholars noted that intergovernmental bargaining and leadership by the European Council had become the decisive factor in high-urgency dossiers (Bickerton *et al.*, 2015; Puetter, 2014). Applied to CFSP, the argument is straightforward: the EU acts when the member states want it to act. This is a necessary corrective to functionalist or legalistic optimism. Yet taken on its own it is underspecified for the puzzle I consider in this paper. Member states wanted to act on Ukraine and largely did, but they also wanted to respond to Gaza or to manage relations with the Gulf and still produced weaker, more fragmented outcomes. Moreover, ‘political will’ accounts rarely disaggregate what instruments, procedures or forms of delegation or empowerment member states choose when they are willing to act. They tell us that preferences matter, but not why those preferences translate into temporary empowerment of EU actors followed by reasserted national control.

Seen together, these three explanations provide an increasingly fine-grained picture of CFSP, but they leave a common gap. The institutional-legal view explains persistent constraints but not short bursts of supranational exercise of authority. The normalisation-through-practice view explains institutional stretching but not reversals. The political-will view explains broad variation across cases but not the micro-level choices about how much autonomy to grant EU actors within a single crisis cycle. What all three have in common is that they treat delegation to the EU level as largely static: either the Treaties constrain it, or practice expands it, or political will enables it. None of them theorises informal delegation – what I describe as ‘empowerment’ – as something that can be loosened on Monday and tightened on Friday with no change in the legal base. This is precisely what a competence-control perspective can add. It starts from the same actors and the same institutional setting identified in the literature, but it treats member states’ empowerment choices as reversible responses to shifting valuations of competence and control. In acute crises, the benefits of exploiting EU-level competence temporarily outweigh the costs of losing some control. As crisis urgency declines and distributional or identity conflicts re-emerge, the balance shifts back in favour of control. This mechanism allows us to retain the insights of the three strands while solving their temporal blind spot.

The competence-control framework has primarily been applied to explain institutional governance arrangements, understood as the *formal* allocation of authority between governors and intermediaries – what we usually understand as ‘delegation’ (Abbott *et al.*, 2020). However, the underlying logic of the competence-control tradeoff operates not only at the level of institutional design but also at the level of policy implementation and operational practice. Even within stable formal structures, principals continuously adjust how tightly they constrain their agents through informal mechanisms:

mandate interpretation, drafting procedures, speaking roles, oversight intensity, and veto exercise. These adjustments constitute what might be called operational or informal delegation or, more precisely, reversible empowerment – the granting and withdrawal of practical autonomy to supranational actors within fixed institutional arrangements.

What distinguishes the competence-control framework from existing crisis decision-making literature? Standard approaches to crisis politics emphasise time pressure effects on information processing (Janis, 1973), rally-around-the-flag dynamics that temporarily align preferences (Boin *et al.*, 2016), or intergovernmental bargaining under urgency (Bickerton *et al.*, 2015; Puetter, 2014). These accounts explain why member states cooperate more in crises, but they do not explain the specific institutional form that cooperation takes – namely, why member states *informally* empower intermediaries rather than simply coordinating directly. The competence-control framework adds three insights. First, it identifies the specific mechanism driving institutional choice: the competence-control tradeoff, not just urgency per se. Member states empower EU actors because those actors possess competences that cannot be quickly replicated at national or intergovernmental levels. Second, it explains the temporal pattern: expansion followed by contraction as the relative marginal values of competence and control shift. Crisis decision-making literature tends to treat cooperation as either present or absent, not as something that expands and contracts in systematic ways. Third, it explains why institutionalization fails despite repeated crises. The credible commitment problem – member states cannot write enforceable rules limiting EU authority to genuinely urgent phases – means temporary empowerment remains preferable to permanent delegation. Standard crisis accounts focus on preference convergence during emergencies but do not explain why that convergence does not translate into lasting institutional change.

Crisis windows and competence-control tradeoffs

My theoretical argument starts from the observation that CFSP is a formal *and* informal delegation setting in which principals (the member states, collectively in the Council and European Council) repeatedly decide how much leeway to grant to a set of agents (HR/VP, EEAS, Commission services with external competences, EU Special Representatives) (Dijkstra, 2014; Hawkins *et al.*, 2006). Delegation, either in its formal and informal version (i.e., ‘empowerment’), is attractive because these agents possess or can generate competence that individual states, acting separately, cannot easily mobilise. Any form of delegation, however, is also risky because agents can act in ways that are politically costly, distributionally inconvenient or normatively misaligned for one or more member states. The result is a structural tension

between exploiting supranational *competence* and preserving national *control*. My core claim here is that, in CFSP, this tension is sometimes resolved through the permanent delegation of formal authority to the supranational level, but more often it is not resolved once and for all. Instead, member states manage it over time through reversible adjustments to empowerment, as an informal form of delegation.

By competence I mean the bundle of informational, coordinative and representational, financial and procurement capacities that EU level actors can bring to bear in foreign policy. Informational competence refers to the ability to collect, aggregate and analyze diplomatic and security relevant information from EU delegations, CSDP missions, Commission services, intelligence sharing and partner organizations (Corpădean, 2023; Csernaton, 2021). Coordinative competence refers to the ability to frame issues, draft common positions, sequence instruments and link external action to other EU policies. Representational competence refers to the ability to speak credibly for the Union in multilateral fora or in crisis diplomacy (Weston & Mérand, 2015). Financial competence refers to the capacity to mobilise and coordinate funding instruments such as the European Peace Facility, macro-financial assistance, and emergency support packages at scale and speed that individual member states cannot match. Procurement competence refers to the ability to achieve efficiency gains through joint procurement of defense materiel or humanitarian supplies, leveraging the EU's collective purchasing power and technical standardization capacity (Fiott, 2023; Nicoli & Beetsma, 2024). All these yield clear collective benefits. They lower transaction costs among 27 capitals, improve the timeliness of external responses and increase the external visibility of the EU. They are also unequally distributed. The EEAS has better global situational awareness than most national foreign ministries (Ewers-Peters, 2025); the Commission can design and implement sanctions and financial instruments faster than many member states; the HR/VP can interact with third parties with a claim to EU representation that no national minister can reproduce; the Commission and EEAS can coordinate financial flows and procurement at scales that often dwarf many individual national capacities. This is why, when crises create urgent coordination demands, member states are drawn to EU supranational level competence.

By control I mean the set of instruments that allow member states to constrain, oversee or retract agent action. In CFSP these instruments are well known (Lamoso-González, 2025): unanimity or quasi unanimity rules; highly specific tasking in Council conclusions; the practice of keeping drafting in Council working parties or in the Political and Security Committee (Juncos & Reynolds, 2007); mandates for EU Special Representatives that are narrow, time limited and renewable; mixed staffing of the EEAS; budgetary and procedural oversight of CFSP lines; and the recurrent use of statements in national formats when joint language cannot be agreed. Control preserves

national sovereignty in sensitive areas, protects divergent bilateral relations with third countries, and allows governments to manage domestic political constraints (Dijkstra & Vanhoonacker-Kormoss, 2017). However, it can be costly because it fragments external messages, slows decision making and weakens the credibility of the EU as a foreign policy actor.

Building on the competence-control framework developed by Abbott *et al.* (2020), I extend their analysis to account for systematic temporal variation in informal delegation (what I understand as ‘empowerment’). While Abbott *et al.* identify the fundamental trade-off between intermediary competence and governor control, they focus primarily on endogenous feedback mechanisms that can gradually shift *formal* institutional arrangements over time. I add an exogenous mechanism: external crises that temporarily but predictably alter the relative marginal value of competence versus control. Crucially, I argue that CFSP operates under different dynamics than many of Abbott *et al.* cases because foreign and security policy is a core state power that member states jealously defend. Even when EU supranational institutions build competence and leverage through effective crisis performance, member states actively prevent this from converting into permanent authority shifts through formal delegation. The sovereignty sensitivity of CFSP means that normal feedback loops whereby intermediary competence erodes governor control, as theorised by Abbott *et al.* (2020), are structurally limited, even if not completely.

In periods of low perceived urgency, when distributional or identity conflicts are salient, the marginal value of control is high. States prefer to keep drafting and representation closer to the intergovernmental level even if this reduces the effectiveness of EU external action. This produces the pattern that much of the literature has observed: cautious mandates, slow decisions, carefully worded statements (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022, pp. 117–141). In the acute phases of external crises, however, the parameters change. Perceptions of urgency spike. Consequently, external time pressure increases, information needs rise, and the reputational cost of inaction grows. The marginal value of competence increases because only the EU level can quickly centralise information, produce an integrated package of measures, and present a unified message. In such moments member states temporarily reduce control, for example by authorizing the HR/VP to speak on behalf of the Union, by letting the EEAS lead operational coordination, or by accepting rapid sanction design by the Commission. Crucially, this is not necessarily a permanent shift in *formal* institutional design. It is, instead, a temporary *reweighting* of the two objectives that leads to temporary variation in levels of empowerment.

This application of the competence-control framework yields a novel theoretical expectation about the temporal pattern of CFSP. In the acute phase of a crisis, when urgency is perceptually high, we should observe an

empowerment spike. This should translate in more agenda setting by EU agents, broader or faster mandates, and a more unified external representation. In the consolidation or post-acute phase, as member states adapt to the crisis as a 'new normal' and perceptions of urgency decline, we should observe a contraction. This would translate in more drafting and negotiation in the Council, more national statements, more qualifications in conclusions, more reassertion of member state oversight. The trigger for contraction is twofold. First, crisis urgency declines and with it the perceived need for pooled competence. Second, disagreements that were initially submerged by the pressure of rapid response reappear. These may be distributional (e.g., who pays, who bears risks), geopolitical (e.g., how far to align with the United States or to balance in the neighbourhood), or normative (e.g., what language to use on Gaza or on human rights). Once these reemerge, the marginal value of control rises again. Member states then use the many control instruments built into CFSP to pull *de facto* authority back from the EU level. Importantly, urgency can re-spike within the same crisis, particularly during escalations, turning points in confrontations, or new developments, producing repeated mini-cycles of empowerment and clawback. Empowerment is thus *reversible by design*, though not perfectly so; each cycle may leave some institutional residue – accumulated competence, established precedents, updated expectations – that shifts the baseline for subsequent episodes.

I specify that this framework for reversible empowerment operates when three conditions are simultaneously present. First, when the underlying institutional setting already contains dense control instruments, as CFSP does. If member states lacked fine-grained tools to tighten control, reversals would be more costly. Second, when the crisis does not alter preference heterogeneity among member states. A large external shock can increase demand for EU action without eliminating disagreements on the substance of that action. Member states may agree that the external shock constitutes a problem that requires joint EU action and yet disagree about the best way to address the shock. Third, when the tasks delegated are procedural or coordinative rather than distributive. It is easier to let the EEAS draft a statement or coordinate sanctions listings than to let it decide on security guarantees or recognition issues. Where crises affect core national interests or identity-laden questions, empowerment is expected to be shorter and reversals faster.

This expectation is consistent with recent work showing that integration dynamics within the same crisis and policy domain can vary substantially depending on the type of decision at stake, particularly its distributional consequences (Krotz *et al.*, 2025). Sanctions coordination, CSDP interventions, and financial burden-sharing may each exhibit distinct empowerment-control trajectories within the same crisis episode, a possibility my empirical analysis explores in the shift from procedural to distributive tasks during the Ukraine response.

These scope conditions help explain why the sequencing observed in CFSP crises differs from patterns in other policy domains. The Eurozone crisis, for instance, followed the opposite trajectory. During that crisis, member states initially pursued high-control national and intergovernmental solutions (bilateral loans, strict conditionality), moving toward more *formal* delegation to EU institutions (ESM, OMT, banking union) only when those solutions proved inadequate (Hodson, 2015). This reversal of the causal sequence reflects differences in initial institutional capacity and the nature of coordination benefits. In 2010, the EU lacked standing fiscal crisis capacity comparable to the EEAS/HR/VP apparatus that existed for CFSP. Member states could not immediately exploit EU-level competence because such competence did not yet exist in a usable form. Moreover, fiscal crises require resource transfers rather than just coordination, raising distributional conflicts from the outset. The competence-control framework therefore predicts different temporal patterns depending on: (1) whether EU-level competence already exists and can be rapidly activated, (2) whether the primary benefits are coordinative (favouring early delegation) versus distributive (favouring initial control), and (3) the degree of sovereignty sensitivity in the policy domain. CFSP exhibits high existing competence, high coordinative benefits, but also extreme sovereignty sensitivity – a combination that produces rapid initial empowerment followed by reassertion.

My framework also explains why member states do not *fully* institutionalise crisis response capacity (through formal delegation) despite repeated crises affecting the CFSP: member states face a credible commitment problem. They cannot write enforceable rules that limit EEAS authority to genuinely urgent phases. Because urgency is perceptual and non-verifiable, any formal crisis authority transferred to supranational institutions could be exploited through creative interpretation, used to build competencies that make future clawback costly, or normalised as a baseline expectation. Given that CFSP touches core state powers, member states prefer costly repeated renegotiations over the risk of permanent authority loss. Temporary, informal, case-by-case, empowerment is safer than standing crisis authority formally delegated to the EU supranational level. This, however, does not preclude gradual drift. Repeated empowerment episodes may produce cumulative effects – in terms of competence accretion, precedent-setting, expectations updating – that raise the floor of EU-level *de facto* authority even as member states may block formal institutionalization.

This approach complements rather than replaces the contributions made in the three strands of scholarship reviewed earlier. From the institutional and legal scholarship, it retains the insight that CFSP contains hard breaks. These brakes are what make reversibility politically cheap. From the practice and normalisation literature it takes seriously the capacity of EU actors to expand their role in situations of high demand. The framework explains

why that expansion is real but not durable. From the political will scholarship, it adopts the centrality of member state preferences, but it adds that political will is not expressed only in the decision to act or not act. It is also expressed in the decision to let an agent act for a limited period of time and then to circumscribe that agency.

Finally, the framework yields observable implications that guide the empirical part of the paper. We should see sequencing in Council documentation, with early documents giving more discretion to EU agents and later ones adding qualifiers, reporting duties or political guidance. We should see explicit references to urgency, immediacy or the need for rapid action decline over time even as the crisis continues. We should see variation in who speaks for the EU over the life of a crisis, with the HR/VP more visible early on and member state foreign ministers more visible later. Within the same crisis, we may observe mini-cycles where new escalations temporarily restore empowerment before another clawback occurs. We should also see that the same legal base is used for both the expansive and the restrictive phases, confirming that what changes is the balance of competence and control, not the formal rules. Finally, we should see member states resist or water down proposals to create standing crisis authority for the EEAS, revealing their fear of irreversible authority shifts. This makes the competence-control framework well suited to explain why the EU has crisis authority without institutionalizing it into a permanently stronger CFSP.

Research design and data

To probe the plausibility of my theoretical argument, I use a single-case study research design, leveraging process tracing to analyze how the competence-control tradeoff shapes dynamics of reversible empowerment under crisis conditions within the same institutional framework. Process tracing allows me to identify causal sequences through detailed reconstruction of events, while the temporal dimension establishes how urgency perceptions affect the competence-control tradeoffs (Beach, 2021; Bennett & Checkel, 2015).

Case selection

I employ a pathway case strategy suitable for process tracing analysis, selecting the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022–2025) as representative of major CFSP crises that generate high initial urgency. The case exhibits the standard features of EU foreign policy crises: an external security threat requiring coordinated response, initial member state convergence on the need for action, and involvement of the principal supranational actors (HR/VP, EEAS, Commission). As a pathway case (Gerring, 2007), Ukraine allows detailed observation of the theorised causal mechanism – how crisis urgency enables temporary

institutional empowerment and how declining urgency triggers member state reassertion – under conditions representative of the broader class of major EU foreign policy crises. Crucially, the protracted nature of the conflict also allows observation of what happens when urgency re-spikes within the same crisis, as new escalations and external shocks produce mini-cycles of temporary re-empowerment and subsequent claw-back.

The temporal scope (February 2022 through February 2025) captures the acute crisis phase, the transition to protracted conflict, and subsequent escalatory episodes that re-inject urgency into the system. This 36-month period provides variation on the independent variable (crisis urgency) while holding constant the policy domain (CFSP) and institutional context (post-Lisbon Treaty EU). The extended timeframe allows observation not only of the full initial causal sequence – shock, empowerment surge, urgency decline, and member state reassertion – but also of the mini-cycles of urgency re-spikes that the theoretical framework predicts. Key events driving these re-spikes include Russia's intensified bombardment of Ukrainian energy infrastructure in late 2024, the ammunition supply crisis, and the geopolitical disruption associated with the return of the Trump administration in January 2025.

Process tracing

I rely on process tracing to analyze the internal dynamics within the case against my theoretical expectations (Bennett & Checkel, 2015). The objective is to identify and trace the causal sequence of actions and actors linking crisis urgency and the changing competence-control tradeoff calculus to changes in empowerment.

The hypothesised mechanism unfolds in four stages:

1. Crisis onset: external shock raises time pressure and information demands.
2. Empowerment spike: member states perceive high urgency and temporarily empower EU supranational actors to exploit competence.
3. Stabilization: member states adapt to the crisis as routine, perceptions of urgency decline even as the objective threat may persist, and latent disagreements resurface.
4. Reassertion of control: member states use available control instruments to claw back authority, returning to high-control equilibrium or moving toward it.

Importantly, as mentioned in the theory section, this is not necessarily a linear progression. Within the same crisis, urgency can re-spike during escalations, turning points, or new phases of the conflict, producing mini-cycles of temporary re-empowerment followed by subsequent claw-backs. The extended temporal scope of this study allows direct observation of such

mini-cycles within the Ukraine case, as escalatory events in 2024 and external shocks in early 2025 re-inject urgency into a system that had already undergone the initial cycle of empowerment and retrenchment.

Data and measurement

My empirical analysis draws on three primary sources: European Council conclusions, Foreign Affairs Council statements, and speeches and public statements by EU officials (HR/VP, European Council President, Commissioners) and national officials (foreign ministers, heads of state). The analysis combines systematic content analysis with process tracing to identify patterns of empowerment and control reassertion.

For European Council conclusions, I code urgency language following the approach established in the existing literature by tracking the frequency and intensity of references to 'urgent,' 'immediate,' 'without delay,' 'crisis,' 'emergency,' or similar temporal pressure indicators. All scores are normalised per 1,000 words to enable comparison across documents of varying length. The corpus comprises 16 European Council conclusions, including the emergency session of 24 February 2022, covering the period from the beginning of the war and until February 2025.

For Foreign Affairs Council statements, I extend the analysis to capture the institutional mode of operation through a novel coding scheme distinguishing action-oriented from deliberative language. Action language includes terms indicating binding decisions: 'decided,' 'adopted,' 'approved,' 'agreed on,' and 'concluded.' Deliberative language includes terms indicating consultation or information exchange: 'discussed,' 'exchanged views,' 'considered,' 'explored,' and 'assessed.' I analyze 37 FAC statements from February 2022 through February 2025, coding each statement for both categories and calculating an action-to-deliberative ratio as the primary measure of institutional decisiveness. Ratios above 1.0 indicate that the Council emphasised decision-making over consultation, while ratios below 1.0 indicate that discussion dominated over binding decisions. All counts are normalised per 100 words. Counts were generated via a deterministic dictionary-based content analysis implemented in R. Using case-insensitive string matching, the script counts each occurrence of pre-specified terms in the substantive text segment of each document, and normalises counts by document length.

Beyond urgency and decisiveness, I code for institutional agency markers distinguishing EU-level actors (references to 'the EU,' 'the High Representative,' 'EEAS,' 'Commission') from member state actors (references to 'member states,' 'bilateral,' 'national'). This captures shifts in the locus of authority attribution. I also code for control mechanisms (unanimity requirements, reporting obligations, Council working groups) and blockage indicators (calls for unity, references to challenges or difficulties).

The quantitative coding is complemented by qualitative analysis of statement substance, the sequencing of who speaks for the EU at key moments (HR/VP versus rotating presidency versus national foreign ministers), and secondary reporting on internal Council dynamics. This dual approach allows me to trace both the observable patterns in formal statements and the underlying perceptual and political mechanisms – how urgency is framed, how disagreements emerge or are suppressed, and how member states justify control reassertion – that quantitative coding alone cannot fully capture. Together, these methods provide evidence for temporal variation in empowerment across the 36-month period. Appendix A provides the full list of analyzed documents.

Additional information regarding the empirical strategy is available in the supplementary materials.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine

The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked the most decisive instance of collective EU foreign policy action in recent history. Within hours, the European Council convened in emergency session and 'condemn[ed] in the strongest possible terms' Russia's aggression, pledging 'massive and severe consequences' (European Council 2022). Member states, faced with an existential shock to European security, aligned preferences sufficiently to empower the supranational machinery to act. Formally, the Treaties remained unchanged, unanimity was preserved, and national vetoes intact. But politically, member states chose to rely on the institutional competence concentrated in Brussels, particularly the HR/VP, the EEAS, and the Commission, to design, coordinate, and communicate a rapid response (Fiott, 2023; Håkansson, 2024; Michaels & Sus, 2024).

This case provides a hard test for my argument about reversible empowerment. If crisis urgency drives temporary institutional empowerment followed by member state reassertion as threat perceptions normalise, the Ukraine invasion should exhibit this pattern clearly. The invasion created maximum urgency – an existential security threat affecting all member states. The temporal scope of my analysis in this section (February 2022 through December 2023) captures both the acute crisis phase and the transition to protracted conflict, providing variation in the independent variable (crisis urgency) while holding constant the institutional context (post-Lisbon Treaty CFSP).

Empowerment surge in the opening crisis phase

The first days after 24 February 2022 illustrate the perceptual urgency that characterised the initial crisis phase. The March 2022 European Council

conclusions are saturated with urgency language, including phrases like ‘must immediately cease military actions,’ ‘must immediately and unconditionally withdraw all forces,’ and must ‘urgently guarantee safe passage’ to civilians. As Figure 1 below shows, analysis of European Council conclusions reveals that urgency-related language spiked sharply in March 2022 at 13.8 terms per 1,000 words. The linguistic signature of crisis shows that member states perceived the crisis as requiring immediate, coordinated response.

Within the first weeks, EU institutions delivered a comprehensive response. On 23 February, even before Russian troops crossed the border, the Council had already adopted restrictive measures including sanctions on recognition of the so-called ‘Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics’ (Portela & Kluge, 2022). Within forty-eight hours of the invasion, EU institutions had delivered a first comprehensive sanctions package targeting Russia’s financial sector, elites, and strategic industries (Council of the EU, 2022). By 28 February, the EU broke the taboo it had long held on supplying lethal weapons to a country at war.

Josep Borrell exercised unprecedented discretion in this decision, personally proposing 450 million euros for lethal weapons plus 50 million euros for non-lethal supplies within four days of the invasion. In a November 2024 interview, he acknowledged going beyond strict mandate limits: ‘My mandate is not only to implement the policy, but to contribute to shaping it. And to shape the policy, I had to go out with ideas. That’s how I proposed to use the European Peace Facility, to arm Ukraine – despite the fact that the EPF was not written for that. But before waiting for a mandate to re-shape the EPF, I said: why don’t we do that?’ (Sydorenko, 2024). He even disclosed

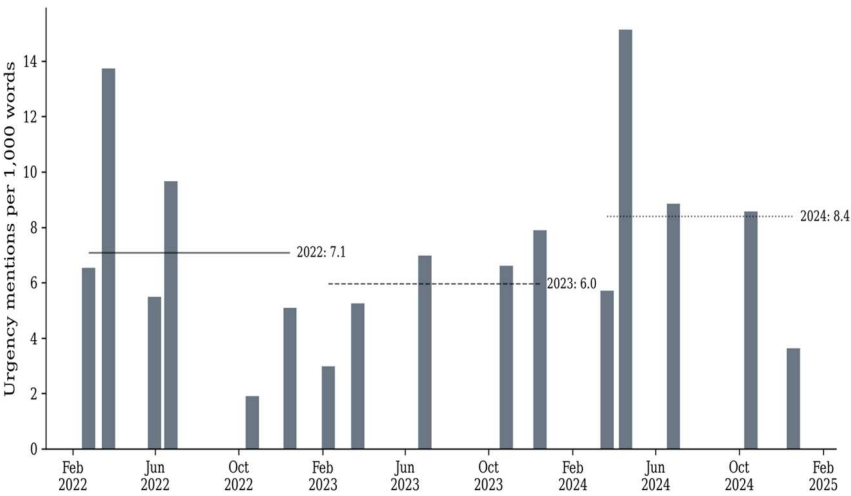


Figure 1. Urgency language in European Council conclusions on Ukraine.

proposing immediate donation of Soviet-era MiG fighter jets from EU member states in late February 2022, a proposal that took years to materialise in a different form.

The EEAS demonstrated operational speed that exceeded normal procedures. According to interviews undertaken by Håkansson (2024),

‘Outlining and developing the first proposals were handled by the EEAS in less than 48 hours after the outbreak of the war. The Member States in turn swiftly reached consensus on these proposals. Despite the formal, multi-step process involving the adoption through different working group levels, including the preparatory bodies RELEX, PSC, COREPER, as well as with the Council, there were no impediments to adopting the packages. This demonstrated the quick utilisation of the ‘new’ mechanism at that time. It also served as a notable example of the evolving mindset within the EU’ Håkansson (2024, p. 11).

This 48-hour turnaround represented significant institutional discretion, with the EEAS pivoting from cautious pre-financing procedures to rapid direct implementation without seeking explicit, formal Council authorization for procedural changes. The EEAS coordinated nine sanctions packages in 2022 alone.

The Commission seized unprecedented leadership in sanctions design. As Lepeu (2025) has shown, ‘The core innovation has been the European Commission emerging as the main architect of those post-invasion sanctions regimes at the expense of the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Member States.’ Commission President von der Leyen’s office directly supervised DG FISMA drafting of sectoral economic measures, relegating the High Representative and Council working groups to supporting roles. As Lepeu states, the ‘Member States ambassadors, the EU High Representative, and the Council working groups were kept at arm’s length during the drafting of the core element of the first three sanctions packages.’

The shift toward empowered EU-level action is evident not only in the substance of decisions but in the mode of institutional operation itself. A systematic content analysis of Foreign Affairs Council statements from the invasion through February 2025 reveals a pattern in how the Council framed its own activities. During the acute crisis phase (February–May 2022), FAC statements emphasised action-oriented language such as ‘decided,’ ‘adopted,’ ‘approved,’ and ‘agreed on’ at substantially higher rates than deliberative language like ‘discussed,’ ‘exchanged views,’ or ‘considered.’ As visible in Figure 2, the ratio of action to deliberative language averaged 2.00 in this period, meaning that FAC statements referenced binding decisions twice as frequently as consultative discussions. This ratio provides a direct measure of institutional decisiveness: values above 1.0 indicate that the Council operated primarily in decision-making mode, while values below 1.0 indicate that discussion dominated over decision.

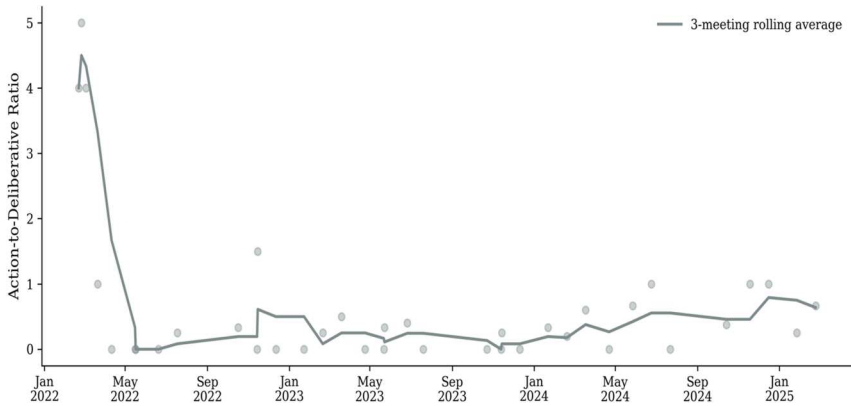


Figure 2. Decisiveness in FAC statements: ratio of action to deliberative language (3-meetings rolling averages).

The 21 February 2022 FAC meeting exemplifies this pattern, with an action-to-deliberative ratio of 4.0, among the highest in the entire period analyzed (the extraordinary 25 February meeting reached 5.0). The statement emphasised that ‘The Council decided on a series of measures,’ ‘adopted a decision to provide €1.2 billion,’ and ‘decided to provide support’ under the European Peace Facility. The February 25 extraordinary meeting, convened within hours of the invasion, maintained action-oriented framing: ‘Ministers proceeded to the adoption’ and ‘Ministers agreed to intensify diplomatic efforts.’ This linguistic pattern reflects the reduced control constraints that member states accepted during the acute phase. When the marginal value of EU-level competence spiked due to crisis urgency, member states tolerated – and even emphasised in official statements – the Council’s role as decision-maker rather than deliberative forum.

February-June 2022 produced nine sanctions packages, six EPF tranches, Strategic Compass adoption, EUMAM launch, and candidate status granted just four months after Ukraine’s application, more major foreign policy decisions than typical years. As Borrell (2022) recognised ‘In the last days, we have acted at the speed of light and broken several taboos. We have arguably advanced more in one week than we have over decades of debates. All this proves that when crisis hits, Europeans do come together.’

Urgency decline and the slowdown of decision-making

However, by late-2022, the perceptual intensity of the crisis began to shift. European elites increasingly characterised the Ukraine situation as a sustained commitment rather than an immediate crisis. Borrell’s rhetoric evolved from his 24 February 2022 characterization – ‘These are among the

darkest hours for Europe since World War II' to his February 2023 anniversary speech emphasizing, as the Council has done previously, that 'We will continue to stand by Ukraine for as long as it takes' (Council, 2023). As early as May 2022, Scholz stated at Davos that 'we cannot allow Putin to win this war,' signalling Berlin's commitment to a protracted effort. (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

Quantitative comparison of European Council conclusions confirms this perceptual shift, as visible in Figure 1. Urgency language declined measurably from 2022 to 2023, with the average frequency dropping from 7.1 urgency terms per 1,000 words in 2022–6.0 terms per 1,000 words in 2023 – a 16% decline. The temporal pattern shows urgency spiking at 13.8 terms per 1,000 words in March 2022, then declining through the stabilization phase, before settling into a consistently lower range throughout 2023. However, the decline was not permanent. In 2024, urgency language rebounded to an average of 8.4 per 1,000 words – exceeding the 2022 average – driven by Russia's intensified targeting of civilian energy infrastructure, the ammunition supply crisis, and the April 2024 special European Council session on Ukraine. The April 2024 EUCO, convened as an emergency session, reached 15.2 urgency terms per 1,000 words, the highest single score in the entire period analyzed. This pattern is consistent with what my framework describes as mini-cycles because new escalatory events can temporarily re-inject urgency into a system that has already undergone the initial crisis-normalisation sequence.

Importantly, this decline is perceptual rather than objective. The war's material severity arguably increased through 2023 with wider mobilization and higher casualties. But European elite perceptions are shaped by public narratives, specific and highly impactful evolutions on the front, and not the general dynamic per se. As Genini (2025, p. 23) observes: 'The intensity of the EU's response to the war in Ukraine has gradually slowed down. Most initiatives were taken during the early phase of the conflict, when the shock of the war fostered unity over fragmentation.'

This perceptual shift manifested not only in slower decision tempo after the early months of 2022 but in a change to the Council's mode of operation, as visible in Figure 2. The action-to-deliberative language ratio in FAC statements collapsed from 2.00 in the acute phase to 0.35 in the stabilization phase (June–December 2022) and reached its nadir at 0.14 throughout 2023, as visible in Figure 3. By the post-acute phase, FAC statements referenced discussions, exchanges of views, and assessments far more frequently than they referenced decisions or adoptions. The 11 December 2023 FAC statement is illustrative: ministers 'discussed the Russian aggression,' 'were joined by' the Ukrainian Foreign Minister and received briefings on developments. The statement mentions that 'the High Representative confirmed' and 'informed the Council' about ongoing work, emphasizing informational

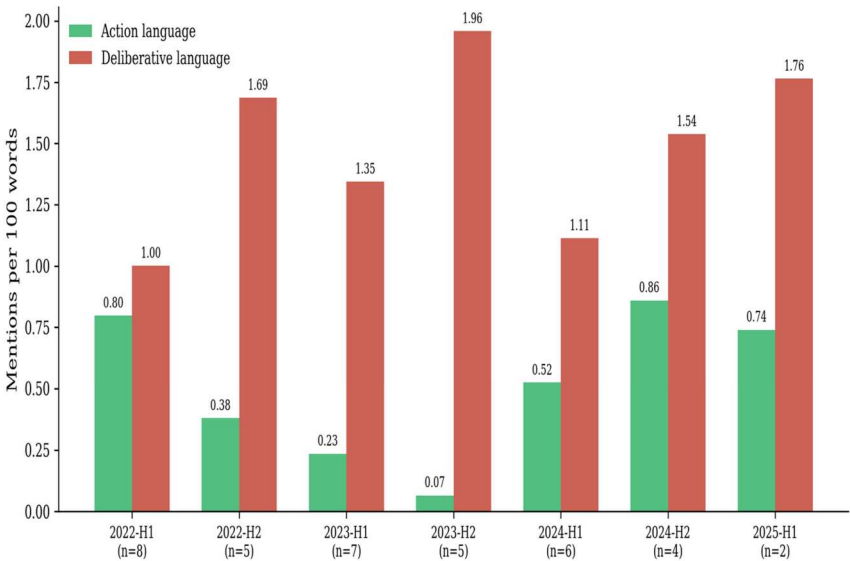


Figure 3. Action vs deliberative language by half-year.

exchange over decision-making authority. Notably, however, the ratio partially recovered in 2024, rising to 0.51 as the FAC returned to adopting sanctions packages (the 15th and 16th rounds) and new restrictive measures. The December 2024 FAC statement, for instance, records that ‘the Council adopted the 15th package’ and ‘adopted a first set of listings under the regime on Russia’s destabilising activities’ – action-oriented formulations absent from most 2023 statements. Yet this partial recovery remained well below the acute-phase peak, consistent with what we would expect under reversed empowerment. Renewed urgency can push decisiveness upward, but not to the levels observed during the initial crisis window, because the scope conditions that enabled acute-phase empowerment – particularly the procedural nature of the delegated tasks – no longer hold to the same degree as the focus shifted to capacity building and re-distributive issues related to financial support for Ukraine.

This is important because it does not simply signal reduced institutional activity overall, but rather a shift in how the Council characterises its own role. The same legal framework and formal procedures that enabled rapid sanctions packages and EPF mobilization in early 2022 later produced statements emphasizing discussion and consultation. This supports the competence-control framework’s prediction that member states use available control instruments to adjust empowerment without changing formal rules. What shifted was not the Council’s legal capacity but member states’ willingness to accept supranational decisiveness and the need to rely on supranational competence.

The operational consequences of urgency decline are relevant here. The decision-making tempo collapsed, as 2022 produced nine sanctions packages, but 2023 produced only three (European Commission, 2025). The eighth EPF tranche, proposed in May 2023, remained blocked for over 18 months by Hungarian veto. The Ukraine Assistance Fund required nine months of negotiation before approval in February 2024. Yet here too, the 2024 mini-cycle is visible as the pace of sanctions adoption partially recovered, with four additional packages adopted between February 2024 and February 2025 (the 13th through 16th). The February 2025 FAC statement records the adoption of the 16th package alongside a ‘new initiative by the High Representative on enhanced EU military support to Ukraine in 2025.’ This recovery, while meaningful, remained bounded, with four sanctions packages in twelve months, compared to nine in nine months during the acute phase.

Member state reassertion and bilateral activism

As urgency declined, member states reclaimed control through bilateral activism. The clearest evidence emerged on 16 June 2022, when German Chancellor Scholz, French President Macron, and Italian Prime Minister Draghi traveled together by overnight train to Kyiv, the EU’s three largest economies coordinating outside EEAS structures. Bloomberg characterised it as ‘the highest-profile delegation’ of European leaders, but there was no evidence of Borrell or EEAS involvement in organizing the visit. Macron stated: ‘This is a message of European unity.’ Yet this unity was demonstrated through coordinated national leadership rather than EU institutional representation or continued empowerment of authority to EU supranational representatives (Bloomberg, 2022).

European Council conclusions analysis reveals this member state reassertion linguistically, as visible in Figure 4. References to ‘Member States’ as grammatical subjects with active verbs (will, shall, are) indicating member state agency were largely absent from early 2022 conclusions (averaging 0.7 per 1,000 words across the acute phase, with zero references in the February and March 2022 sessions). However, 2023 conclusions show a marked increase in such references, rising to an average of 2.7 per 1,000 words, with the October 2023 conclusions reaching the highest density at 4.7 per 1,000 words. This elevated level of member state prominence persisted into 2024 (average 2.6 per 1,000 words), even as urgency language rebounded to 2022 levels. The April 2024 special EUCO conclusions, for instance, combine high urgency language (15.2 per 1,000 words) with explicit member state agency references (5.1 per 1,000 words) – a combination never observed in the initial acute phase, when urgency was high, but member state linguistic prominence was essentially zero. This dissociation between

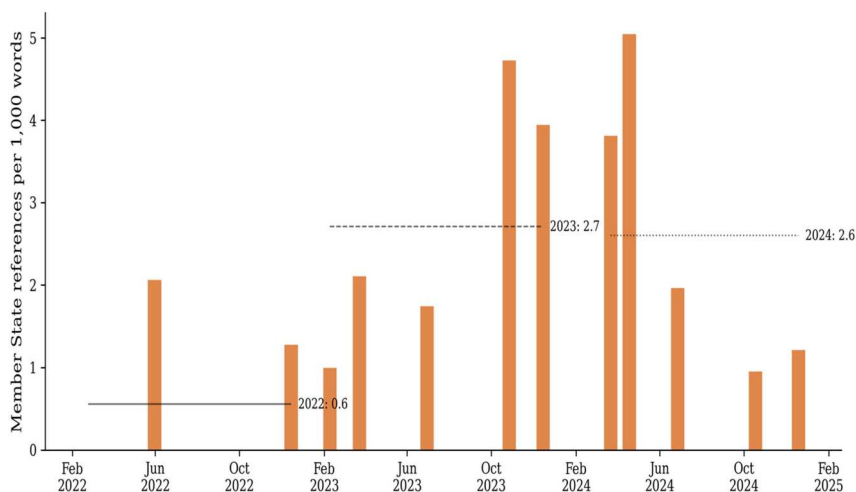


Figure 4. Member states prominence in European Council conclusions on Ukraine.

urgency and member state control reflects the shift from procedural to distributive tasks as the main concerns were no longer related to coordination and more about capacity building and providing the financial and material resources necessary to Ukraine. This means that high urgency no longer triggers the same degree of empowerment because highly re-distributive issues (military assistance, financial aid) become central in the member state consideration of the competence-control tradeoff (see the third scope condition of the theoretical framework).

Member states increasingly provided military support through bilateral channels rather than the European Peace Facility. By March 2024, bilateral commitments reached 20 billion euros for 2024 alone, compared to 5 billion euros in the Ukraine Assistance Fund (Karjalainen, 2024). A December 2023 *European Pravda* report explained: ‘Member states can provide aid under bilateral agreements, not EU structures such as the European Peace Fund’ (European Pravda, 2023) Poland provided over 250 T-72 tanks bilaterally, Germany delivered IRIS-T systems through domestic processes, France announced SCALP missiles without EU coordination. This represents functional clawback – the member states maintained control rather than channeling through centralised EU mechanisms.

Veto power also reasserted dramatically. Hungary exercised constructive abstention on initial EPF decisions in February 2022, but by May 2023 actively blocked the eighth EPF tranche for over a year, using unanimity requirements where one member state can veto decisions (Müller & Slominski, 2025). The March 2024 Ukraine Assistance Fund compromise required buying out the Hungarian veto with 10.2 billion euros from cohesion funds (European Commission, 2023).

The reassertion of member state control also appeared in the procedural texture of FAC statements themselves, as visible in [Figure 5](#). Analysis of EU-level agency language – references to ‘the EU will,’ ‘EU adopted,’ ‘the Commission will’ – shows fluctuation across the period. The acute phase averaged 0.59 EU agency mentions per 100 words, declining to 0.53 during stabilization and then rising to 0.83 in the post-acute phase of 2023 before settling back to 0.58 in 2024–2025. This non-linear trajectory reflects competing dynamics: while EU-institutional framing remained present throughout, its substantive weight shifted. The high-water mark came in early 2022, when FAC statements attributed action directly to EU institutions. The transition to the new HR/VP Kaja Kallas in late 2024 reinvigorated some EU-level framing – the December 2024 FAC statement attributes action to ‘the Council’ and ‘the High Representative’ more directly than most 2023 statements – but this occurred within an institutional landscape where member states retained the control built during the stabilization and post-acute phases.

This pattern complements the evidence on bilateral activism and veto assertion documented above. While member states increasingly channelled military support through national mechanisms and blocked EPF decisions through unanimity requirements, they simultaneously reclaimed discursive control over how EU foreign policy activity was characterised. The shift from ‘the EU decided’ to ‘ministers discussed’ can be interpreted as an informal but consequential form of de-empowerment. Member states did not need to amend the Treaties or formally revoke mandates; they simply reasserted control over the framing and tempo of Council deliberations. This is precisely the reversibility that the framework predicts: when crisis urgency declines and distributional conflicts resurface, member states have multiple instruments – procedural, financial, and discursive – to claw back authority

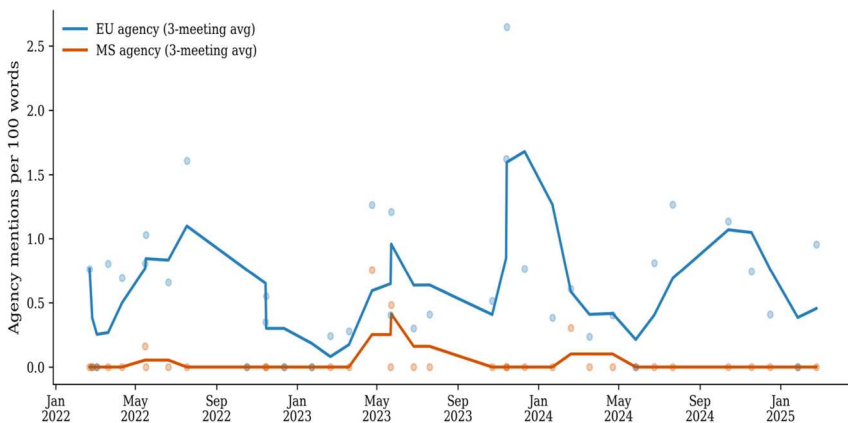


Figure 5. EU vs member state agency in FAC statements.

that was temporarily delegated to EU-level actors. The decline in the FAC's action-to-deliberative ratio from 2.00 to 0.14 captures this clawback in its most direct form. The subsequent partial recovery to 0.51 in 2024 demonstrates that these instruments are not permanent locks. This recovery shows that when urgency re-spikes, some decisiveness returns, but the recovery is bounded by the control infrastructure member states have already built. The January 2025 FAC, meeting after Trump's inauguration, records that ministers 'agreed on renewing the EU restrictive measures' while Kallas stressed that 'Ukraine needs more' and that 'more military support for Ukraine is very important for our own security as well.' The urgency framing returned; the full scope of acute-phase empowerment did not.

Urgency as the driving factor

In a retrospective interview with Sergiy Sydorenko (2024), Borrell notes that in February 2022 'I had to go out with ideas' due to the shock of the invasion and admits that 'to continue using the European Peace Facility, we need unanimity. I cannot assure you that unanimity will exist,' adding that decisions 'often took too long because some member states had to be convinced.'

Genini (2025) also confirms the urgency-empowerment link. He finds that 'in severe situations and crises, such as the Russian war on Ukraine, which represents an all-encompassing and symmetrical crisis for the Union, we also observe greater coordination between EU institutions and the Member States. The EU institutions have greater influence over the Member States in these circumstances than during 'normal' policy-making.'

This temporal alignment supports the causal mechanism I outline in the theoretical framework. The high urgency (February – May 2022) enabled higher levels of informal empowerment to the EU's supranational institutions, affording them institutional discretion and nine rapid decisions, by re-valuing the value of EU-level competence and thus shifting the competence-control tradeoff calculus. Declining urgency (June 2022 – December 2023) produced bilateral activism, Hungarian blockage, and decision-making slowdown. The 2024–2025 extension strengthens this finding by providing a natural test of the mini-cycle prediction. When new escalatory shocks re-injected urgency – Russia's intensified energy infrastructure attacks, the ammunition crisis, and the geopolitical uncertainty following Trump's return to the White House – the FAC's action-to-deliberative ratio rose significantly from 0.14 to 0.51 (Mann–Whitney $p = 0.015$), and EUCO urgency language returned to 2022 levels. Yet this re-empowerment was bounded, as the ratio settled at roughly one quarter of its acute-phase peak, and member state prominence in EUCO conclusions remained at 2023 levels (2.6 per 1,000 words) even as urgency rebounded. The February 2025 FAC, convened on the

third anniversary of the invasion, adopted the 16th sanctions package and recorded a ‘new initiative by the High Representative on enhanced EU military support’ – but framed both within a context where member states retained the bilateral channels, veto instruments, and procedural controls established during 2022–2023. Urgency creates conditions for empowerment by raising the marginal value of EU-level competence while reducing deliberation time. But the degree of empowerment achievable during a mini-cycle is constrained by the control infrastructure that member states built during earlier phases of the same crisis. The ratchet moves up from the post-acute floor but does not reach the initial spike.

In sum, the Ukraine case provides support for the presence of reversible empowerment as the product of competence-control trade-offs. Supranational EU actors enjoyed larger degrees of delegated authority and exercised expanded discretion during the high-urgency opening phase. However, as crisis urgency language declined 16% from 2022 to 2023, member states reasserted control through bilateral activism, vetoes, and procedural resistance. The linguistic evidence from Council conclusions, in terms of declining urgency language and increasing member state agency references, traces this dynamic accurately. As Borrell acknowledged: ‘We are who we are. The EU is a group of 27 member states with different views that need unanimity’ (Sydorenko, 2024). Crisis urgency can produce temporary institutional empowerment, but that empowerment remains vulnerable to reassertion through existing veto mechanisms once urgency declines.

Conclusions

The analysis of the EU’s responses to the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates that the Union’s foreign policy machinery is neither institutionally paralyzed nor necessarily steadily integrating. Rather, it operates through a pattern of *reversible empowerment*, in which member states adjust the balance between competence and control according to the perceived benefits and risks of supranational agency. When crises produce acute external pressure and align member-state preferences, as in the first months of the Ukraine war, operational discretion granted to EU-level actors expands rapidly. The HR/VP, the EEAS, and the Commission become essential repositories of competence, capable of coordinating sanctions, mobilizing instruments, and projecting a unified diplomatic voice. Yet as soon as crises normalise and political or normative divisions resurface, the same member states retract the authority they temporarily granted. The 2022–2025 temporal scope of this study further shows that within protracted crises, this cycle does not simply run once. New escalatory events and external shocks can re-inject urgency and partially reactivate empowerment, but changing scope conditions may limit the extent of re-delegation. More precisely,

when the agenda shifts from procedural coordination to distributive burden-sharing, member states may retain tighter control regardless of urgency levels.

In this paper, I have extended the competence-control framework from its original application to institutional governance arrangements to the domain of operational delegation and policy implementation. While Abbott *et al.* (2020) focus on how formal authority is allocated between governors and intermediaries, I have shown that the competence-control tradeoff operates continuously within stable institutional structures. Member states adjust how tightly they constrain EU actors through informal mechanisms – mandate interpretation, procedural oversight, veto exercise, and discursive framing – producing temporal variation in effective delegation, which I call ‘reversible empowerment’ – without formal institutional change. I claim that this extension matters because it explains a broader range of governance dynamics than institutional design theories alone can capture.

Empirically, the study contributes to understanding how the EU can act ‘geopolitically’ without becoming a geopolitical actor in the structural, institutional sense. The Ukraine response showed that under the right conditions, the EU can generate coherence, speed, and global influence rivaling that of traditional great powers. However, the EU’s foreign policy system can surge but not fully stabilise. The extended analysis through 2025 sharpens this point. Even when new crises within the same protracted conflict re-inject urgency, the system’s response is attenuated. The 2024 urgency re-spike produced a partial recovery in FAC decisiveness and renewed sanctions activity, but the degree of empowerment remained well below the initial February 2022 levels, while member state control indicators stayed elevated. The capacity for reversible empowerment is thus both an asset – allowing rapid activation without treaty change – and a limitation, ensuring that operational autonomy granted to the supranational level remains temporary and, in protracted crises, progressively bounded.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the single-case design provides detailed evidence for the theorised mechanism but limits generalizability. While the Ukraine case was selected as representative of major CFSP crises, other crises with different configurations of preference heterogeneity, distributional stakes, or geopolitical alignment may produce distinct empowerment-control trajectories. Comparative analysis across multiple crises would help establish how far the pattern extends. Second, the analysis treats CFSP responses as a unified domain, but different sub-policy areas within the same crisis – sanctions coordination, CSDP missions, financial assistance – may exhibit distinct dynamics, as the partial evidence on the shift from procedural to distributive tasks suggests. Future research could disaggregate the empowerment-control cycle by sub-policy area (Krotz *et al.*,

2025). Third, the observed peaks and troughs in empowerment may be influenced by intervening factors beyond crisis urgency, including changes in EU-internal political dynamics, leadership transitions, or developments in the broader international environment. The content analysis I employed here captures linguistic patterns but cannot fully isolate the urgency mechanism from these confounding influences.

Theoretically, the findings invite a broader reconsideration of informal and formal delegation under uncertainty. The EU exemplifies a wider governance dilemma in multilevel systems related to modes of harnessing competence without forfeiting control. Crises sharpen that dilemma rather than resolve it. They momentarily tip the balance toward competence, but as urgency declines, control inevitably reasserts itself. In protracted crises, this produces not a single cycle but a series of bounded oscillations as each new urgency spike reactivates empowerment, how much will depend on the underlying scope conditions. Understanding EU foreign policy, therefore, requires not only searching for an institutional fix but also recognizing that reversibility may be the system's equilibrium, not its failure.

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