REDEMOS

RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD

REDEMOS Working Paper D7.4

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17902290

EU understandings of its image as a norms supporter and their relevance for EU policies

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December 2025

Funded by the European Union

The REDEMOS project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101061738. The Associated Partner University of Surrey has received funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee under grant number 10040721. The Associated Partner University of St. Gallen has received funding from the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, UKRI and SERI. Neither the European Union nor UKRI or SERI can be held responsible for them.

Executive Summary

Policy is formulated based on what decision-makers believe, not necessarily on what is. The European Union's (EU) foreign policy is no exception. Yet we know little about how EU officials and institutional representatives perceive how the EU and its foreign policy are viewed by interlocutors abroad, or how these meta-perceptions shape their preferences for diplomatic instruments. This article revives earlier research from the 1950s and 1970s on external perceptions to theorize foreign policy-making as a reflexive process shaped by perceived reputational standing, using updated methodological tools. We modernize Q-methodology and combine it with original survey data to capture how EU representatives construe the Union's external image and how these perceptions inform their diplomatic preferences. Focusing on democracy promotion in the EU's Eastern Neighborhood, our analysis shows that respondents who believed the EU was seen as lacking strategic coherence or normative authority were less supportive of assertive or confrontational democracy promotion instruments. These findings highlight a reflexive, perception-driven dynamic in foreign policy preference formation, linking how the EU is viewed abroad to how its representatives understand legitimate and effective diplomacy.

Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **2**

TABLE OF CONTENTS **3**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS **4**

LIST OF TABLES **5**

LIST OF FIGURES **6**

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS **7**

INTRODUCTION **8**

THEORY. EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES FOR DIPLOMATIC PRACTICES **10**

METHODOLOGY. SURVEY AND KEY VARIABLES **11**

Key independent variable, Perception of EU external images *12*

Dependent variable. Preferred democracy promotion instruments *16*

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS. THE EFFECT OF META-PERCEPTIONS ON PREFERENCES FOR DEMOCRACY PROMOTION **17**

CONCLUSION **19**

APPENDICES **21**

A. Distribution of respondents 21

B. Key independent variable: Perception of EU external images 22

C. Key independent variable: Clustering procedure and validation 26

D. Dependent variable: Practices of Democracy Promotion 28

E. Regression robustness check (listwise deletion) 30

REFERENCES **31**

Acknowledgments

Financial support from the European Union's Horizon research and innovation program under grant agreement No. 101061738 is gratefully acknowledged. For more information, please visit https://redemos.eu. We warmly thank our REDEMOS colleagues as well as the participants of the annual meetings of the ECPR Joint Sessions and General Conferences in 2024 and 2025, the European Communities Studies Association Switzerland in 2023 and 2024, the Swiss Political Science Association in 2024 and 2025, the biannual conference of the Swiss Network of International Studies in 2023, and the research colloquium of the political science department at the University of St.Gallen for their insightful feedback and suggestions. For detailed comments, we thank Arusyak Aleksanyan, James Davis, Timon Forster, Alexander Maltsev, Maryna Rabinovych, Dominik Rehbaum, Frank Schimmelfennig, Karina Shyrokykh, Hannah Smidt, and Natasha Wunsch. Our sincere thanks go to Tomohiro Bisang, Sofiia Klymenko, Maja Mandic, and Mathilde Morin for their excellent research assistance, and to Danyl Denysenko and Ragnar Weilandt for their valuable contributions to earlier versions of this study. We also gratefully acknowledge the generous support of Othmar Karas (former Vice-President of the European Parliament), as well as Alberto Domini and Ilona von Bethlenfalvy from the European Commission. Finally, we would like to thank the Athens Technology Center, particularly Adam Doulgerakis and Manolis Paterakis, for accommodating our special requests regarding the survey application, and Marina Braem for her outstanding work on the Q-sorting explainer video that was embedded in our EU practitioners survey https://youtu.be/P2NmxqHpt8g.

List of Tables

Table 1: Top 20 Statements Differentiating Meta-Perception Clusters 15
Table 2: Diplomatic practices of democracy support 17
Table 3: Regression results (imputed data set) 18
Table A: Professional and sociodemographic background 21
Table B Grouped statements on EU external images 22
Table C1: Evaluation of clustering methods 26
Table C2: Confusion matrix of the two-class system random forest 27
Table C3: Cluster comparisons across demographic variables 27
Table E1: Regression results (listwise deletion) 30
Table E2: Robustness of Cluster 2-effect across imputed datasets 30

List of Figures

Figure 1: Results of the final spectral method use 14
Figure C1: Results of the final spectral method used to cluster traits 26
Figure C2: Top 20 Most important statements for cluster prediction 27

List of acronyms and abbreviations

DV	Dependent Variable
ENCs	Eastern Neighborhood countries
EP	European Parliament
EU	European Union
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IR	International Relations
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin criterium
MICE	Multivariate Imputation by Chained Equations
OLS	Ordinary Least Squares
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
PMM	Predictive Mean Matching
UMAP	Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has long envisioned itself as a global champion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, projecting an identity of 'normative power' that underpins its foreign policy and international engagement (Manners, 2002). This self-image is reflected in key policy documents, such as the European Democracy Action Plan in 2020 (European Commission, 2020) and the Defence of Democracy package in 2023 (European Commission, 2023), both framing the EU as a 'force for good' and a committed promoter of democracy worldwide. Central to this vision is the EU's aspiration to be viewed as a legitimate and credible actor, with influence largely rooted in soft power and the appeal of its values (Nye, 2004).

Yet, historical examples highlight a disconnect between the self-perception and external image: In Tunisia, post-2011 EU democracy promotion was criticized for neglecting local visions and priorities (Pace, 2014), while in the Eastern Neighborhood, elements of the EU's agenda have been dismissed by local elites as neo-imperialist (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2013). Empirical studies support that the EU's positive self-image is not necessarily shared by political elites outside Europe (Chaban & Holland, 2007; Elgström et al., 2007; Scheipers & Sicurelli, 2007; Schlipphak & Treib, 2017, p. 590). This disconnect raises a critical question: How do EU officials and representatives from key institutions ('EU representatives') perceive the EU's external image, and how do these perceptions influence the democracy promotion instruments they prefer to be used towards partner countries?

To address this question, we take the empirical literature on how the EU is perceived abroad as our starting point and explore how EU representatives' own views of the EU's external image might shape their democracy promotion preferences. Research depicts a complex, often critical picture: While the EU is sometimes portrayed as a normative power, many political elites outside the Union see its actions as self-interested, inconsistent, or lacking political influence (Larsen, 2014). Recent scholarship has begun moving from largely descriptive accounts toward more explanatory analyses of EU external perceptions (e.g., Lucarelli, 2014), but much of this work still focuses on how such perceptions are formed rather than on their policy consequences.[1] Yet persistent foreign skepticism can undermine EU initiatives, leading to resistance, strained relations, and limited policy uptake, and thus weaken the Union's ability to promote and defend democracy (Smith, 2011; 2014, p. 209). It is reasonable to assume that EU representatives are aware of these perceptions and may adapt their policy actions to maximize influence. In line with research on organizational learning and internal socialization in international institutions (Checkel, 2005), such adaptations may reflect how practitioners internalize feedback from external audiences and translate it into behavioral adjustment within the EU's diplomatic apparatus.

We theorize how EU representatives' perceptions of the EU's external image shape their preferred diplomatic instruments, reviving early International Relations (IR) research on the role of perceptions and beliefs in foreign policy decision-making (Jervis, 1976). Specifically, we examine how EU officials' views of how the Union is perceived abroad inform the types of instruments they consider appropriate for democracy promotion, treating these preferences as indicators of broader orientations toward diplomatic action. We conceptualize these views as meta-perceptions, that is, second-order perceptions of how one is seen by others (Mead, 1934), and use this as an analytical lens to assess how perceived reputational standing influences foreign policy preferences.

Pioneers of cognitive and psychological approaches in IR argued that foreign policy is shaped not only by objective conditions but also by subjective interpretations of international realities, calling for attention to decision-makers' psychological and operational environments. These "apperceived environmental factors" (Sprout & Sprout, 1957, p. 310) or, more simply, "images" (Boulding, 1959, p. 120; Holsti, 1970; Jervis, 1976) shape expectations about threats, opportunities, and legitimacy, and often diverge from how others actually view the external actor in question. Foreign policy is thus guided not merely by material interests or strategic

[1] Notable exceptions in the fields of climate and environmental diplomacy show that perceived external expectations can constrain EU effectiveness (Torney, 2014) or undermine policy coherence when internal and external images diverge (Delreux & Keukeleire, 2021).

goals, but also by what decision-makers believe to be true about the international environment and, crucially, about themselves.

This view is supported by research showing that foreign policy is enacted through the everyday work of practitioners, embedded in shared routines, professional contexts, and socially meaningful interactions (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Neumann, 2012; Sending et al., 2015). We build on these insights to argue that foreign policy preferences are shaped by practitioners' perceptions and meta-perceptions of how their policy actions are viewed by others.

Empirically, we focus on EU practitioners engaged in the Eastern Neighborhood, including officials from key EU institutions, members of the European Parliament involved in interparliamentary delegations for the region, and staff of EU civilian and military missions in partner countries. The Eastern Neighborhood combines a generally favorable view of the EU —with no colonial history and elites who often regard it as a desirable partner in modernization, reform, and integration— with persistent skepticism about its normative consistency, political asymmetry, and decision-making speed (Bengtsson & Elgström, 2012, p. 99; Larsen, 2014, p. 904). This mix of receptiveness and critique exposes EU representatives to both recognition and challenge, making it a revealing setting for examining how perceptions of the EU's image shape preferences for democracy promotion.

We use a modified version of Q-methodology, combined with an original quantitative survey, to identify clusters of shared meta-perceptions among EU representatives and examine how these relate to their preferred democracy promotion tools. Originally developed in psychology to systematically map the structure of subjectivity (Brewer, 2000; Brown, 2008; Stephenson, 1935), Q-methodology is uniquely suited to capturing and contrasting individuals' viewpoints, revealing patterns of agreement and divergence that may underpin common practices. By focusing on the foreign policy tools EU representatives prefer for promoting democracy, we shift the analytical lens from high-level policy formulation to the ground-level perspectives of those directly engaged in advancing and supporting democracy promotion, including diplomats, public servants, and parliamentarians involved in external relations (cf. Cooper et al., 2013, p. 2). This enables us to ask whether shared meta-perceptions of the EU's external image contribute to the emergence of "communities of practice" (Bicchi, 2018, pp. 9–10) in which actors converge around similar understandings of what instruments are appropriate and legitimate for democracy promotion.

Our analysis supports the core claim that EU officials' policy preferences are shaped not only by strategic goals or normative ideals, but also by how they believe the EU is perceived externally. These meta-perceptions influence which democracy promotion instruments they consider legitimate and effective. Specifically, officials who perceive the EU as lacking in strategic coherence or normative legitimacy tend to express less support for confrontational democracy promotion instruments. Applied to foreign policy-making, our findings suggest that meta-perceptions can have a constraining effect on foreign policy preferences. The paper thus makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it reintroduces the concept of meta-perceptions into the study of foreign policy, showing how they operate as a reflexive mechanism in preference formation. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of Q-methodology, combined with survey data, for systematically mapping subjective understandings among policy practitioners. Empirically, it provides rare evidence from EU representatives themselves, offering a practitioner-level perspective on the link between perceived external image and democracy promotion preferences.

The rest of the article proceeds as follows: we first develop the theoretical framework and hypotheses before we present our data and methodology, with a particular focus on the construction of our key interdependent and the outcome variables. The empirical analysis follows, leading to a discussion of implications for both EU foreign policy and the broader IR literature on perceptions and policy preferences. Overall, this paper adds the perceptual and practical perspectives of "those agents involved in the quotidian unfolding" (Pouliot, 2010, p. 1) of democracy promotion. It advances our understanding of how the EU's foreign policy is shaped not only by external realities but by practitioners' beliefs about how the Union is seen, adding a missing perceptual dimension to debates on the EU's ability to promote democracy in a contested international environment.

Theory. External perceptions and preferences for diplomatic practices

Much of the study of international relations and foreign policy has privileged system-level explanations, emphasizing power distributions, security dilemmas, and economic interdependence. Yet beneath these structural patterns lies the agency of individual decision-makers, whose preferences and choices can redirect the course of policy. Research on leaders and elites shows that formative experiences, professional trajectories, and embeddedness in institutional and social networks shape the interpretive frames they bring to foreign policy (Krcmaric et al., 2020; Saunders, 2022). Like other human actors (Asch, 1952), those engaged in foreign policy tend to act "based less on their objective circumstances than their perceptions of those circumstances" (Renshon, 2008, p. 511), a premise that underpins our focus on EU representatives' meta-perceptions of the Union's external image.

This focus on subjective understandings resonates with mid-20th-century cognitive process models, which stress that foreign policy choices are shaped more by how actors interpret and process information than by any 'objective' reality (Hermann, 1967; Holsti, 1962). Building on these classics, Shapiro (1973) argues that it is individual perceptions, rather than the actual geopolitical environment, that drive behavior. Similarly, Holsti's (1970) concept of "national role conceptions" captures decision-makers' understandings of their nation's role in the international system, including their beliefs about its responsibilities, commitments, and obligations. These role conceptions shape not only how states see themselves but also how they engage with others. As early IR scholars such as Boulding (1959, p. 120) emphasize, foreign policy is guided less by the 'objective' facts of a situation than by decision-makers' own "image" of it. This dynamic is not confined to heads of state or high-profile leaders. As Lang et al. (2024) show, even mid-level practitioners in highly institutionalized settings, such as mission chiefs at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), can imprint policy decisions with their own beliefs and career-shaped perspectives.

Perceptions of how the EU is viewed externally are therefore likely to influence what officials consider appropriate diplomatic conduct. We argue that these meta-perceptions shape preferences not simply in terms of policy content, but in the mode of engagement EU representatives find legitimate and effective. This argument builds on research on intra-organizational learning and belief adaptation in international institutions, which shows that practitioners internalize external expectations and translate them into behavioral repertoires (Checkel, 2005). It further aligns with studies highlighting how reputational and audience-based constraints shape institutional behavior under conditions of uncertainty and visibility (Nelson, 2014). Together, these perspectives suggest that international organizations are not merely strategic actors but reflective entities, whose members adjust and enact policy choices in light of perceived external evaluations.

Such meta-perceptions do not remain at the level of abstract belief but inform judgments about what kinds of actions are legitimate and effective in specific contexts. In diplomacy, such judgments translate into preferences for certain policy instruments over others. Officials who believe that their organization enjoys credibility and normative authority abroad may view assertive or value-driven tools as appropriate, whereas those who perceive reputational weaknesses may favor more cautious or cooperative approaches. In this sense, meta-perceptions (i.e. beliefs about how one is viewed by others) serve as a cognitive bridge between self-understandings and concrete policy preferences. When shared, these perceptions can structure the work of what Bicchi (2018) terms "communities of practice." As practice theorists emphasize, diplomacy is a socially enacted practice, sustained by shared understandings of appropriateness, credibility, and legitimacy Pouliot (2016). We therefore expect that shared meta-perceptions among EU representatives systematically influence their preferences for democracy-promotion instruments, as reflected in our first hypothesis:

H1: EU officials adjust which democracy promotion instruments they prefer according to how they perceive the EU to be perceived by their interlocutors in partner countries.

How do perceptions translate into concrete preferences for diplomatic instruments? We argue two mechanisms can plausibly link meta-perceptions to preferences for specific types of democracy promotion instruments. The first, reputation management, concerns how EU officials seek to preserve or enhance the Union's standing in the eyes of external audiences (e.g., Dafoe et al. 2014). The second, interaction

management, centers on the short-term costs of provoking resistance from a specific interlocutor in a specific interaction (e.g., Jönsson & Hall, 2005). These two mechanisms represent distinct causal pathways through which meta-perceptions of the EU's external image can shape diplomatic choices. While the first emphasizes the cumulative effects of credibility and trust over time, the second focuses on defusing immediate tensions in particular encounters.

In the first mechanism, reputation management, perceptions matter because in international affairs, marked by uncertainty and incomplete information, reputation functions as a critical guide for strategic behavior. As Dafoe et al. (2014, p. 365) observes, actors often make decisions based on how they believe others view them, precisely because intentions cannot be observed directly. Reputation is not simply an 'objective' record of past behavior; it reflects collective beliefs and judgments about an actor's identity, trustworthiness, and predictability (Dafoe et al., 2014; Jervis, 1989). A strong reputation, as Keohane (2005, pp. 105–106) notes, "makes it easier for a government to enter into advantageous agreements," whereas a damaged one narrows the range of viable options. Cultivating a favorable reputation requires not only advancing one's interests and values, but also demonstrating sensitivity to foreign audiences' expectations and interpretations (Cooper et al., 2013, p. 2; Mercer, 2018; Tetlock, 1998). Drawing on insights from reputation-sensitive organizational behavior (Carpenter, 2012; Coombs, 1996), we expect EU representatives to act in ways that preserve the Union's credibility, mitigate reputational risks, and avoid actions that might further erode external trust.

In the second mechanism, interaction management, the focus shifts from long-term image-building to the immediate relational dynamics of a particular encounter. This perspective is rooted in a strand of diplomatic studies and foreign policy analysis that treats diplomacy as an inherently relational practice aimed at sustaining workable channels of communication, building trust, and avoiding actions that could derail cooperation (George, 1991; Jönsson & Hall, 2005; Rathbun, 2014; Sharp, 2009). In this view, diplomacy's value lies in structuring and sustaining interaction over time, calibrating responses, and minimizing misunderstandings so as to keep dialogue possible even in difficult circumstances (Jönsson & Hall, 2003). Meta-perceptions matter here because they inform practitioners' judgments about which actions are likely to maintain a cooperative atmosphere and which risk provoking defensive or hostile reactions. EU representatives who believe their counterparts see the Union as domineering, incoherent, or normatively overbearing may therefore avoid assertive or punitive measures, such as sanctions or public condemnation, that could cause the relationship to break down in the moment. Instead, they may favor less confrontational approaches, such as technical assistance or information exchange, that keep channels open and preserve the possibility of progress.

Both mechanisms suggest that meta-perceptions calibrate the balance between engagement-and-conditionality and declaratory-and-unilateral signaling. When EU representatives believe the Union is perceived as weak, unfair, or incoherent, they are likely to shy away from signaling instruments (i.e. unilateral moves that risk reinforcing unfavorable images), while engagement-and-conditionality tools remain acceptable as relationship-building options. By contrast, when the EU is seen as principled, coherent, and effective, representatives should be more willing to endorse declaratory and unilateral signaling to assert leadership and visibility, with engagement continuing to enjoy broad support, as reflected in our two sub-hypotheses:

H1a: EU representatives who believe the EU is perceived externally as lacking credibility, coherence, or normative authority will show lower support for declaratory and unilateral signaling instruments.

H1b: Support for engagement- and incentive-based instruments will be largely invariant to meta-perceptions of the EU's external image (i.e., similar across perception clusters).

Methodology. Survey and key variables

We test our hypotheses using original data from an online elite survey of EU officials and representatives from key institutions ("EU representatives") who deal broadly with issues related to democracy support in the Eastern Neighborhood countries (ENCs): Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine:. This region is analytically well suited to our study. Like few other parts of the world, it lacks a colonial history

with the EU and contains political elites who often regard the Union as a desirable partner in modernization, reform, and integration (Bengtsson & Elgström, 2012, p. 99; Larsen, 2014, p. 904). This generally favorable orientation is tempered by skepticism about the EU's normative consistency, limited political influence, and decision-making speed (Dimitrova & Dragneva, 2013). The combination of receptiveness and critique offers EU representatives direct exposure to both recognition and challenge, making the Eastern Neighborhood a revealing setting in which to explore how perceptions of the EU's image shape preferences for democracy promotion instruments.

We conducted the online survey between November 2024 and May 2025,[2] administered in English, French and German through a newly developed, open-access, open-source platform that integrates restricted choice sorting (Q-sorting). As (political) elites are a hard-to-access population (e.g., Hafner-Burton et al. 2013), purposive sampling is widely used to efficiently capture relevant individuals (Khoury, 2020; Walgrave & Dejaeghere, 2017). We identified 553 EU representatives through the WhoisWho EU directory, including staff from the European Commission (N = 174), the European External Action Service (EEAS, N = 110), the European Parliament (N = 244), the European Council (N = 25). To maximize the response rate, we employed multiple recruitment strategies, including cold-email invitations, follow-up reminders, phone calls, and direct outreach. For instance, we organized a webinar with European Commission staff and emphasized the survey's endorsement by Dr. Othmar Karas, former Vice-President of the European Parliament. In total, 59 EU representatives completed the survey, from whom over 150 data points were collected, not including metadata. The response rate of 10.67 percent aligns with expectations for elite survey research;[3] and the resulting sample includes a diverse cross-section of EU representatives across institutional affiliations — spanning bureaucratic/technocratic (i.e., Commission), diplomatic (i.e., EEAS), and political bodies (i.e., Parliament and the European Council), professional seniority, age and gender (see Appendix A). This institutional and demographic diversity helps mitigate concerns about potential non-response bias and ensures substantive representativeness with respect to the spectrum of perspectives relevant to EU democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighbourhood. Moreover, Q-methodology is not designed to achieve population-level generalizability but to identify distinct patterns of shared viewpoints within a purposive sample, making the modest number of respondents analytically sufficient. To mitigate social desirability bias and encourage candid participation, all responses were collected anonymously.

Key independent variable, Perception of EU external images

Our central independent variable (IV) is perceptions of the EU's external images, specifically how EU representatives believe the EU and its democracy support are perceived by actors in the ENCs. The literature on EU external perceptions paints a complex and often critical picture of how the EU is viewed from the outside, highlighting several key challenges for legitimate and effective foreign policy. First, EU external action receives little media coverage and remains largely unknown among the general public outside the EU (Chaban et al., 2008). 'Europe' is more often associated with individual member states or the geographic continent than with the EU as a political actor. Second, the EU is typically perceived as an economic giant prioritizing security and economic interests rather than as a principled foreign political leader (Elgström et al., 2007). Third, its external actions are often viewed as inconsistent and inefficient, undermining its credibility and impact (Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010).

In this study, we ask whether EU representatives' perceptions of the EU's image resonate with these challenges, and how such perceived limitations shape their understanding of what diplomatic practices are appropriate in their interactions with external interlocutors. We assume that EU representatives' perceptions of how the Union is viewed cluster around distinct understandings of its external role and reputation. Some may emphasize the EU's institutional credibility and internal functioning; others its normative ambitions and external impact. Existing research on external perceptions supports this variation, documenting, among others, images of the EU as a leader in trade (Elgström et al., 2007), a secondary actor in high politics (Chaban

[2] Conducted during the post–July 2024 election transition, the survey benefited from a modest expansion in the pool of eligible EU representatives.

[3] Studies targeting members of parliament report similarly low or declining response rates, e.g. Bailer (2014); Deschouwer & Depauw (2014); Hoffmann-Lange (2008).

et al., 2014), a principled normative power (Manners, 2006), a self-interested political player (Hyde, 2008), or even a neo-colonial patron (Andretta & Doerr, 2007; Bayoumi, 2007).

To measure this, we adapt a technique of factor analysis first proposed by Stephenson (1935) in a letter to *Nature*. This 'Q-methodology' (coined by Stephenson, as opposed to 'R-methodology') represents a systematic approach to studying subjectivity by inverting the logic of conventional factor analysis. Whereas traditional (R-type) factor analysis seeks to identify latent structures among variables (e.g., test items or survey questions) by analyzing how these variables co-vary across individuals, Q-methodology performs factor analysis on individuals themselves. It does so by correlating and grouping respondents based on the patterns in their rank-ordering of a common set of statements about a topic. This makes it particularly well suited to our aim of identifying clusters of meta-perceptions (as coherent constellations of how respondents believe the EU is perceived externally) because it groups individuals by the structure of their evaluative judgments rather than by isolated survey items. Compared to standard survey analysis, which risks fragmenting these interrelated perceptions, Q-methodology preserves their relational meaning and reveals underlying shared frames. Moreover, by relying on respondents' rankings of context-specific statements rather than hypothetical scenarios, and by forcing trade-offs between competing interpretations, it helps reduce socially desirable responding while capturing stated, experience-based viewpoints. Originally developed in psychology, Q-methodology has since been adapted in various social sciences to identify belief systems, discourse coalitions, and evaluative frames.

In this study, we innovate on the original design in three critical ways to better align the method with the analytical goals and epistemic standards of political science. First, we depart from the standard practice in Q-methodology applications of deriving statements inductively from respondents themselves (e.g., through interviews or workshops). Instead, we construct our statement set deductively, drawing on a targeted review of academic literature on EU foreign policy and external perceptions (Chaban et al., 2008; Chaban et al., 2014; Lucarelli & Manners, 2007), EU policy documents, and expert consultation. To ensure comprehensive coverage and analytical clarity, we structured the resulting 42 evaluative statements into four theoretically informed dimensions —how the EU acts, what the EU does, who the EU is, and what the EU achieves— that reflect core aspects of the EU's perceived external image and align with established lenses in the literature on EU foreign policy and reputation (Chaban, Holland, et al., 2006; Jørgensen, 2009; Lucarelli, 2007). This approach reduces priming effects, targets conceptually relevant dimensions, and ensures that the resulting data speaks directly to scholarly debates on credibility, legitimacy, and normative power.

Second, we implement a randomized polarity design to reduce acquiescence bias. Each of the 42 evaluative statements is formulated in both a positive and a negative version (e.g., "The EU is seen as a reliable development partner" vs. "The EU is seen as unreliable and inconsistent"). Respondents are randomly assigned one version of each item, such that each individual evaluates a balanced set of positively and negatively worded statements. This within-respondent balance helps control for affirmatory response tendencies and reduces framing effects. To our knowledge, this randomized formulation of Q-statements represents an innovative advancement in the application of Q-methodology, one that strengthens measurement validity by mitigating systematic bias in response patterns (Schuman & Presser, 1996). A list of the statements by category, in both positive and negative formulations, is provided in Appendix B.

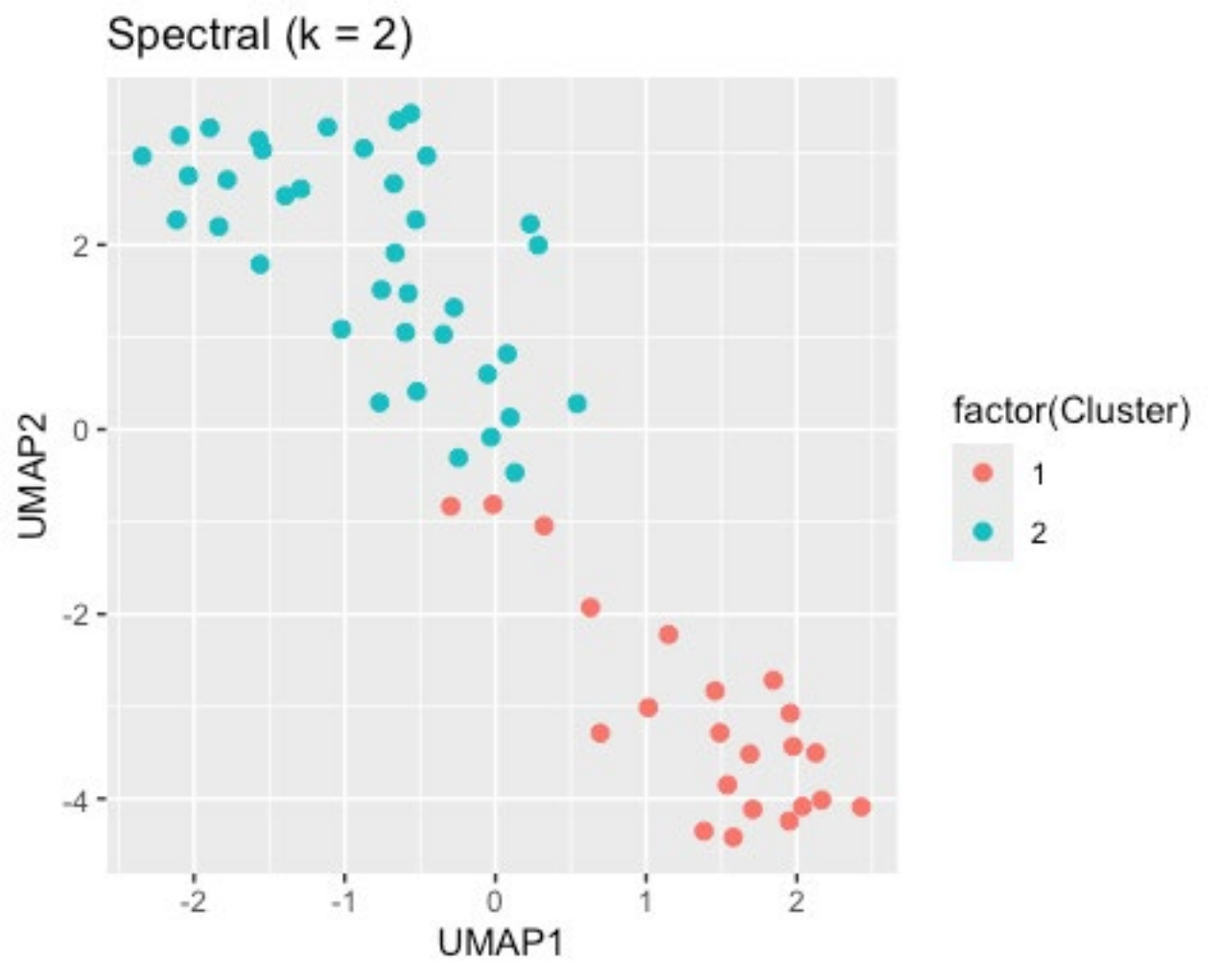
Third, we go beyond conventional Q-analysis by incorporating a multi-model clustering strategy and cross-validation based on predictive accuracy. While standard Q-studies typically rely on factor extraction and subjective judgment to identify respondents types (Balch, 1982), we test four unsupervised clustering algorithms —K-Means, Gaussian Mixture Models (GMM), agglomerative hierarchical clustering (Ward's method), and spectral clustering— on a reduced representation of the response space. These clustering methods have well-documented strengths in exploratory data analysis and are widely used in machine learning and pattern recognition (Jain, 2010; Von Luxburg, 2007; Xu & Wunsch, 2005). The optimal model is selected based on internal validation metrics assessing cluster compactness, separation, and stability. To assess empirical coherence, we train a random forest classifier to predict cluster membership and evaluate whether the clusters are learnable from the underlying data. This predictive validation strengthens the reliability of the resulting typology and reflects best practices in statistical learning (Hastie et al., 2009). Together, these three innovations —deductive statement construction, randomized polarity design, and

predictive model validation— enhance measurement validity, reduce bias, and ensure that the identified meta-perceptions are both theoretically grounded and empirically robust.

What clusters of meta-perceptions exist among EU representatives regarding how the EU is perceived in the Eastern Neighbourhood? To operationalize our key independent variable, we identify latent clusters based on respondents' evaluations of the 42 paired Q-statements, reduced via principal component analysis. We apply four unsupervised clustering algorithms and select spectral clustering with k = 2 as the optimal solution, based on internal validation metrics assessing cluster compactness, separation, and stability. The resulting two clusters capture meaningful variation in how EU officials believe the EU is viewed by their interlocutors in partner countries. Full details on the clustering procedure, validation indices, and predictive performance are provided in Appendix C.

Figure 1 visualizes the position of each respondent in the reduced attitudinal space, with colors indicating cluster membership. The clear separation between the two groups suggests meaningful variation in how EU officials believe the Union is perceived externally. These clusters emphasize distinct dimensions of the EU's external image, reflecting divergent perceptions about which aspects of its external role are most visible, contested, or consequential.

Figure 1: Results of the final spectral method use



Note. Distribution of survey respondents in a reduced attitudinal space based on their evaluations of 42 Q-sort statements; each dot represents one respondent, colored by their assigned cluster. UMAP1 and UMAP2 are the first two dimensions of a Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection (UMAP), a dimensionality reduction technique used to visualize patterns in high-dimensional data.

To interpret these perceptual patterns, we compute the average agreement score for each statement by cluster and rank the items by the magnitude of inter-cluster differences. Our interpretation focuses on those statements with the largest inter-cluster gaps, as they highlight the most salient divergences in how EU representatives believe the Union is perceived externally. Table 1 presents the 20 most discriminative statements. These highlight key differences in how the EU's normative agenda ('what the EU does'), external performance ('what the EU achieves'), and institutional credibility ('how the EU acts') as well as identity ('who the EU is') are perceived.

Table 1: Top 20 Statements Differentiating Meta-Perception Clusters

No.	Statement	1:Stabilizing normative power	2: Weak and unfair external actor	Δ
36	"EU supports civil society credibly"	**1.68**	-2.11	3.79
17	"EU respects the freedom of religion"	**0.82**	-2.73	3.55
30	"EU offers new market opportunities"	**1.27**	-2.22	3.49
27	"EU is politically stabilizing"	**1.14**	-2.11	3.24
13	"EU promotes multilateralism credibly"	**1.23**	-1.97	3.20
40	"EU protects territorial integrity"	**1.23**	-1.95	3.17
24	"EU provides humanitarian aid"	**0.86**	-2.08	2.94
16	"EU's free trade fosters welfare/peace"	**2.27**	-0.65	2.92
3	"EU engages in proper dialogue with ENCs"	**1.18**	-1.68	2.86
4	"EU respects ENCs' cultures"	**0.50**	-2.16	2.66
39	"EU mediates conflicts"	**0.73**	-1.22	1.94
31	"EU promotes gender equality"	**0.45**	-1.05	1.51
42	"EU stands up to major powers"	**1.59**	0.49	1.10
33	"EU is led by strong personalities"	**1.27**	0.27	1.00
22	"EU is a role model for regional cooperation"	-1.32	**-3.49**	2.17
29	"EU is attractive for ENCs to join"	-1.36	**-3.51**	2.15
25	"EU is relevant in peace-building"	-0.05	**-1.89**	1.85
20	"EU uses market power responsibly"	-0.45	**-2.05**	1.60
34	"EU enlargement is coherent and fair"	-0.14	**-1.68**	1.54
21	"EU considers ENC's migration concerns"	-0.23	**-1.19**	0.96

Note. Average agreement scores for each of the top 20 statements most distinguishing between the two clusters identified through spectral clustering, k=2; values in bold highlight the cluster for which the statement is most characteristic, based on higher mean agreement within that group. A negative score indicates that respondents agree with the negative formulation of the statement. Statements are abbreviated; full text given in Appendix B.

Cluster 1 includes respondents who view the EU as stabilizing normative power, emphasizing its values, delivery of public goods, and the creation of opportunities; Cluster 2, in turn, reflects a more skeptical view of the EU as a weak, inconsistent and unfair external actor, emphasizing shortcomings or failures in fairness and relevance. In more detail, for Cluster 1 the most strongly endorsed statements highlight the EU's credibility in supporting civil society (36), its respect for religious freedom (17), and its commitment to

multilateral diplomacy (13), all core expressions of 'what the EU does' in normative terms. Respondents also underscore the EU's capacity to deliver tangible outcomes, including the provision of humanitarian aid (24), the creation of market opportunities (30), and its political stabilizing role in partner regions (27). Regarding 'how the EU acts', Cluster 1 members value the Union's readiness for genuine dialogue with Eastern Neighbourhood countries (3), cultural sensitivity (4), and engagement in conflict mediation (39), suggesting a perception of the EU as a respectful, cooperative, and proactive interlocutor. Finally, moderate agreement with statements on the EU's assertiveness vis-à-vis major powers (42) and leadership strength (33) reflects confidence in its institutional stature (i.e. 'who the EU is'). Taken together, these perceptions portray the EU as a principled, capable, and trustworthy external power, whose legitimacy derives from both its normative commitments and its ability to foster stability and shared prosperity. This image is closely aligned with the Union's self-conception as a normative power.

Cluster 2, by contrast, reflects a skeptical and critical assessment of how the EU is perceived externally. Respondents in this group systematically reject statements portraying the EU as a credible or constructive force (e.g., its support for civil society (36), respect for religious freedom (17), and commitment to multilateralism (13)), revealing deep reservations about what the EU does in normative terms. They are likewise unconvinced of what the EU achieves, expressing disagreement that the EU provides humanitarian aid effectively (24), fosters welfare and peace through free trade (16), or contributes to regional stability (27). Negative evaluations also extend to how the EU acts: respondents deny that the EU engages in proper dialogue (3), respects local cultures (4), or mediates conflicts constructively (39). Even statements concerning the EU's institutional strength and leadership (42, 33) elicit little confidence. More generally, Cluster 2 members disagree that the EU serves as a role model for regional cooperation (22), is attractive for neighbors to join (29), or acts fairly and responsibly in using its market power (20), pursuing coherent enlargement (34), or considering migration concerns (21). Taken together, these views portray the EU as a weak, inconsistent, and unfair external actor, whose perceived deficits in credibility, coherence, and relevance undermine its legitimacy as a normative power.

Overall, these clusters are mirror images and capture structured differences in how EU representatives believe the Union is perceived externally. Crucially, these meta-perceptions are not merely abstract beliefs but likely influence how officials interpret the external environment and what specific instruments they prefer in the EU's democracy support efforts. We use them to explain variation in policy preferences through multivariate regression analysis.

Dependent variable. Preferred democracy promotion instruments

Our dependent variable (DV) captures respondents' preferences for democracy promotion instruments, i.e., the tools they believe the EU should employ to advance its external objectives, particularly the support of democracy abroad. Drawing on established typologies of EU foreign policy tools (Burnell, 2000; Kotzian et al., 2011; Smith, 2014), respondents were asked to evaluate 14 instruments commonly used in EU external action. These include both traditional mechanisms (e.g., aid, election observation, sanctions) and EU-specific instruments (e.g., visa facilitation incentives, association or membership prospects). Instruments related to military deployment or peacekeeping were excluded due to their limited relevance for democracy promotion (Kotzian et al., 2011).

Rather than examining individual instruments in isolation, we conceptualize respondents' preferences in terms of broader modes of diplomatic engagement. To improve construct validity and distinguish personal preferences from professional routines or institutional constraints, we complemented this main evaluative question with two additional items (Fowler, 2013): one asking which instruments respondents personally use in their work, and another probing how they typically experience interactions with interlocutors in the ENCs (see Appendix D). This multi-item design helps isolate individual preference structures from organizational practices and positional effects, ensuring that our measure reflects underlying attitudinal orientations rather than context-specific role behavior.

To identify underlying dimensions in respondents' preferences, we conducted a principal component analysis PCA: using the principal function from the psych package, extracting two factors with oblimin rotation and computing factor scores. The analysis yielded two correlated components (r = .46) that together capture the dominant logics of EU democracy promotion. The first factor reflects preferences for engagement- and

incentive-based instruments, which involve direct interaction with partner-country interlocutors, typically through cooperation, negotiation, or conditional offers (e.g., the provision or suspension of financial and technical assistance and membership prospects). The second factor captures preferences for declaratory and unilateral signaling instruments, which the EU can employ without reciprocal engagement, most notably public statements. The sampling adequacy of the model was high (*KMO* = .91), and item communalities (averaged .98). Instruments were assigned to a component if they loaded ≥ .50 on one factor and < .40 on the other. Table 2 provides the factor loadings for each instrument. The first factor explains 62 percent of the total variance, and the second factor explains 38 percent.

This empirically derived distinction resonates with broader discussions in the literature that differentiate between instruments designed to incentivize democratic reform and those used to signal disapproval or exert leverage (Burnell, 2000; Kotzian et al., 2011; Smith, 2014). In line with these contributions, our analysis captures variation not in the substance of policy objectives but in the modes of engagement through which the EU seeks to advance them, ranging from negotiated and conditional interaction to declaratory signaling and unilateral expression. Each factor serves as a separate outcome variable in ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models. We use the resulting factor scores as the dependent variables in subsequent multivariate analyses that examine how respondents' meta-perceptions of the EU's external image relate to their preferences for different types of diplomatic instruments.

Table 2: Diplomatic practices of democracy support

Instrument	1: Engagement & incentives	2: Declaratory and unilateral signaling
Declarations/statements expressing the EU's position (condemnation, concern, or support)	0.04	**0.88**
Election monitoring	**0.65**	0.25
Financial and technical assistance as an incentive for reform	**0.82**	-0.05
High-level visits	**0.87**	-0.10
Sponsoring thematic conferences	-0.09	**0.90**
Support of other international organizations, notably UN agencies	**0.57**	0.26
Incentive of visa facilitations or promise of such	0.19	**0.68**
Prospect of EU membership and associated intermediate steps	**0.72**	0.15
Diplomatic sanctions, including suspending high-level contacts or withdrawing technical experts	**0.78**	-0.08

Note. Factor loadings from PCA (*N* = 59); sampling adequacy: *KMO* = .91; average item communality = .98. Loadings > 0.50 indicate instruments' primary association with the respective factors, highlighted in bold.

Empirical Analysis. The effect of meta-perceptions on preferences for democracy promotion

How do EU representatives' meta-perceptions of the Union's external image shape their preferences for specific diplomatic instruments? In particular, does a more confident, principled view of how the EU is perceived externally correspond to stronger support for declaratory and unilateral signaling instruments,

while more skeptical perceptions encourage reliance on engagement- and incentive-based tools? More broadly, do groups of EU representatives who share similar understandings of how the EU is viewed by its eastern partners also display shared preferences for certain modes of diplomatic engagement, suggesting the presence of distinct, perception-driven orientations in the practice of EU foreign policy?

Specifically, we estimate two separate multiple linear regression models using ordinary least squares (OLS): one for preferences toward engagement- and incentive-based instruments and one for preferences toward declaratory and unilateral signaling instruments, which represent the two empirically derived dimensions of our dependent variable. The key explanatory variable is cluster membership derived from the Q-methodology analysis, capturing respondents' shared meta-perceptions of how the EU is viewed externally. To account for potential ideological influences, we include respondents' economic and cultural orientations as control variables. Following Hooghe et al. (2002), economic views are measured on a continuum from support for state intervention ('left') to support for free-market policies ('right'), while cultural views range from liberal positions emphasizing personal freedoms and equal rights to conservative positions emphasizing traditional values and social order.

To address missing data in the instrument-use preferences of EU officials, crucial for accurate factor identification, we employed multiple imputation using the Multivariate Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE) approach (Buuren & Groothuis-Oudshoorn, 2011). Specifically, we applied the Predictive Mean Matching (PMM) method via the mice package in R, generating eight imputed datasets (m = 8) with a fixed random seed for reproducibility. This procedure preserves multivariate relationships by drawing from the observed data distribution. For each imputed dataset, we conducted a PCA, as outlined above, and added the resulting factor scores to the original dataset for further analysis. We then estimated linear regression models for each imputed dataset, modeling engagement- and incentive-based and declaratory and unilateral signaling outcomes as functions of the meta-perception clusters variable. The cluster coefficient in the signaling model reached statistical significance in seven of the eight imputations, as well as under listwise deletion (see Appendix E), indicating strong consistency in the cluster effect across imputed datasets.

Table 3: Regression results (imputed data set)

	Engagement & incentives	**Declaratory & unilateral signaling**
Intercept	0.179 (0.398)	0.288 (0.392)
Cluster 2 (Ref. = Cluster 1)	-0.292 (0.291)	**-0.611* (0.287)**
Economic views (more to the right)	-0.176 (0.131)	-0.073 (0.130)
Cultural views (more conservative)	0.224 (0.121)	0.138 (0.119)
R2	0.105	0.137
R2 Adj.	0.054	0.087
AIC	163.5	161.9
RMSE	0.95	0.94

Note: Ordinary least squares (OLS) coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses, based on the first imputed dataset (m = 8, see Appendix E). Significance levels: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001. N = 59.

The regression analysis provides clear support for our theoretical expectation that EU representatives' meta-perceptions of how the Union is viewed externally shape their diplomatic preferences. Officials who belong to the cluster portraying the EU as a weak, inconsistent, and unfair external actor (Cluster 2) show significantly lower support for declaratory and unilateral signaling instruments (Factor 2). This suggests that when officials believe the EU's reputation is fragile or contested, they are reluctant to endorse visible, one-sided forms of communication that could risk reinforcing negative impressions. By contrast, preferences for engagement- and incentive-based instruments (Factor 1) remain remarkably stable across perception

clusters, indicating a broad consensus that more cooperative, engagement-oriented approaches represent appropriate tools for democracy promotion, regardless of how the EU is perceived abroad.

Importantly, these patterns are not driven by ideological predispositions. Neither respondents' economic nor cultural orientations significantly predict their preferences for either type of instrument, underscoring that the observed variation is linked not to left–right worldviews but to perceptual beliefs about the EU's external image.

Taken together, the findings highlight a perception-driven dynamic in EU foreign policy: officials' understandings of how the EU is seen abroad subtly shape their sense of what constitutes appropriate diplomatic behavior. Meta-perceptions thus operate below the level of formal mandates or ideological commitments, influencing everyday decision-making in ways that reflect shared professional judgments about credibility, legitimacy, and the risks of reputational damage. This empirical relationship between perceived external image and diplomatic preferences underscores the importance of meta-perceptions as a cognitive lens through which foreign policy is interpreted and enacted. The EU's external image, whether understood as a source of reputational capital or as a liability, appears to shape not only how its representatives understand their context, but also what instruments they prefer to act within it.

Conclusion

This study examined how EU representatives' meta-perceptions (i.e. beliefs about how the Union is viewed abroad) shape their preferences for democracy promotion in the Eastern Neighborhood. While classic research in International Relations has long argued that perceptions and beliefs influence foreign policy behavior, systematic empirical evidence has remained scarce. By leveraging a novel survey design that combines Q-sorting with targeted questions on instrument preferences, this study provides an empirical test of how subjective understandings translate into concrete policy orientations among EU practitioners.

Empirically, our analysis shows that EU representatives who believe the Union is seen as weak, inconsistent, or normatively unreliable are significantly less likely to support declaratory and unilateral signaling instruments (e.g., public statements or condemnations), while preferences for engagement- and incentive-based instruments remain stable across perception clusters. This pattern suggests that reputational concerns primarily temper the use of visible, one-sided diplomacy, whereas engagement-oriented tools (e.g., technical assistance, high-level visits, or membership incentives) retain broad legitimacy. The Eastern Neighborhood provides an especially revealing setting for this dynamic: it combines receptiveness to EU influence with persistent skepticism about its coherence and credibility, making it possible to observe how meta-perceptions shape preferences even under relatively favorable conditions. The fact that reputational caution emerges here implies that such restraint may be even stronger in more adversarial environments.

Theoretically, the study advances a mechanism specifying how second-order beliefs about the EU's external image act as microfoundations of diplomatic behavior. Meta-perceptions shape what officials consider credible, legitimate, and effective forms of engagement, constraining certain tools while normalizing others. In doing so, the study builds on early insights in IR that foreign policy is guided less by objective realities than by decision-makers' perceptions and beliefs about how they are seen by others (Boulding, 1959; Holsti, 1970; Jervis, 1976). It further extends contemporary debates on how internal beliefs, learning processes, and reputational concerns structure institutional behavior (Checkel, 2005; Nelson, 2014), offering micro-level evidence of these mechanisms within the EU's external action.

Methodologically, the paper contributes a novel measurement approach: by combining an updated version of Q-sorting, survey data on instrument preferences, and predictive validation, it demonstrates how subjective viewpoints can be systematically mapped onto behavioral orientations. This approach allows for an empirical exploration of what earlier theories of cognition and perception in foreign policy could only posit.

Practically, the findings imply that internalized negative images can quietly narrow the EU's perceived repertoire of legitimate instruments, potentially constraining its diplomatic flexibility and effectiveness. Future research could test whether these dynamics hold in other regions or policy domains, and whether practitioners' meta-perceptions align or diverge from their own understandings of the EU's identity.

Comparing these internal beliefs with external perceptions would illuminate how (mis)alignments shape legitimacy, credibility, and ultimately the Union's ability to act abroad.

By showing that EU representatives' beliefs about how the Union is seen externally structure their preferred diplomatic tools, this study provides rare empirical evidence for a long-standing theoretical claim: that foreign policy behavior is filtered through the lens of perception. It thus reaffirms the value of perception-based approaches and offers a new empirical pathway for studying the cognitive foundations of international engagement.

Appendices

A. Distribution of respondents

Table A: Professional and sociodemographic background

Characteristic	"population"	"sample"	response rate
Institution			
Commission	174 (32%)	27 (46%)	15.52%
EEAS	110 (20%)	9 (15%)	8.18%
Parliament	244 (44%)	9 (15%)	3.69%
Council	25 (5%)	14 (24%)	56.00%
Seniority			
Senior Executive Leadership	49 (9%)	6 (10%)	12.25%
Upper Management	174 (32%)	8 (14%)	4.60%
Specialized and Senior Expert Role	72 (13%)	15 (13%)	20.83%
Professional Role	154 (28%)	17 (29%)	11.03%
Support and Junior Role	16 (3%)	7 (12%)	43.75%
Entry-Level Role	2 (0%)	0 (0%)	0.00%
Member of the EP	86 (16%)	4 (7%)	4.65%
Prefer not to say		2 (3%)	
Gender			
Female	221 (40%)	23 (39%)	10.41%
Male	332 (60%)	35 (59%)	10.54%
Prefer not to say		1 (2%)	
Age			
Mean Age	47	49	
***N* total**	553	59	10.67%

Note: Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) don't really map neatly onto the standard administrative staff seniority hierarchy, because they're elected political office-holders, not career officials or civil servants. We therefore keep them separate.

B. Key independent variable: Perception of EU external images

Table B Grouped statements on EU external images

No.	Positive Formulation	Negative Formulation	Sources
How the EU acts (e.g., respectfulness, responsiveness, engagement)			
1	The EU treats its eastern neighbours with respect	The EU treats its eastern neighbours with disrespect	Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 105; Elgström et al. 2007: 962; Lucarelli 2014: 10.
2	The EU actively seeks understanding with its eastern neighbours	The EU shows little interest in reaching an understanding	Chaban et al. 2014: 441; Elgström et al. 2007: 956; Lucarelli & Fioramonti 2010: 171; Chaban & Elgström 2021; Chaban, Miskimmon, et al. 2019; Sabatovych et al. 2019; Barcevicius et al. 2015.
3	The EU manages to engage in proper dialogue with its eastern neighbours	The EU fails to engage in proper dialogue with its eastern neighbours	Elgström et al. 2007: 962; Pace 2010: 9.
4	The EU respects the cultures of its eastern neighbours	The EU disregards the cultures of its eastern neighbours	Delcour & Wolczuk 2021; Arynov 2022a; Arynov 2022b.
5	It is easier to talk to the EU than to other external actors	It is harder to talk to the EU than to other external actors	Arynov 2018; Bremberg & Borg 2021 ; Chaban et al. 2014: 442; Larsen 2014: 7; Elgström et al. 2007: 962.
9	The EU operates efficiently	The EU is too bureaucratic	Bekenova & Collins 2019; Bachmann 2013; Barcevicius et al. 2015; Chaban et al. 2006: 252–253; Schlipphak & Treib 2017: 4; Elgström et al. 2007: 961; Lucarelli 2014: 6.
11	The EU acts in the interests of its eastern neighbours	The EU prioritizes its own interests over those of its eastern neighbours	Bachmann 2013; Sabatovych et al. 2019; Arynov 2022b.
20	The EU uses its market power responsibly	The EU abuses its market power	Chaban et al. 2014: 440; Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 104; Larsen 2014: 7; Elgström et al. 2007: 954.
21	The EU takes its eastern neighbours' concerns about migration seriously	The EU is ignoring its eastern neighbours' concerns about migration	Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 99.
39	The EU takes the initiative in mediating or resolving conflicts	The EU leaves the initiative in mediating or resolving conflicts to others	Chaban, Elgström, et al. 2019.
41	The EU reacts consistently to violations of international law	The EU is inconsistent in its response to violations of international law	Larsen 2014: 7; Scheipers & Sicurelli 2007: 451; Elgström et al. 2007: 960.

No.	Positive Formulation	Negative Formulation	Sources
What the EU does (e.g., policy goals, normative commitments)			
10	The EU acts consistently with its principles and values	The EU acts inconsistently with its principles and values	Sabatovych et al. 2019; Delcour & Wolczuk 2021; Sicurelli 2015; Müller & Zahda 2018.
12	The EU credibly promotes human rights, rule of law, democracy, and good governance	The EU's promotion of human rights, rule of law, democracy, and good governance lacks credibility	Simionov et al. 2021; Müller & Zahda 2018; Su & Yeh 2018; Arynov 2022b; Barcevicius et al. 2015:; Delcour & Wolczuk 2021; Chaban et al. 2014: 439; Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 98; Larsen 2014: 7; Scheipers & Sicurelli 2007: 451; Elgström et al. 2007: 956.
13	The EU credibly promotes multilateralism and diplomacy	The EU's promotion of multilateralism and diplomacy lacks credibility	Larsen 2014: 7; Scheipers & Sicurelli 2007: 451; Elgström et al. 2007: 960; Lucarelli & Fioramonti 2010: 174.
15	The EU's engagement against climate change is credible	The EU's engagement against climate change lacks credibility	Sicurelli 2015; Chaban et al. 2014: 441; Larsen 2014: 7; Scheipers & Sicurelli 2007: 451; Elgström et al. 2007: 956; Lucarelli & Fioramonti 2010: 175.
16	The EU credibly promotes free trade to alleviate poverty and to foster peace	The EU's promotion of free trade to alleviate poverty and to foster peace lacks credibility	Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 103; Larsen 2014: 7; Elgström et al. 2007: 958; Pace 2010: 12; Lucarelli & Fioramonti 2010: 171.
17	The EU respects the freedom of religion	The EU disrespects the freedom of religion	Fioramonti & Lucarelli 2008: 7; Furia & Lucas 2006: 590.
18	Natural resources have a minimal impact on the EU's relationship with its eastern neighbours	The EU policy is primarily motivated by the natural resources of its eastern neighbours	Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 100.
19	Agreed objectives remain unaffected by geopolitical considerations	Geopolitical considerations take precedence over agreed objectives	Hadfield and Lightfood 2021; Youngs 2004; Crombois 2019; Winn and Gänzle 2023.
34	EU enlargement policy is consistent, coherent, and fair	EU enlargement policy is inconsistent, incoherent, and unfair	Arynov 2018; Arynov 2022b.
32	EU aid is distributed fairly	EU aid is unfairly distributed	Delcour & Wolczuk 2021.
36	The EU credibly supports civil society organisations	The EU's support of civil society organisations lacks credibility	Barcevicius et al. 2015; Delcour & Wolczuk 2021; Arynov 2022b:; Chaban et al. 2013: 439.
37	EU conditionality attached to financial aid interferes in domestic affairs	EU conditionality attached to financial aid respects domestic affairs	Barcevicius et al. 2015; Völkel 2014.
40	The EU sufficiently protects respect for territorial integrity	The EU's protection of respect for territorial integrity is inadequate	Johansson-Nogués, et al. 2020; Sjursen 2017.

No.	Positive Formulation	Negative Formulation	Sources
What the EU achieves e.g., effectiveness and external outcomes:			
14	The EU effectively employs economic sanctions to promote compliance with international norms	The EU's use of economic sanctions fails to achieve the desired results	Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 99–100; Larsen 2014: 7; Elgström et al. 2007: 955; Schlipphak & Treib 2017: 4.
23	EU development aid effectively combats corruption	EU development aid increases corruption	Delcour & Wolczuk 2021.
24	The EU provides appropriate humanitarian aid e.g. in the event of natural catastrophes	The EU provides insufficient humanitarian aid e.g. in the event of natural catastrophes	Fawn et al. 2022:; Arynov 2022b:; Chaban et al. 2014: 439; Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 104; Larsen 2014: 7; Elgström et al. 2007: 962; Lucarelli & Fioramonti 2010: 17
25	The EU is an important actor in building peace	The EU plays no role in building peace	Stivachtis et al. 2013; Chandler 2013; Richmond et al. 2013.
26	EU investment in infrastructure effectively contributes to development in its eastern neighbours	EU investment in infrastructure hinders development in its eastern neighbours	Chaban et al. 2014: 439.
27	The EU is politically stabilising its eastern neighbours	The EU is politically destabilising its eastern neighbours	Chaban et al. 2014: 439.
30	The EU offers opportunities to expand into new markets for its eastern neighbours	The EU restricts opportunities for its eastern neighbours to expand into new markets	Korosteleva 2011; Bohle 2021.
31	The EU effectively implements its strategy to achieve gender equality	The EU fails to effectively implement its strategy to achieve gender equality	Lombardo 2003.
35	The EU delivers what it promises	The EU only talks and does not act	Chaban et al. 2017; Zhang 2020.
38	National sovereignty is being promoted by the EU's neighbourhood policy	National sovereignty is being eroded by the EU's neighbourhood policy	Andretta & Doerr 2007; Larsen 2014: 905; Schlipphak & Treib 2017.

No.	Positive Formulation	Negative Formulation	Sources
Who the EU is (e.g., identity, coherence, and autonomy)			
6	The EU acts autonomously from its member states	The EU is fully bound by the decisions of its member states	Serban & Harutyunyan 2021.
7	The EU effectively balances the power of its member states	The EU is overshadowed by its powerful member states	Serban & Harutyunyan 2021.
8	The EU acts autonomously from other international actors	The EU fails to act autonomously from other international actors	Bachmann 2013; Chaban et al. 2014: 441; Chaban, Elgström, et al. 2006: 256; Pace 2010: 9; Portela 2010: 152–153; Zhang 2010: 171.
22	The EU is a role model for regional cooperation	The EU is no role model for regional cooperation	Bachmann 2013; Arynov 2022b; Chaban & Elgström 2021; Bengtsson & Elgström 2012: 103; Larsen 2014: 9; Elgström et al. 2007: 955; Lucarelli & Fioramonti 2010: 172; Lucarelli 2007: 264.
28	The EU is highly visible in its eastern neighbours	The EU is hardly visible in its eastern neighbours	Chaban & Elgström 2021; Aivazyan & Petrova 2018.
29	The EU is an attractive model that its eastern neighbours want to join	For the eastern neighbours, the EU is an unattractive model that they do not want to join	Arynov 2022b; Kølvraa 2017; Korosteleva 2011.
33	The EU is led by strong personalities	The EU lacks leading personalities	Esch & Swinkels 2015; Foreign Analysis 2024.
42	EU stands up to major powers such as China and Russia	The EU is showing weakness in the face of major powers such as China and Russia	Chaban et al. 2017; Zhang 2020.

C. Key independent variable: Clustering procedure and validation

To identify latent clusters of EU officials based on their meta-perceptions, we applied four unsupervised clustering algorithms to the PCA-reduced matrix of responses, using different numbers of cluster: K-Means, Gaussian Mixture Models (GMM), agglomerative hierarchical clustering (Ward's method), and spectral clustering. The clustering quality of each algorithm was evaluated across multiple cluster solutions using three internal validation indices: the average Silhouette Score, Calinski-Harabasz (CH) index, and Davies-Bouldin (DB) index, see Table C1. These measures allow us to assess the compactness, separation, and stability of the clusters. To verify that the resulting clusters did not merely capture background characteristics, we compared them across institutional affiliation, age, gender, and seniority. As shown in Table C3, the χ^2 and t-tests indicated no significant differences between clusters on any variable except institution, confirming that the identified clusters primarily reflect variation in meta-perceptions rather than demographic or positional factors.

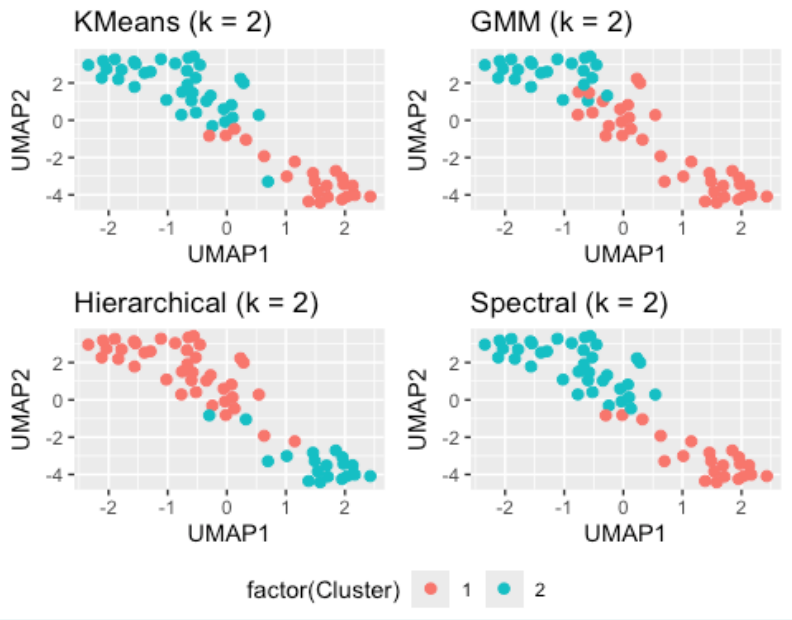
Table C1: Evaluation of clustering methods

Method	Silhouette	CH	DB
K-Means	0.22	16.54	1.76
GMM	0.17	14.10	1.80
Hierarchical	0.21	14.99	1.74
Spectral	0.22	16.47	1.75

Note: Average Silhouette Score, Calinski-Harabasz (CH) index, and Davies-Bouldin (DB) index.

Figure C1 shows that all cluster solutions, spectral clustering with k=2 performs most consistently, yielding the highest silhouette score and Calinski-Harabasz index, and the lowest Davies-Bouldin index.

Figure C1: Results of the final spectral method used to cluster traits



To assess the empirical coherence of the clusters, we train a random forest classifier to predict cluster membership using the original 42 standardized statement scores. The model achieved high predictive accuracy. The low error rates indicate that the clusters are robust and learnable from the underlying data, as shown in Table C2.

Table C2: Confusion matrix of the two-class system random forest

Class 1	Class 2	Class error
19	3	0.1363636
1	36	0.0270270

We further extract variable importance scores from the model and show the 20 most discriminative statements by Mean Decrease in Gini index in Figure C2.

Figure C2: Top 20 Most important statements for cluster prediction

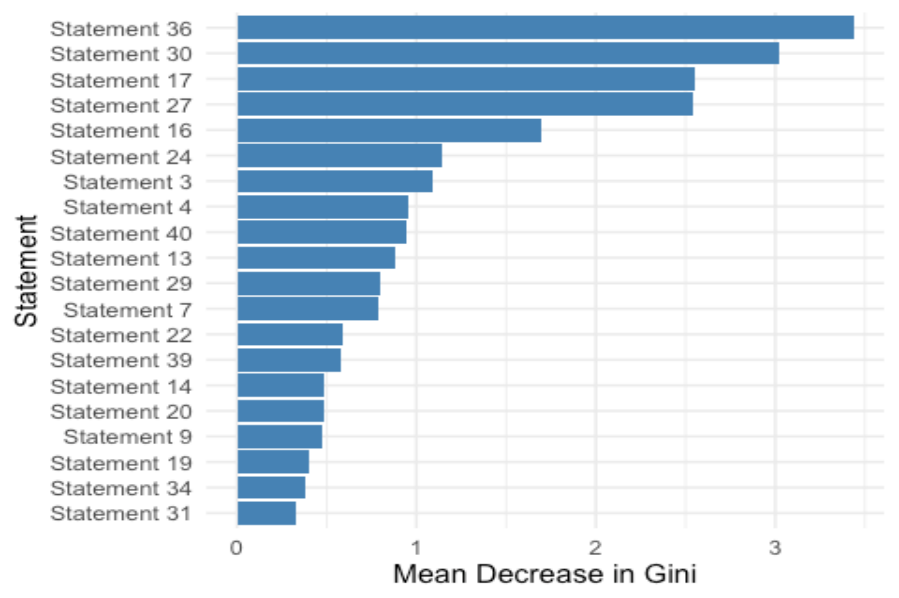


Table C3: Cluster comparisons across demographic variables

Variable	Test Statistic	df	*p*-value
Institution	24.60	6	< .001
Age	1.55	51	.13
Gender	3.91	2	.14
Seniority	7.88	7	.34

Note. Tests indicated no significant cluster differences beyond respondents' institutional affiliation. Age differences were tested using a t-test; all other variables were analyzed using chi-square tests.

D. Dependent variable: Practices of Democracy Promotion

Meeting Experience (Q4). How do you experience a typical meeting with your interlocutors in partner countries? Please treat the following list as suggestive and complete it with features that are important to you. On a scale of -3 to +3, -3 means that you strongly disagree with the statement and +3 means that you strongly agree with the statement; the scores in between allow you to qualify your personal assessment. Please select one option each row.

#	Meeting Feature
1	Allows us to learn how our partners tick.
2	Enables us to build trust between our interlocutors and us.
3	Makes it possible to clarify our mutual expectations.
4	Allows differences to be expressed and discussed.
5	Increases the chances that our objectives and policies are understood.
6	Provides us with a platform to pursue our interests.
7	Allows for the exchange of information.
8	Allows for expressing concerns about developments.
9	Allows us to communicate our position on a particular situation.
10	Allows our partners to learn how the EU ticks.
11	Allows us to see if we share similar values.
12	Others, please specify.

Note: -3 = Strongly disagree; -2 = Mostly disagree; -1 = Somewhat disagree; +1 = Somewhat agree; +2 = Mostly agree; +3 = Strongly agree; 98 = Don't know.

EU Instruments (Q5). In principle, the EU has a wide range of diplomatic instruments at its disposal. Which of the following instruments do you personally think the EU should use in its relations with its eastern neighbours? On a scale of 0 to 5, 0 means that you think the EU should definitely not use the instrument in question and 5 means that you think it should definitely use that instrument when appropriate; the scores in between allow you to qualify your personal assessment. Please select one option per row.

#	Instrument
1	Declarations/statements expressing the EU's position (condemnation, concern, or support) on a particular situation.
2	High-level visits.
3	Support of other international organizations, notably UN agencies.
4	Diplomatic sanctions, including suspending high-level contacts, or withdrawing technical experts.
5	Travel/visa bans, or the threat of such.
6	Requesting further information on policies.
7	Requesting support for EU positions in international fora, including conferences and summits.
8	Incentive of visa facilitations, or promise of such.
9	Association agreement, including reference to jointly agreed actions.

#	Instrument
10	Prospect of EU membership and associated intermediate steps.
11	Sponsoring thematic conferences.
12	Election monitoring.
13	Providing expertise and knowledge to address policy problems (e.g., water governance, migration).
14	Financial and technical assistance as an incentive for reform.

Note: 0 = Should definitely not use; 1 = Should probably not use; 2 = Should rather not use; 3 = Should rather use; 4 = Should probably use; 5 = Should definitely use; 98 = Don't know.

Personal Actions (Q6). And which of the following actions do you personally undertake in order to carry out your duties in relation to the European neighbouring countries? On a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 means you never use the practice and 5 means you use it all the time; the scores in between allow you to qualify your personal assessment. Please select one option per row.

#	Action
1	I monitor developments and contribute to the drafting of declarations/statements expressing the EU's position (condemnation, concern, or support) on a particular situation.
2	I meet and consult with relevant stakeholders from the eastern neighbouring countries at diplomatic visits.
3	I express my support or actively support the activities of other international organizations, notably UN agencies.
4	I support the imposition of diplomatic sanctions where appropriate and necessary.
5	I support the imposition or threat of a travel/visa ban where appropriate and necessary.
6	I request further information on policies or reforms.
7	I take part in or prepare activities to support EU positions at international conferences and summits.
8	I support granting (or promising to grant) visa facilitation to encourage reform where appropriate and necessary.
9	I refer to the possibility of association agreements to promote or support reforms where appropriate and necessary.
10	I refer to the prospect of EU membership in principle and the associated interim steps to provide incentives for reform where appropriate and necessary.
11	I organize and/or contribute to thematic conferences.
12	I support the free and fair conduct of elections (e.g., by advocating for the presence of EU observers).
13	I invite or propose to invite experts in certain areas and technologies (e.g., water governance, migration).
14	I use and advocate financial and technical assistance to encourage reform where appropriate and necessary.

Note: 0 = Never; 1 = Rarely; 2 = Occasionally; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Frequently; 5 = Always; 98 = Don't know.

E. Regression robustness check (listwise deletion)

Table E1: Regression results (listwise deletion)

	Engagement & incentives	Declaratory & unilateral signaling
Intercept	0.208 (0.551)	0.782 (0.533)
Cluster 2 (Ref. = Cluster 1)	-0.286 (0.394)	**-0.821* (0.382)**
Economic views (more to the right)	-0.188 (0.157)	-0.157 (0.152)
Cultural views (more conservative)	0.227 (0.170)	0.026 (0.165)
R2	0.105	0.147
R2 Adj.	0.041	0.086
AIC	141.0	138.0
RMSE	1.01	0.97

Note: Ordinary least squares (OLS) coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. $N = 47$, listwise deletion.

Table E2: Robustness of Cluster 2-effect across imputed datasets

Imputation	Coefficient	p-value	Significant? (p < 0.05)
1	-0.611	0.038	TRUE
2	-0.724	0.015	TRUE
3	-0.552	0.063	FALSE
4	-0.616	0.036	TRUE
5	-0.617	0.037	TRUE
6	-0.676	0.020	TRUE
7	-0.695	0.019	TRUE
8	-0.714	0.016	TRUE

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REDEMOS- 101061738
HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01-04

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