

Acta
Universitatis
Danubius



RELATIONES
INTERNATIONALES

Complementarity With the Principles of Subsidiarity and Proportionality in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice

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Abstract: The European Union is the guarantor of 27 different visions in the field of security and respect for human rights. The European idea has endured for more than 70 years, and the numerous transformations it has undergone, reforms and the integration process are the result of permanent adaptation to the surrounding reality, as well as the will of its equal members. Sovereignty is an internationally recognised and promoted principle, and one of the basic principles of the EU is its recognition of Member States. However, the issue of sovereignty seems to be increasingly threatened by EU policies. Even if the EU acts only within the sphere of shared competences, based on the principle of subsidiarity and proportionality, the policy on the area of freedom, security and justice reveals the most sensitive area of conflict on the issue of sovereignty and respect for human rights. This paper aims to analyse, including from the perspective of the impact of international conflicts, the effects of decision-making at the EU level on the area of freedom, security, and justice policy, and the effectiveness of bringing this policy within the sphere of shared competences between the EU and its Member States. Ultimately, this analysis seeks to address the question of the need for reform of the existing EU treaties, particularly in the areas of civil, criminal, and police cooperation.

Keywords: subsidiarity; sovereignty; governance; world order; proportionality

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1. Introduction

An international system threatened by numerous global challenges prompts states to adopt the most effective measures to ensure the security of their borders, frontiers, and citizens (Iftode, 2019, p. 91). This is why 27 countries believe that a supranational entity is the one that can take common measures to address common challenges, such as the European Union, an increasingly important player at the international negotiating table.

To this end, a rigorous and complex system of legislation has been developed to transfer to the EU the attributes of national sovereignty of the Member States, enabling them to represent their interests most efficiently. In support of this idea, the Treaty on European Union art. 5 expressly regulates the issue of the European Union's competences, which are negotiated and determined by the Member States, and it is based on the principle of conferral. That ensures that the competences for each EU policy are defined concretely and in accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality. Furthermore, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union classifies in articles 3, 4 and 6, EU competences into three categories (exclusive, shared, supporting and complementary) (Anghel, Silași & Crăciunescu, 2015, pp. 348-385), specifying for each category of competences which policies are appropriate.

Thus, the policy on the area of freedom, security and justice falls, according to Article 4 TFEU, within the sphere of competences that the EU shares with the Member States. Given the sensitivity of the areas governing this policy and the issue of sovereignty, often claimed by the Member States to be outdated and threatened by European regulations, the TFEU has, in its annexes Protocol No 2, which contains rules on the application of the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity, as a guarantee for the Member States that they will not be threatened (Maricut & Akbik, 2016, p. 3). In this respect, the EU ensures that, through a thorough mechanism, there is a parliamentary scrutiny of each Member State to chart the direction of an initiative through the EU Commission's legislative proposals. The yellow card or orange card is the tool that Member States have at their disposal in the parliamentary scrutiny to give a favorable or unfavorable opinion, within eight weeks after the analysis of the legislative initiative proposed by the European Commission, whether it complies with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, according to art. 6 of Protocol No 2 on the application of the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity (Mătușescu, 2018, p. 5).

According to the provisions of this protocol, which have been thoroughly elaborated, if a quarter of the votes in the national parliaments are against the initiative, it must undergo a review procedure by the European Commission. The provision of article 7, para. 2 of Protocol no. 2 on the application of the principle of proportionality and subsidiarity has been specifically designed to apply to the policy on the area of freedom, security and justice. It serves as an additional safeguard, precisely to highlight the particular importance the European Union attaches to this sensitive area, which often comes into conflict with its competence due to misinterpretation of the scope of the actions the EU takes in situations.

However, the Member States complain of a lack of transparency on this issue, given that after the review procedure mentioned above, the European Commission can decide whether to keep the initial draft, amend it, or withdraw it, regardless of the opinion resulting from scrutiny by the national parliaments. In fact, although the parliaments of the Member States are consulted and issue opinions on compliance with the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, the decision ultimately rests with the EU Commission. Moreover, eight weeks for examining legislative initiatives is considered too short, given the need and the careful attention required to address the problems of sovereignty or human rights that may arise when the EU acts beyond the powers conferred upon it (Yanis, 2013).

2. Sovereignty or Security?

The area of freedom, security, and justice regulates vital issues, including migration and the rights of those seeking international protection, the settlement of civil cases, the harmonisation of rules, and the recognition of judicial acts in civil and criminal matters, as well as the fight against terrorism and organised crime. All these have implications for fundamental rights, as well as for the judicial systems of each Member State.

The decision-making process for policy on the area of freedom, security and justice is also a sensitive subject, being a particularly complex one, with the drafting and transposition of legislative measures in this area still affected by a lack of democratic methods, with the unanimity procedure and voting in the European Council still being used for certain specific issues, which are directed by national governments and are therefore political decisions (Monar, 2009, pp. 17-19).

This is why several political leaders, practitioners and academics believe that some amendments or revisions to the EU treaties on this policy are necessary. A European Union that promises ‘unity in diversity’ cannot find itself in conflicts of competence with Member States that feel their sovereignty threatened by the action of a supranational power that has been granted attributes of national sovereignty precisely to represent and defend the interests of its members more effectively.

In the current context, the international system is threatened by a wide range of diverse factors. Regional crises, Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, the armed conflict in Gaza, the ongoing tensions in the Indo-Pacific region, and the crisis in the Middle East are just a few examples that heighten citizens’ insecurity and distrust in international institutions and organizations. The risk of these conflicts escalating in the region, or, as some experts (Barnes-Dacey, Bianco & Lavatt, 2023). Notably, the point is very high globally, and global governance does not appear to have the necessary tools or mechanisms to ensure the collective security of all international actors. Moreover, security in the contemporary era has many different meanings.¹ apart from the classic threats (military ones), today we can talk about environmental security, cyber security, economic security, food security, societal security, etc. (Funieru, 2011, pp. 172-173).

The COVID-19 pandemic, the conflicts mentioned above, and the ensuing wave of economic consequences, which are likely to lead to a global financial crisis, cannot be effectively managed at the state level. This is exceptionally well known among states. This is why the dynamics of the international system underwent a colossal transformation during the period of the great conferences (the Vienna Conference of 1815), which also illustrates a significant landmark in the behaviour of the leading players on the international stage, recognising the need to capitalise on the concept of cooperation in multilateral diplomacy (Mihai, 2019, pp. 3-7). Subsequently, the 20th century, characterised by political leaders with significant initiatives, was marked by their major contribution to the symbiosis of the international system, the emergence of many international organisations, built on the foundations of idealism and liberalism, which promoted the defence of collective security through the joint efforts of states. This is how the United Nations emerged as the world’s guarantor of security and peace, the main “responsible” for global governance in all areas.

With the dynamics of the international system and the interdependence between states, they have learnt different lessons to pursue their own interests and objectives,

¹ https://ipp.md/old/public/files/Proiecte/1-conceptul_securitatie.pdf.

guaranteeing the security of their citizens and national sovereignty. Thus, over time, they have migrated from the traditional form of diplomacy (bilateral) to multilateral diplomacy, including conferences, congresses, and ultimately international organisations (Floroiu, 2013, pp. 8-10). The globalisation of the contemporary century and the risks, vulnerabilities and threats that come with it have led states to realise that national sovereignty can be shared (based on the competences they assign) to supranational entities, which have the levers and mechanisms that give them the capacity to address common problems through unanimous solutions (Iftode, 2019, p. 92).

The same was true of the European idea in the 1950s. Through the will of six countries, a common objective (strictly economic) was identified, and it was decided to establish a community to manage the problems in the field by developing binding measures and strategies for all participants (Sidjanski, 2014, pp. 44-45). The European construction illustrates a successful and, at the same time, grounded model of the spill-over process that characterises the European integration process: vertical integration (the acquisition of as many EU competences as possible, including the political one, in the meantime), but also horizontal integration (the waves of enlargement through the accession of new members, the EU now counting 27 Member States). The European states, shaken after the two world wars and weakened politically, economically, and militarily, have increasingly come to rely on an entity formed by mutual will, acting within the limits of their own competences, to defend and guarantee respect for common interests and objectives (Aldecoa Luzarraga, 2011, pp. 20-22; Sidjanski, 2000, p. 16; Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2008, p. 501). Thus, the EU operates based on seven formal institutions, its own decision-making process, and a range of policies that address the issues facing European states. Moreover, today we can discuss European governance, which features a unique decision-making system within the broader international system. The EU is the reason why small states in Europe can make their voices, risks, and needs heard in international fora. The EU has become a significant international actor on the global stage, initiating or participating in the development of key global policies and resolving numerous international disputes.

In recent years, however, the EU has undergone some changes. States are increasingly complaining about inefficiency in EU action, with numerous conflicts of competence, and member states often feeling their sovereignty is threatened. Brexit has set a precedent, and there are now more diverse voices within the EU,

representing a wider range of interests.¹ Franco-German tensions over nuclear security in a context of insecurity in the immediate neighbourhood may lead us to understand that those concerned no longer have much confidence in this organisation.² At international events, congresses and public statements, more and more political leaders and representatives of international organisations are talking about the European Union as an essential player in current security strategies, but it is losing its relevance because of the identity and cultural crises it is going through³. Moreover, according to the EU-US Summit from 2023, whose main aim was to strengthen transatlantic cooperation, amidst debates addressing common threats and interests, the US stressed the need for EU unity and to find a solution to overcome the tensions it is going through, to be a core partner to pursue common defence and security strategies.⁴

3. The New World Order - A New Architecture of the International System

The Westphalian world order is a landmark on the map of international relations, with the concept of sovereignty, in the sense of autonomy and equality of states, at its heart. With Westphalia, the European state system takes on a new form, one in which the process of decolonisation begins and respect for the principle of non-intervention in the internal affairs of states is promoted. However, the international system was only able to institutionalise the concept of sovereignty after the Westphalian era, with the advent of the UN, which led to the emergence of a new architecture of the international system, now also characterised by an international legal order. Moreover, it was precisely this fact that was essential to the recognition of national sovereignty as an attribute of states: the existence of an international

¹ <https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/10/27/europe-has-a-problem-france-and-germany-have-forgotten-how-to-argue>.

² <https://www.thetimes.com/world/ireland-world/article/germany-s-intentions-for-the-eu-are-as-clear-now-as-they-were-in-1914-p5hst3tt3>, <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2023/01/02/why-did-the-eu-change-to-a-france-germany-game/>.

³ Conference *Rethinking cooperation between Eu-MENA*, Reykjavik Summit for renewing the “Conscience of Europe”, <https://edoc.coe.int/en/the-council-of-europe-in-brief/11619-united-around-our-values-reykjavik-declaration.html>, Copenhagen Democracy Summit 2023, <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/initiatives/the-copenhagen-democracy-summit/the-summit-2023/>.

⁴ US-EU Summit 2023 Joint Statement, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/10/20/u-s-eu-summit-joint-statement/>.

“government” that provides mechanisms and policies to manage all interactions between the various subjects of international law, to guide conduct to be followed, and, most importantly, to have a coercive force that can sanction when fundamental principles are violated (Getachew, 2019, p. 13).

The European idea originated at the economic level, and gradually the organisation has taken on increasing significance, leading to cooperation between Member States, including at the political level. The Coal and Steel Economic Community was established in the 1950s, specifically on this basis, within the context of the new international architecture with its new principles and concepts. The aim was to enhance the security and economic recovery of European countries, utilising the latest instruments promoted by the UN. Against the backdrop of insecurity, European states understood that the only solution for their defence was to transfer some attributes of sovereignty to the new entity (ECSC) and to their own institutions, which could act more effectively at a higher level to defend their interests (Hoffmann, 2003, p. 420). And so, the ECSC has experienced the process of European integration, with more states joining. For almost four decades, a spill-over from the economic to the political has been noted as real progress, leading to a united European Union, where states have come to believe in the EU institutions and the decision-making process.

However, a significant reform at the EU level (the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty) in an international context influenced by other state-level transformations, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, has led to a change in the vision of the Member States (Bărbulescu, 2015, p. 83). Although EU Member States, as well as those emerging from restructuring, have felt a greater need than ever for close cooperation, including restructuring towards European reunification that promotes democracy, the European Union is beginning to encounter numerous obstacles. Even as the EU has assumed more areas of its competence (internal affairs, criminal cooperation, police cooperation, migration, and social policies), which are controversial in terms of national sovereignty and each state’s own legal system, more bottlenecks have begun to appear. Member States were no longer willing to transfer sovereignty to the EU institutions to adopt decisions in these areas, and the voting system (specific unanimity for these policies), allowed them to block by veto all controversial decisions or initiatives for these policies. Countless conflicts of competence have arisen, and the problem persists today, with states claiming disproportionate EU intervention in certain areas of shared competence (Brack, Crespy & Coman, 2019, pp. 820-822). Although

European integration has continued, European citizens or national parliaments have developed such a distrust of the European idea that they consistently refuse to agree on the decision to supranationalise the European Union.

Or the current crises within the European Union are certainly not leading to a federal future. Nor do they lead to a supranational structure with its own, unitary legal order, valid for all Member States. Tensions between two founders of this idea, such as France and Germany, the voluntary exit of United Kingdom, the frequent blocking by certain states, such as Hungary or Poland, of decisions at European level in areas of the EU's shared competences with the Member States, all lead to a loss of credibility and relevance of an important player on the international stage.¹

Sovereignty is, in contemporary times, an internationally recognised right of states and should not cause so many conflicts between the state and the supranational level if the entity established by the common will of its member states has empowered it for express matters mentioned explicitly in its constituent acts.

However, it is today's regional and international security crises and threats that must urgently change the vision of states regarding the concept of national security, encompassing all its components. The international system has endured without major conflicts for over 70 years. This has been made possible thanks to preventive diplomacy, global governance, and the principles of international.² States can no longer defend themselves; threats have changed, and they no longer have a state-by-state approach. The sense of security can no longer be ensured solely by their own army or by their own mechanisms to fight organised crime, the fight against terrorism, and the foreign policies of states that promote bilateral diplomacy. Membership of various supranational structures/entities seems to be the only option that possesses the necessary tools to address and manage the numerous and diverse threats.

But European states need to wake up to reality, in line with the surrounding context and with a redefinition of sovereignty thinking. The European Union has been suffering for some 30 years due to the national interests of only certain Member States, despite its European mottos on collective security, democracy, the defence of

¹ https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/etude75-eu-us_relations-en_01-1.pdf.

² <https://ecfr.eu/article/bracing-for-a-broader-conflict-how-the-israel-hamas-war-could-escalate/>.

common interests, or the establishment of its own order based on common sovereignty.¹

4. Fragmentation and Adaptation: New Instruments of Adjustment

This topic is gaining particular relevance in the current context, where European defense has increasingly drawn the attention of European Union institutions, despite being an area of exclusive competence of the member states. The Union often proves institutionally underprepared to face the security challenges it encounters. Although it was not traditionally anticipated that the European Union would acquire responsibilities in the field of defense—beyond its established economic, political, and legal dimensions—recent geopolitical realities have radically reshaped the logic of the European project as conceived in the 1950s.

Emerging security threats—both conventional and hybrid—together with the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, occurring in the EU's immediate neighborhood, have highlighted the need for structural and functional adaptation.² Member states now find themselves in a position where, to respond effectively to external pressures, they must develop new defense instruments and mechanisms, even as these remain embedded in an institutional architecture shaped by outdated decision-making logics. The most important challenge lies in the principle of unanimity, still applied to all decision-making in the Common Foreign and Security Policy as well as in the Common Security and Defense Policy, according to article 24 of the Treaty of European Union.

Furthermore, the prospect of a possible reduction—or even withdrawal—of U.S. military support for the defense of the continent compels a redefinition of European responsibilities. Under such a scenario, European security can no longer be conceived solely under the transatlantic umbrella. Still, it must instead be reinforced through a joint effort by member states, capable of generating their own capacities and enhancing strategic autonomy.³

Amid a potential redefinition of the transatlantic relationship—stemming from the Trump administration's prioritization of systemic rivalry with China at the expense

¹ https://institutdelors.eu/content/uploads/2025/04/etude75-eu-us_relations-en_01-1.pdf.

² <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/eu-enlargement-and-integration-voices-support-and-scepticism>.

³ <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/fit-purpose-reforming-nato-age-trump-20>.

of Europe—the European Union has been forced to pursue rearmament. Yet this effort is hindered by the absence of political consensus and by deep fiscal and structural blockages.¹

It is precisely in this context that the European Commission has promoted initiatives of significant relevance for strengthening the Union's defense dimension. Although the Treaty of Lisbon, through the articles 42-46 of TEU, foresaw the possibility of establishing a standard defence policy, but this has remained at a nascent stage until today. However, notable progress was registered in March 2025, with the presentation of the *ReArm Europe* program / *Readiness Plan 2030*², designed to enhance the Union's military capabilities and to develop its defense infrastructure. The plan foresees an investment of approximately €800 billion aimed at countering geopolitical threats and uncertainties arising from a potential decline in U.S. military support. Moreover, for the first time at the European level, the position of a Defence Commissioner was created, signalling a new institutional stage in the Union's political architecture (Wolff, Steinbach & Zettelmeyer, 2025, pp. 1-3).

In May 2025, the Commission introduced the financial instrument SAFE (Council Regulation establishing the Security Action for Europe, 2025). It is intended to allow member states to contract very long-term loans (up to 45 years) dedicated to defence-related investments. This initiative confirms the will to build concrete support mechanisms for common security.

Nonetheless, the implementation process remains difficult. The European Union's fragmentation—both at the level of divergent national visions and due to the absence of a shared security culture—prevents genuine coherence. The persistence of the intergovernmental method, coupled with the unanimity requirement in foreign and security policy, demonstrates that member states are not yet willing to cede competences in this essential domain, even in a critical moment³. Recent debates among European leaders illustrate precisely this tension: there is growing discussion on ways to overcome the unanimity principle to accelerate urgent decision-making, especially in foreign policy⁴. Fragmentation is also visible among European institutions themselves. The most recent example concerns the adoption of the *SAFE*

¹ <https://cepa.org/article/the-mystery-of-natos-5-spending-promise/>.

² White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6d5db69-e0ab-4bec-9dc0-3867b4373019_en.

³ <https://icds.ee/en/no-gain-without-pain-estonias-views-on-eu-enlargement/>.

⁴ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-08-30/eu-explores-ways-of-acting-more-quickly-on-foreign-policy>.

instrument, which sparked an institutional conflict. The European Parliament challenged the legitimacy of the procedure, arguing that it reduced its democratic role and political relevance¹. The European Commission defended its decision by referring to Article 122 TFEU; however, it remains debatable whether recourse to an emergency procedure is justified for an instrument that has been valid for 45 years. This situation sets a sensitive precedent, raising questions about both the institutional balance within the Union and the degree of democratisation of strategic decision-making in the field of defence.

5. Conclusions

The international environment is under threat from a security perspective. Numerous ongoing crises and conflicts erode the power of global institutions due to states' mistrust in them. Collective security, unfortunately, remains only a concept mentioned in writing in the constitutive acts of all regional or international organisations whose aim is to guarantee global peace and security. However, a trend can be observed among member states. We are seeing a return to realist thinking among Member States, dominated by the pursuit of national interest, which is increasingly adopting methods to maximise relative gain, i.e., national security.

Unfortunately, the European Union requires further reform, particularly as it prepares for a new wave of enlargement, with several new Member States already well advanced in the accession process. As the history of the European process has shown, with a new wave of enlargement and a new international context marked by changes in the architecture, the EU could adopt a new European treaty, just as it did with the current one, adopted in Lisbon, which is outdated and requires substantial changes to the text.

In this respect, we consider it vital to transfer certain areas from the category of shared competences between the EU and the Member States to the category of exclusive EU competences. Thus, the areas of freedom, security, and justice, as well as defence, foreign policy, and collective security —the areas with the most conflicts of competence —should be managed only at the supranational level. The voting modalities for these areas, as well as at the European level in general, are another aspect that needs to be changed. The EU promotes democracy, which is why unanimity cannot be accepted as a way of making decisions in an organisation that

¹ <https://euperspectives.eu/2025/08/defence-loans-spark-eu-institutional-clash-meps-sue/>.

values and defends the principles of international law. The majority is the only key to ensuring that collective security can be pursued without the threat of blockage by states pursuing national ambitions.

However, none of the above can be achieved without an awareness and reconsideration of the vision of the Member States. Conflicts can escalate, imitation of aggressor behaviour can occur, the effects of pandemics spill over into the economic sphere, and the consequences of globalisation can take on nefarious forms. Transatlantic cooperation and US support can only be valid if there is a united Europe, and this can only be achieved by moving from the concept of “national sovereignty” to “European sovereignty” and from “national interest” to “European interest.”

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