Fragmented Commitments: Mapping Feminist Principles in EU External Action

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Abstract

This thesis addresses the European Union's inconsistent integration of feminist principles in its foreign policy, chiefly during Ursula von der Leyen's Commission presidencies. Employing a qualitative multimethod approach, integrating Critical Discourse Analysis and document-based outcome tracing, it uses a synthesis of Decoupling theory and Multilevel Governance to produce a cohesive explanatory framework. The analysis of 9 official documents directly related to the Union's external action and its attempts to project feminist values abroad reveal pervasive policy-practice decoupling (PPD) and means-ends decoupling (MED), where rhetoric diverges from actual outcomes. MLG systemically enables this fragmentation, often leading to instrumentalised gendered discourse and missed targets. This puts into question the EU's normative identity, requiring a shift from symbolic pledges to genuine structural transformation in order to safeguard its democratic credentials.

KEY WORDS: European Union foreign policy, feminism, decoupling, MLG

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Abbreviations

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CFSP: Common Foreign and Security Policy

CivCom: Civilian Committee

CPCC: Civilian Planning and Conduct Capability

CRSV: Conflict-Related Sexual Violence

CSDP: Common Security and Defence Policy

ECHR: European Convention on Human Rights

EEAS: European External Action Service

EP: European Parliament

EU: European Union

FFP: Feminist Foreign Policy

HR: High Representative

MED: Means–Ends Decoupling

MLG: Multilevel Governance

MS: Member States

NPE: Normative Power Europe

PDT: Power Dependence Theory

PPD: Policy–Practice Decoupling

QMV: Qualified Majority Voting

SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

UDHR: Universal Declaration of Human Rights

WPS: Women, Peace and Security

Abbreviations of analysed documents

Given that the documents analysed are referenced repeatedly throughout the document, in order to ease understanding and foster a smoother reading of the research the documents are referred to throughout the text with the following abbreviated names. The full reference can be found after the References section in the chapter titled Policy documents.

Baseline Study Report, 2022: Report on the follow-up baseline study on integrating human rights and gender equality into the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (EEAS(2022)405).

Civilian CSDP Compact, 2023: Civilian CSDP Compact: Towards more effective civilian missions.

CSDP Action Plan, 2021 Strategy and Action Plan to Enhance Women's Participation in Civilian CSDP Missions 2021-2024 (EEAS(2021)1325).

EP CFSP, 2025 Implementation of the common foreign and security policy – Annual report 2024 (Resolution No. P10_TA(2025)0057).

EU Report GAP III, 2023: Joint mid-term report on the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) (JOIN(2023) 36 final).

GAP III, 2020: EU Gender Action Plan III: An ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action (JOIN(2020) 17 final).

Independent GAP III Evaluation, 2023: Mid-term evaluation of the implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III: Final report (Volume I – Main report).

WPS Action Plan, 2019: EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2019-2024 (EEAS(2019)747).

WPS Council Conclusion, 2022: Council conclusions on Women, Peace and Security (Press release).

1. Introduction

The European Union has consistently portrayed itself as a normative power in the international arena. This identity is explicitly reiterated in foundational and strategic documents, presenting the Union as an actor committed to upholding democracy, human rights, the rule of law, peace, and gender equality (GAP III, 2020). In foreign policy specifically, the Union asserts that its external action will reflect the values upon which it was built, "leading by example" (GAP III, 2020). Feminist values, which integrally advocate for "all genders having equal rights and opportunities" (International Women's Development Agency, 2025) are regularly included in this normative portfolio. Not only does the EU as an institution officially celebrate key events like International Women's Day (European Parliament, 2025) or Pride (European Union External Action, 2025), officially claiming that "the EU promotes full and equal enjoyment of all human rights by all with no discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (ibid)".

Its institutions continuously promote these values in the form of gender equality assertions in speeches, calls for gender balance and in increased gender awareness within and extending past its institutions (European Council, 2025; European Parliament, 2025). Gender equality is highlighted as a core value of the EU and a universally recognised human right, considered imperative for well-being, economic growth, prosperity, good governance, peace, and security (GAP III, 2020). This discursive commitment is reinforced by ambitious goals in external action, with the Union declaring that it will reiterate its commitment that 85% of all new EU actions promote gender equality as a significant or principal objective (ibid.) and continuously reiterating its pledge of "promoting gender equality & women's rights beyond the EU" (European Commission, 2025).

The EU also aims to set an example on gender equality internally, with concrete steps being taken towards ensuring equal opportunities and diversity of staff in management positions within the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS). There are calls and official targets for a gender quota of 50% at all levels of the Commission and EEAS management, and work is ongoing towards a similar target for external missions and representation (European Commission & High Representative, 2020). This commitment to feminism is reinforced by great symbolic milestones, including the appointment of a female President of the European Commission (Ursula

von der Leyen since 2019) and a women-led High Representative of the European Union for foreign policy and head of the EEAS (Kaja Kallas since 2025).

However, the presence of feminist principles within the Union's foreign policy discourse is far less consistent than the previous declarations suggest (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). Deep-rooted inequalities persist globally, and no country is close to achieving gender equality by 2030 as initially established by the Sustainable Development Goals (GAP, 2020). This thesis sets out to achieve the following goals: demonstrate that EU strategic foreign policy documents vary considerably in how they engage with gender, reveal the differences and inconsistencies *across* discourse, reveal the differences *between* discourse and tangible results and importantly, explain *how* and *why*.

This investigation is approached from a critical and feminist perspective, informing itself to a certain extent through critical feminist theory, normative theory and employing a critical methodology. Notwithstanding, this thesis begins from the reflexion that a Feminist Foreign Policy as officially adopted by the EU is, for the time being, impossible. As outlined by the Center for Feminist Foreign Policy, achieving foreign policy change in line with feminist values requires political leadership and ownership across all levels (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020), this would not entail all European institutions but also the entirety of its Member States, including conservative components like Hungary and Poland, notoriously defending traditional views on gender and chastising the LGBTQI community (Baczynska, 2021). Although feminist principles and gender equality have become part of the EU's external rhetoric, *feminism* as an guiding force in strategic policymaking is fragmented and inconsistent. To investigate this gap, the thesis explores this inconsistency through a combined dual theoretical framework.

Originally developed by Meyer and Rowan (1977), Decoupling theory describes how institutions adopt formal policies to gain legitimacy, while insulating core practices from meaningful change. Applied to the EU, this might suggest that feminist values are promoted symbolically in external rhetoric but fail to shape actual policy outputs. At the same time, a common theory employed in understanding EU dynamics arises as a potential explanation for this decoupling. Applied into this context, Multilevel Governance theory treats this pattern not as a failure of political will alone, but rather as a systemic product of the EU's governance structure. Given this explanatory and interpretative window, this research decides to use the two theories in conjunction. This approach thus allows not only to understand the ways in which the EU's foreign policies

are decoupled from its feminist objectives, but also to explain why this occurs. This includes examining the reasoning supported by decoupling of the European Union's need to uphold its status as a moral champion and feminist ally, while also examining the possibility of genuine problems in the administration and multilevel governance of the Union which Multilevel Governance theory offers.

Given the absence of a single main foreign policy document, in order to analyse and evaluate this phenomenon, this thesis examines key policy documents presented and published by prominent institutions in EU foreign policy. Methodologically, this research employs qualitative multimethod analysis, encompassing critical discourse analysis supported by policy-based outcome tracing. Following Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, such a version of critical discourse analysis enables the examination of feminist principles at the level of language, institutional practice and broader socio-political context. The discursive material is compared and analysed not only in terms of discursive, textual and social aspects but also in terms of the results and evaluations it publishes in terms of outcomes of policy strategies. This means therefore that, by means of document-based outcome tracing, their content with regards to objectives, goals and targets, are analysed against how they did in practice via implementations reports and reviews.

In doing so, the thesis aims to provide a diagnosis of how feminist principles are integrated, marginalised and contested across EU foreign policymaking. Rather than offering normative evaluations or prescriptive frameworks for what Feminist Foreign Policy ought to be, this study seeks to map the current terrain, to understand the institutional as well as the discursive conditions under which feminist values become credible foreign policy objective. Aligned with the goals of critical research, this thesis ends with a discussion on the broader implications of the findings and provides policy recommendations addressing the EU's current gaps highlighting improvements in accountability frameworks, stronger enforcement mechanisms and addressing structural coordination to ensure a more cohesive feminist foreign policy approach that follows through all stages of the policy cycle.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The EU's normative credentials

The concept of Normative Power Europe emerged as scholars attempted to move beyond traditional understandings of the European role in the international arena, which were often framed in terms of 'civilian power' or potential 'military power' (Manners, 2002). Introducing and developing the concept of NPE, Manners argued that the EU's most significant power lies in its ability to "define what passes for 'normal' in world politics" (ibid., p.236). This notion moves beyond the empirical focus on the EU's institutions or policies, and the concentration on how state-like the EU appears, to include cognitive processes and the EU's international identity. The exercise of such power (the diffusion of EU norms in world politics) is understood by Manners to occur through various mechanisms. A key element facilitating procedural and other forms of diffusion is conditionality, which occurs when the EU attaches conditions related to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law to offers of membership, trade agreements, or aid (Sedelmeier, 2006, p.119).

The EU's hybrid polity, combining supranational and intergovernmental elements, is seen as a peculiar and distinctive form of governance, providing the EU with its 'sui generis' label. Its political-legal constitution is founded upon and informed by a catalogue of universal norms and principles. When it comes to external relations and foreign and development policy objectives, these are stated in the Treaties to be informed by and conditional on these principles, aligning with instruments like the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Examples of norms the EU seeks to promote include democracy, rule of law, human rights, sustainable development, and good governance. As declared by Sedelmeier (2006), the EU promotes human rights and democracy as an essential component of its foreign relations, incorporating human rights clauses in trade agreements, whilst gender equality is explicitly named among the common values promoted through EU partnership and dialogue with third countries (Lucarelli & Manners, 2006).

At the same time, the current increasing militarisation of the EU's external action is seen by some, including Manners (2006) as "weakening the normative claims of the EU in a post-11 September world characterized by the drive towards 'martial potency' and the growth of a Brussels-based 'military-industrial simplex'" (p. 183). Despite these

challenges and nuances, the concept of NPE provides a foundational understanding of how the EU constructs and communicates its global identity through the language of values. Among the democratic norms the EU claims to champion, feminist ideals like women's empowerment, combatting gender-based violence (GBV) or gender equality, which occupies a prominent place, frequently raised in internal and external discourse. Even despite the presence of conservative Member States within the Union, European institutions consistently display public support and endorse the inclusion and protection of LGBTQ rights and its community, as well as increasingly including intersectionality and gender mainstreaming to their discourse.

Nevertheless, the integration of feminist principles in practice, represents a rather complex picture. The following section introduces the concept of Feminist Foreign Policy and discusses the literature surrounding its application on the EU.

2.2. An FFP for Feminist Power Europe

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has emerged as a characteristic approach to external action. Fundamentally, it seeks to challenge traditional, often masculine-dominated, approaches to global politics (Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019), empowering women and ensuring their meaningful participation in all domains of life (ibid). A main feature of FFP is the analytical and practical integration of a systematic gender equality perspective throughout foreign policy (Rosén Sundström, Zhukova & Elgström, 2021). Feminist principles like gender equality are viewed "as both a priority objective and a tool to advance other foreign policy priorities" (ibid., p.445). Key values and aims underpinning FFP, as derived from feminist theory and practice, include promoting gender equality, gender justice, and peace (Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019). FFP is transformative in that it aims to redefine security and peace in the current world order. Further, it is fundamentally emancipatory.

Unlike neoliberal empowerment, which encourage individual agency and self-fulfilment, emancipation in critical feminism and postcolonial scholarship, focuses on collective agency and the need to dismantle oppressive systems, showcasing the transformative drive of feminist foreign policy (David, Guerrina & Wright, 2024). The adoption of a FFP is seen as a means for transformative change in global politics that "seeks to disrupt racist, colonial and patriarchal power dynamics by prioritizing peace, gender equality, and environmental integrity across all levers of foreign policy" (Papagioti, 2023, p.8).

The concept of FFP gained significant global prominence following Sweden's adoption of the world's first FFP in 2014 (Rosén Sundström et al., 2021). This move has been described as "unprecedented and pathbreaking" (Aggestam & Rosamond, 2019, p.41), building on Sweden's self-identity as a "moral superpower" (ibid.). Since then, a growing number of states have adopted or studied a potential adoption of feminist-informed approaches to their foreign and security policies. These include Canada, Australia, México, Colombia, Libya, and Mongolia (Rosamond & Cheung, 2025, p.186), as well as EU Member States such as France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands (ibid).

Despite its growing adoption, FFP faces significant challenges. As mentioned by Sundstrom et al., there is often a clash between the ideals of FFP and traditional state interests, likes security and commercial benefits, "e.g. selling weapons to regimes that oppress women" (Rosén Sundström et al., 2021, p.452). EU countries that have adopted FFPs, seem to view FFP as not in conflict with increases in defence budgets, the continuation of arms exports or stringent migration controls. Liberal Western interpretations of FFP are also critiqued for disregarding structural inequalities rooted in colonialism (Nylund, Håkansson & Bjarnegård, 2023) FFP policies are thus frequently framed within a narrow understanding of gender, focusing predominantly on women and girls, reinforcing binary distinctions (Jalušic, 2009) and overlooking the need for intersectional awareness and postcolonial perspectives (Rosamond & Cheung, 2025, p.186).

Turning our focus back on the EU's assertion that gender equality is a core democratic norm, a closer look into the EU's external action reveals that "the influence of feminist principles on its international relations is evident" (Guerrina, Haastrup & Wright, 2023, p.491). Academics have highlighted three overarching feminist frames present in the EU's external policies: liberal, intersectional, and postcolonial (ibid.). Particularly, much of the scholarship has focused on specific institutions within the EU and analysed them through a gendered lens. Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín (2021) have looked specifically into the gendered nature of the European Parliament, considering it an "early adopter of institutionalized gender equality machinery" (p.106). At the same time, however, the practices and discourse are unequal within the Brussels hemicycle. While the Parliament homes advocates for the adoption of FFP, it also faces a resistance and politicisation of gender equality from right-wing and Eurosceptic parties, exposing internal struggles for homogenous discourse. (ibid.).

Furthermore, academic literature has also turned to the EEAS, a central piece to the EU's external action architecture. While the EEAS is expected to embody and promote gender equality as a public normative actor, integrating gender into its structures seems to be a significant challenge (Chappell, 2021). Research points to structural and normative impediments to gender mainstreaming within the EEAS, including severe disparities in gender balance, particularly in senior management (ibid.). Another key point is that, security and defence issues continue to take precedence over a feminist agenda, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Meanswhile, scholars see the European Commission as a central EU institution in gender equality policy (Lombardo & Meier, 2006) indicating a "shift from a single gender focus to one on multiple inequalities" (Jacquot & Krizsán, 2021, p.163), progressively integrating concerns surrounding inclusion and intersectionality. Yet, despite the expansion in the scope of mainstreaming policy, many of its initiatives rely on soft measures, potentially leading to inconsistent implementation (Hartlapp et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the European Council system is notably "overwhelmingly male" (Abels, 2021, p.124) and "less gender- friendly" (Ahrens & Rolandsen Agustín, 2021, p.106). Scholarship points at the difficulties in the adoption of gender equality policies, constrained by the nature of the Council as a representative of national preferences (Abels, 2021, p.126). Researchers point out that policy domains directly related to gender equality, such as family law or social protection and especially foreign policy, require unanimity in the chamber, a huge challenge for such initiatives (ibid., p.122).

These challenges to feminist reform are also intensified by current world-wide trends like the rise of far-right populism (ibid. p.129). Research stresses that resistance to gender policies within the Council seems to reflect post-functionalist ideas, characterised by heightened national identity and cultural values increasingly driving policy preferences (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Coupled with the politicisation of gender issues across Europe (Kriesi, 2016), this has led to ideological divides that obstruct agreement on progressive gender measures, especially if opposition is framed as a protection of traditional family values and sovereignty.

Overall then, the picture of the EU as a potential feminist champion remains blurry at best. While the EU has increasingly incorporated gender equality into its external action discourse, a coherent, institutionalised feminist foreign policy remains absent. Scholarly work involving EU external action and feminist values has largely been prescriptive

rather than analytical. What remains underexplored is how feminist principles are already being taken up, contested and negotiated within the EU's institutional machinery. To do so, the following sub-chapters introduce two theoretical discussions turning inwards, the concept of policy decoupling, which interrogates the gap between the rhetoric and its implementation; and second, the framework of multi-level governance, which sheds light on how authority, agency and policy competences are distributed across different institutional levels and actors involved in shaping the EU's external action.

2.3. Decoupling

Scholarly work on decoupling has offered greatly valuable insights into how formal commitments may fail to produce meaningful policy change. While much of the literature on decoupling focuses on private organisations, recent investigations have expanded the scope and applied the concept to public institutions and governance settings, especially in legitimacy-sensitive environments, making the theoretical concept exceptionally applicable to the merge of EU foreign policy and feminist norm implementation.

Decoupling theory stems from sociological institutionalism and was first conceptualised by Meyer and Rowan (1977) in their foundational work on organisational legitimacy. They argued that organisations are significantly shaped by its external environments, not just through the exchange of resources, but also by embodying the commonly held beliefs, or in their words, "myths embedded in the institutional contexts" (p.341). The main premise of Decoupling theory as contended by Meyer and Rowan is that organisations adopt formal structures and policies not with the primary goal of improve technical efficiency and effectiveness, but rather to obey and adapt to institutionalised 'myths' and norms accepted and celebrated by the wider society (Bromley, Hwang & Powell, 2012).

In other words. organisations choose to implement policies in form but *decouple* them from core practices to maintain internal flexibility. In this way, organisations are able to maintain legitimacy by conforming to societal beliefs without compromising their practical work requirements. Decoupling occurs then, by "building gaps between their formal structures and actual work activities" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 341), resulting in a gap between official discourse and actual practice, which Meyer and Rowan describe as a means of 'buffering' the technical core of the organisation from external institutional demands (Oliver, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Accordingly, institutions become isomorphic, incorporating elements externally legitimated by (socially constructed)

beliefs of the outside stakeholder, regardless of their effect on core tasks (p.346). As a result, decoupling can be essentially conceptualised as an organisational response (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p.2), identified as the creation and maintenance of a gap between formal policies and actual daily practices or operations (ibid.).

Brunsson (1989) later built upon decoupling by exploring the idea of 'organisational hypocrisy', conceptualising the '*why'* in the choice of organisations to engage in contradictory talk and actions. His research concluded that decoupling was a rational response to conflicting institutional expectations since, by separating talk from action, organisations can simultaneously satisfy multiple and often incompatible stakeholders' prerogatives. This conceptualisation contributed to understanding decoupling not as organisational failure, but rather as a strategic response to institutional complexity and competing legitimacy demands.

Building on this foundation, more recent work has researched into the different ways in which decoupling occurs in practice. Bromley and Powell (2012) distinguish two forms of strategic responses to institutional pressures: symbolic adoption and symbolic implementation. The former occurs when practices do not result in meaningful implementation due to the lack of will or capacity, creating a "gap" between policy and practice (Bromley et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the latter refers to when measures are implemented but lack meaningful impact towards the stated goals. Elaborating on this point, Bromley and Powell make a key conceptual distinction these two practices and their subsequent decoupling that emerges: policy–practice decoupling (PPD) and means–ends decoupling (MED).

PPD is what most of the early literature focused on, referring to cases where organisations adopt policies to signal compliance with institutional norms, but do not actually put them into practice (Bromley, Hwang & Powell, 2012). In these cases, evaluations or inspections related to these policies are often missing or are so vague that they provide small significant information (ibid.). This kind of decoupling is common in legitimacy-sensitive settings where there is external pressure to conform, regardless of whether the institution has the capacity or the interest in doing so. Nevertheless "it is a mistake to be too cynical about decoupling" (Meyer, et al., 1997, p.155; Bromley, et al., 2012, p.488). While indeed, PPD is common in the context of serving the interest of organisational legitimacy, it can also stem from involuntary causes like lack of resources.

By contrast, MED refers to situations where policies are in fact implemented, but their outcomes are disconnected from the original goals (Bromley, et al., 2012). In other words, the organisation is technically doing something, but it is not clear whether that something is effective, meaningful or in fact aligned with the stated mission, and so "their contribution to promoting an organization's primary goals may be tenuous or opaque at best" (p.470). This is especially relevant in contexts where organisations take action to be seen as responsive, like implementing gender mainstreaming tools or diversity plans, but those actions do not necessarily translate to transformative change. Bromley, Hwang and Powell (2012) highlight this as an increasingly important form of decoupling, arguably more common than PPD, especially in modern-day complex international organisations/corporations.

Some EU scholars have also demonstrated how decoupling can be empirically assessed through policy indicators, showing divergent implementation across Member States or regions despite a shared formal commitment. For example, Mazzanti and Zoboli (2008) identify both relative and absolute delinking in EU environmental policy, noting that policies like the Landfill Directive are sometimes symbolically transposed into law but fail to impact actual waste generation or prevention at the local level—a clear case of policy-practice decoupling.

Adding to this, Kern et al. (2017) argue that power and politics are a neglected but central dimension in understanding why and how different forms of decoupling occur (p.544). Their study, considering intra-organisational decoupling, shows that power relations between actors, including those within the same organisation but also between subunits, may decouple in different ways, depending on their level of influence, interests or proximity to external pressures. In this context, decoupling does not simply originate from passive resistance but rather from extensive chains of command regarding decisions about what gets implemented, by whom, and how.

Altogether, the different strands explored above not only conceptualise and operationalise decoupling as merely ignoring rules or a failure to implement policies through a top-down approach. Rather, decoupling takes multiple forms and helps capture the complex interplay between legitimacy, identity, and capacity within institutional, organisational and administrative settings. Yet, despite its richness, this theoretical framework has not been applied much to the EU and also not much regarding to organisational/institutional

implementation of feminist commitments. The following section builds on this foundation by turning to the concept of multilevel governance.

2.4. Multilevel Governance

Multilevel governance provides a deep understanding of the dynamics involved in the sharing of authority and policymaking influence across multiple levels of government, including subnational, national, and supranational tiers. MLG posits that authority, understood as "the competence to make binding decisions that are regarded as legitimate—has been dispersed from the central state upward and downward over the past seventy years" (Hooghe, Marks & Schakel, 2020, p.194). This 'dispersion' is said to be two-sided, involving shifts to both subnational jurisdictions and international institutions.

Two logics underpin the development of this dispersion. First, a functionalist logic conceives governance as an instrument to deliver public goods efficiently by means of allocating competences where appropriate. For example, macro-level concern like defence would be arguably centralised whilst localised services like education would be decentralised. On the other side, the is the political logic, which tend to be exhibited as identity-driven pressures calling for self-rule usually by territorial communities arguing linguistic, cultural or historical distinctiveness, often defending local autonomy over efficiency (Hooghe, Marks & Schakel, 2020). These two distinct and generally antagonistic logics are present in the EU context and stress the structural complexity and fragmentation that characterise its governance dynamics.

Central to this conceptualisation is the work of Hooghe and Marks (2003), who distinguished between two types of MLG. Firstly, Type I governance tends to resemble traditional federalist models, with a limited number of general-purpose jurisdictions positioned hierarchically: international, national, regional, and local (Hooghe & Marks, 2002). These are typically durable, with clear lines of authority. By contrast, Type II governance, is polycentric and task specific. It is comprised of multiple and overlapping jurisdictions designed to address particular policy problems. These units are often ad hoc, created as a response to functional demands across a variety of territorial levels (Hooghe & Marks, 2003; Chowdhury & Wessel, 2012). The EU is often theorised as being a combination, possessing elements of both models. While it structurally resembles Type I with formalised multi-tiered governance, it also demonstrates Type II characteristics,

particularly with regards to the creation of task-specific agencies, regulatory networks, and issue-based coalitions (Hulicka, Lukas & Carson, 2023).

A concept like MLG does not come without critique, scholars like Börzel (2020) have criticised the original MLG framework for upholding a public authority bias. In other words, MLG fails to afford sufficient relevance to non-state actors such as NGOs, business groups and epistemic communities. She argues that, despite MLG focusing on "network governance" and the understanding of governance as a multi-actor phenomenon, EU institutions often continue to treat subnational and civil society actors as stakeholders rather than partners, limiting their influence in policymaking. In this way, an inclusion of these actors into the framework would render insights which were relegated until recently. Similarly, Pazos-Vidal (2019) notes that regional and local authorities are frequently sidelined in agenda-setting, particularly with regards to the formulation of foreign policy and external action strategies. These observations challenge the assumption of MLG that understands authority as evenly distributed, drawing attention instead to asymmetries in agency and access.

Crucially, MLG also provides analytical value when considering accountability and coordination challenges. Hooghe, Marks and Schakel (2020) observe that the dispersion of authority within MLG can blur lines of responsibility, making it especially difficult for citizens to determine who (which level of authority) is accountable for each outcome. This research sees this opaqueness as becoming especially salient in the EU's external action, where policy initiatives often reflect the result of compromise between institutions with diverging mandates and political cultures. The relevance of MLG for this thesis lies in its ability to make sense the interplay between layered institutional competences, competing priorities and political resistance, which shape how and to what extent feminist commitments are embedded within EU foreign policy. This relevance is heightened when understood in relation to Decoupling theory, as developed in the following section. While decoupling identifies the gap between symbolic and operational commitments, MLG helps explain the systemic conditions that allow for these gaps to persist. Together, they offer an insightful lens through which to assess the heterogeneity of feminist engagement in EU foreign policy.

3. Theoretical framework

The chapter above, grounded on an extensive body of literature, has situated the EU's position as a normative power in the world, along with scholarly debates surrounding feminist foreign policy and its possibilities for and within the Union, highlighting how its core principles surface unevenly within EU institutions. While various bodies and actors rhetorically championed feminist principles in various of its institutions, a closer examination reveals a discursive landscape marked by fragmentation, variation, and even contradiction.

As pointed out by feminist scholars, deep-rooted global inequalities persist, not only with differences existing between countries within the EU but in the EU institutions themselves. To investigate this gap, this chapter sets out the theoretical framework through which this inconsistency is studied. Rather than asking why a coherent and institutionalised FFP has not yet been adopted, the focus here is on understanding how and why feminist principles are articulated so unevenly across EU foreign policy discourse.

To do this, the chapter proposes a consideration of two distinct but complementary explanatory pathways. The first interprets the fragmentation within the administrative bodies as a strategic form of decoupling, in which values are symbolically deployed to assert legitimacy without being systematically embedded in practice. The second, multilevel governance, accounts for the interplay between multi-actor dynamics and institutional activities, providing the institutional backdrop for understanding how such contradictions arise.

Together, these frameworks allow for an assessment into whether the observed variation in feminist discourse within the EU stems from deliberate political choices or from systemic features embedded in its institutional configuration. The following section mobilises both frameworks to construct a cohesive explanatory framework for interpreting the structural and strategic drivers behind the inconsistent articulation of feminist principles within the EU and ultimately its foreign policy.

3.1. Decoupling: identifying gaps in feminist rhetoric and practice

As previously discussed, the European Union frequently articulates strong commitments to core values such as gender equality in its internal and external communication, aiming to act as a normative power. Notwithstanding, the real integration of these principles in

its external action is notably inconsistent. While the previous literature review introduced decoupling as a general gap between rhetoric and practice, this theoretical framework chapter explores its details, illustrating how decoupling is not a static concept but rather a dynamic and nuanced phenomenon greatly suited for this investigation.

As mentioned earlier, Bromley and Powell (2012) make a crucial distinction between two decoupling forms. PPD encapsulates the more traditional understanding, where formal policies are adopted but not implemented. While MED, diagnoses policies that are implemented, but their connection to the intended outcomes are weak, unclear or irrelevant. Bromley, Hwang, and Powell (2012) highlight that this form is on the rise given the increasingly complex and managerial make-up of contemporary international organisations. This distinction is vital for the purpose of this thesis, as it allows for a deeper assessment and understanding of decoupling instances (and its causes). The more accurate the diagnosis the more precise its prognosis.

Another significant theoretical advancement on decoupling scholarship comes from Jastram and Foersterling (2024), who aim to address the "pervasive vagueness and inconsistency" in defining "ends" within MED (p.505). As a solution, they propose a twofold typological classification: 'ends as outcomes', referring to immediate or intermediate changes for beneficiaries; and 'ends as impacts', discussing to actual "property changes" or ultimate, long-term effects. For this thesis in particular, this conceptual distinction enables a much more precise analysis whereby one can more accurately analyse the achievements and impact of feminist policy. For instance. whether EU policies achieve short-term, superficial "outcomes" (e.g., increased reporting on gender, funding for specific projects) while remaining "decoupled" from profound, long-term "impacts" (e.g., dismantling patriarchal power structures or achieving genuine gender justice in foreign policy) enables a better determination of the level of decoupling as well as the utility of the EU's policies. In this way, this improves analysis beyond simple observation towards a more precise diagnosis of the nature of the disconnect.

Further, regarding the mechanisms and drivers of decoupling, the framework introduces specific underlying factors or "micro-mechanisms" that influence MED, as identified by Jabbouri et al. (2019). This is also related to work on "causal complexity", "behavioural invisibility" and "practice multiplicity". Firstly, causal complexity refers to intrinsic difficulty in establishing clear cause-and-effect relationships between actions and their results (ibid) – a mechanism particularly relevant in complex policy areas like foreign

policy. Secondly, behavioural invisibility refers to when actions or deviations from professed goals are difficult to pinpoint or assess, allowing actors to maintain a façade of compliance without being noticed. Thirdly, practice multiplicity refers to the ambiguity that arises from varying or sometimes even contradictory practices, this ambiguity makes it challenging to discern what truly leads to substantive compliance or goal achievement (ibid) or to measure the effectiveness of each strategy. These mechanisms serve as additional factors to take into account in explaining how the disparity between rhetoric and practice actually comes about.

A crucial dimension often overlooked in earlier institutional theory is the role of power. The framework incorporates Kern et al.'s (2017) argument that power and politics can and tend to significantly influence how decoupling unfolds, particularly within big organisations. Decisions to decouple or efforts to resist implementation depend on a plethora of actors' influence, interests or proximity to external pressures (ibid). The authors move beyond a purely legitimacy-focused explanation of decoupling and note that the power arrangements and capacities between actors are a key determinant, involving strategic choices and internal conflicts. This provides a highly pertinent consideration to this thesis, as it allows for a consideration of how different EU actors or institutions might strategically engage in decoupling based on their power dynamics and competing interests in feminist foreign policy.

As one of the only scholars bridging feminism and decoupling, Sanders (2022) draws on feminist institutionalism to discuss "institutional decoupling" in the context of equality policy in Welsh government partnerships, defined as "a disjunction between the formal institutional rules that promote equalities representation and the informal institutional practices that sideline the equalities agenda" (p.56). While the main theoretical lens in her work remains feminist institutionalism rather than decoupling, her work on institutional decoupling enriches this thesis, supporting one of it core arguments: that institutional decoupling can exist characterised by the formal promotion of gender equality while discreetly sidelining it.

Finally, and providing a positive backbone for this thesis, Bromley et al. (2012) posit that "decoupling should be thought of as a process rather than a state" (Bromley et al., 2012, p.470). Such process entails thus, the possibility of recoupling, where initial disconnections between policies, practices, and goals can become more aligned over time (Hallet, 2010; Jastram & Foersterling, 2024). In this setting, decoupled policies intended

to act symbolically or currently failing to meet their intended goals, still hold the possibility of becoming integrated with time, driven by forces like shifting internal power dynamics, internal champions, or increased external accountability (Hallet, 2010). Recoupling is arguably a vital concept for this work, providing an optimistic foundation and constructive outlook against the backdrop of criticising ongoing policy. Recoupling defends and promotes the potential for policies and practices to genuinely align over time.

In sum, this section has gone beyond a definitional treatment of decoupling. It has provided a dynamic understanding, analytical depth and a political dimension, that will enable a much more nuanced and precise analysis of the disparity between rhetorical commitments and actual practice within the EU's foreign policy on gender equality.

3.2. MLG as the analytical foundation for understanding EU policy contradictions

As previously established, the European Union is fundamentally characterised by the dispersion of authority both to jurisdictions within and beyond national states (Hooghe, Schakel, 2020), which makes policy tracing and analysis complicated. MLG however, is able to move beyond more simple understandings views of the EU (e.g., intergovernmentalism or neofunctionalism) by acknowledging and leveraging the multifaceted nature of its authority distribution (Borzel, 2020). In order to navigate the EU's complex governance system, our framework not only embraces MLG but also adopts the typologies developed by Hooghe and Marks (2002, 2003), Type I MLG and Type II MLG.

Type I MLG, conceptually rooted in federalism, is characterised by a limited number of jurisdictions that bundle multiple functions within a system-wide architecture (Hooghe & Marks, 2002). Whilst Type II MLG involves a multitude of function-specific, intersecting jurisdictions and competences with no set limit to their number (ibid). The EU exceptionally combines characteristics of both types (Hulicka et al., 2023; Hooghe & Marks, 2002), incorporating Type I elements (e.g. Member States and state competences), but it also exhibits Type II features (e.g. variable territorial jurisdictions and continuous creation of agencies and taskforces). This inherent structural duality within the EU's MLG system is a foundational element for understanding potential fragmentation and inconsistency in policy, such as that which is observed in feminist foreign policy.

Furthermore, recent MLG scholarship has increasingly focused on the shift from the state as the sole policymaker to a "fluid regulatory space populated by both private and public actors" operating across various administrative levels including regulatory processes (Chowdhury & Wessel, 2012, p.337). Such 'actors' can include international organisations, European regulators, national industry associations or subnational authorities (ibid) to name a few. This dispersion of authority means that policy drafting, interpretation and enforcement can occur "with little or no reference to each other," (p.339) leading to "regulatory overlap and dissonance" and "regulatory uncertainty" (ibid).

Another valuable contribution of MLG is with regards to understanding the fragmentation of authority across multiple actors, operating "concomitantly and independently of (and therefore also at crossroads with) each other" (p.348) within regulatory spaces. The subsequent creation of a lack of uniform policy application (ibid) can be traced back to be a direct consequence of the MLG architecture. Additionally, such architecture, this thesis will later argue and showcase, directly underpins the practice multiplicity micro mechanism of decoupling (Jabbouri et al., 2019), where consistent practices become difficult. MLG thus, provides the mechanistic explanation for how and why the EU's rhetorical commitments, such as those to feminist foreign policy, diverge from actual practice, later on precipitating into decoupling.

Ultimately then, the MLG framework provides the structural and dynamic context for understanding how the tensions between diverse actors (EU institutions or Member States to name a few) and fragmented authority can systematically contribute to the observed disparities between rhetorical commitments and practical outcomes in the context of feminist values in European external action.

3.3. Bringing the two together: explaining gaps in EU feminist foreign policy

This thesis argues that understanding the inconsistencies and limitations in the European Union's articulation and implementation of feminist principles within its foreign policy requires a theoretical lens that moves beyond singular theoretical explanations. Therefore, this section synthesises two distinct yet complementary frameworks: decoupling and MLG. By combining these perspectives, this cohesive framework provides a robust analytical toolkit to explain the complex disparity between the EU's rhetorical

commitments to foreign policy and its actual, often fragmented or symbolic practice. While the preceding sections have introduced decoupling as a means to understand the nature of this gap and MLG as the institutional backdrop of EU policymaking, a synthesised approach offers a deeper analytical lens.

The interplay between MLG's structural complexities and the manifestation of decoupling mechanisms is multi-layered. First of all, both of the two frameworks view and understand governance and policy implementation as a dynamic, rather than a static process. MLG acknowledges a "continuous readjustment in an unstable equilibrium between autonomy and interdependence" (Pazos-Vidal, p. 11). While in a similar fashion, decoupling is understood as a process (even with potential solutions and the possibility 'recoupling') where policies and practices can become more or less aligned over time due to shifts in power dynamics or increased accountability (Brombley, Hwang & Powell, 2012). An integrated perspective of these two complementary viewpoints allows for an analysis of whether the EU's FFP commitments are merely symbolic gestures or if they show signs of genuine, (albeit to a certain extent unaccomplished), attempts to achieve goals and feminist progress.

Moving past this inherent similarity in terms of understanding policy and governance as a dynamic ever-changing phenomenon and holding this as a fundamental premise. A multiplicity of other assertions, arguments and concepts are complementary of each other. An example of this is the inherent fragmentation of authority within the EU's MLG system. Traced across diverse actors and levels, the notion that EU authority within policy domains is fragmented in particular ways uncovered by MLG, directly contributes to the appearance of 'practice multiplicity', a micro-mechanism of decoupling explored in the previous sections. In this case, when policymaking is dispersed among numerous actors that operate independently from each other, it is an evident result that consistent policy application will be inherently difficult to enact, implement and follow through. As a result of this, FFP principles and feminist principles alike risk to be interpreted and applied heterogeneously across different EU institutions (e.g., Commission, EEAS, Parliament) or Member States, leading to their dilution or side-lining.

Furthermore, a combination of the two frameworks aids to bring more clarity into actor dynamics, power struggles and existing competing institutional logics. On the one hand, MLG frameworks explicitly incorporate the diverse agendas and agentic power of individual actors and organisations, beyond just formal governmental bodies and serving

particularly in the explanation of quasi-supranational organisations like the EU. MLG as well as to a certain extent decoupling literature, assume actors to pursue their "individual utility," engaging in "rent-seeking or influence maximising tactics" (Pazos-Vidal, p.159).

This aligns directly with decoupling research's emphasis on power and politics where decisions to decouple or to resist policies are fundamentally contingent on actors' influence or interests (Kern et al.) For example, a powerful institution as the European Commission, which has its own agenda and a "privileged position as rule-maker" (Pazos-Vidal, p.110) might strategically decouple feminist commitments if they conflict with other entrenched interests, such as economic or security agendas. Weaker actors like individual EP parliamentarians, while potentially advocating for FFP, might be involved in decoupling practices to providing an image of European commitment to FFP yet being unable to do so due to lack of resources and power imbalances.

The "iron law of multilevel governance" as proposed by Pazos-Vidal (2019), further elucidates this importance in understanding power dynamics within organisations in multilevel governance systems by stating that the final form of any multilevel initiative is contingent on satisfying the individual interests of the actors involved, even if it leads to suboptimal outcomes" (p.234). This helps explain why the transformative ideals of FFP are compromised in favour of less disruptive and rather easily accommodated interpretations, like the liberal or superficial approaches that are observed in some national FFPs (critiqued by feminist scholarship mentioned above).

MLG's inherent complexity translates to decoupling's institutional complexity and "opacity in the relations between means and ends" (Kern et al., p.545) where it is challenging to establish if a policy achieves its exact intended goals is contingent on satisfying. This is directly relevant to 'causal complexity,' a micro-mechanism of MED. In the compound field of EU foreign policy, it can be inherently difficult to trace the clear cause-and-effect relationships between specific feminist initiatives and their ultimate transformative impacts, making it easier for practices to be "symbolically implemented" without generating real change (Jastra & Fosterling, 2023). So, by synthesising two theoretical frameworks specialised in dealing with complex management systems (as is the EU) this integrated lens provides a particularly potent tool for analysing the EU's foreign policy attempts at feminist policies.

This allows this investigation to go beyond simply stating that feminist policies and values are being (in)consistently applied, and rather move further into providing a nuanced explanation for *why* and *how* this occurs. For example, the widespread rhetorical commitment to gender equality by various EU bodies (e.g., the appointment of a female Commission President, statements from the EEAS) may be interpreted through the lens of MLG-driven isomorphic pressures (e.g., normative and mimetic pressures for legitimacy) (Mackay, Monro & Waylen, 2009). However, the observed fragmentation, variation, and even contradiction in actual practice can then be explained by decoupling mechanisms operating within the MLG structure. A combination of both theories allows for a smooth diagnosis of the case study.

Feminist norms might be diluted or fragmented due to the 'competing logics' inherent in MLG, where the functionalist logic of efficient public goods delivery at an optimal scale is clashing with the demand for autonomy coming from distinctive communities like Member States or powerful institutional actors. The 'public authority bias' in early MLG research, has met fair critique by scholars like Börzel (2020), which question the tendency of MLG scholars of privileging public authorities like states or established international organisation over economic and societal actors ranging from banks to grass root movements. In addition to these public authorities, Börzel highlights the need to consider non-state actors like civil society groups and NGOs who, for the case of this thesis could be experts and advocates in FFP. Their agentic power and their ability to form advocacy networks pushing for stronger FFP commitments are analysed and considered to a limited extend due to their impact being limited by the power imbalances and collective action problems inherent in the MLG system (Pazos-Vidal, 20019). The strategic choices of powerful leaders or institutions, as observed in decoupling studies, can lead to FFP principles remaining "symbolic, subordinate, and loosely coupled to other institutional goals" (Mackay, Monro & Waylen, 2009, p.258).

This section has not only argued but also demonstrated the viability of employing two major theories in combination, in order to make sense of the present policy state of feminist values in the EU's foreign policy. It has not only displayed its similarities but has also showcased how their concepts relate to one another, telling a more complete story of how policy is leveraged, produced and implemented. The following chapter now turns to the methodological instruments employed to analyse the policy documents.

4. Methodology

This section presents and explain the methodological choices made for this investigation, covering not only the analytical approach adopted but also the choice of case study, the selection of the time frame and resources analysed. This section thus, aims to lay the groundwork for the chapters to follow and to clarify how the chosen methods, both in terms of document choice and method choice align with the core objectives of this work. Firstly, this section will ground the socio-political setting in which the case study and this research is being conducted, highlighting the moderately recent changes in EU leadership putting female and feminist characters at the forefront of Europe's international relations. After justifying the selection of case documents the chapter is followed by an explanation of its methodological choice of Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis (CDA) supported by document-base outcome tracing as well as an explanation of the operationalisation and analysis of the data. A brief discussion on methodological limitations follows.

4.1. Case study

Firstly, the research topic arises in the context of an increasingly convoluted time for the EU's external affairs, struggling to speak through one united voice through the many current normative challenges and dilemmas it faces. This paper is aware of the broad and multifaceted nature of the themes explored within it, a common challenge within qualitative research. The European Union, often defined as *sui generis*, resists straightforward classification, operating as a unique political entity unlike nation states or international administrations. Feminism, too, as outlined in the chapters above, is characterised by its conceptual complexity, encompassing multiple dimensions relating to its definition, aims, and implementation. Even foreign policy, particularly in the EU context, does not take the form of a single tangible document but rather emerges through a collection of policy documents, statements and practice. Against this backdrop, the following subsection delineates and justifies the chosen specific research scope: the EU's external action policies and its articulation and application of feminist principles during the Commission presidency of Ursula von der Leyen, specifically covering her first term (2019-2024) and extending to the start of her second term.

This period was selected for several key reasons. Firstly, von der Leyen's nomination in 2019 marked a significant moment, as she became the first ever female President of the

European Commission (Marinić, 2019). Her presidency began with a public commitment to achieving gender balance within her cabinet (Cox, 2024). This public emphasis on gender equality by the head of the EU's highest executive body positioned her tenure as a period potentially ripe for advancing gender equality and considering feminist principles within the EU's operations.

Following this, the most recent decision of Kaja Kallas as head of the European External Action Service and High Representative to the EU this 2025, also marks a symbolic representation of gender equality and feminist values in EU foreign policy. Kaja Kallas being Estonia's first women prime minister and saying, "if women were in charge there would be less violence" (ERR News, 2022). In addition to this, von der Leyen's presidency has seen specific incidents and policies in the external sphere that have brought gender and feminist considerations to the forefront. Illustrated by the 'sofagate' incident in 2021, where von der Leyen was notably left without a chair during a diplomatic meeting in Turkey, was publicly called out by her as a moment highlighting ongoing gender inequality and its relevance to EU values (BBC, 2021).

Beyond symbolic incidents and a focus on gender balance within the payroll of the EU institutions, critical perspectives have emerged regarding the substance of EU external actions under this leadership, particularly concerning human rights and values (Islam, 2024). For instance, von der Leyen's stance on the conflict in Gaza and her approach to migration deals have been critiqued as potentially disregarding human rights conventions and failing to align with a value-based approach expected of a feminist leadership (ibid.). This criticism has come not only from scholars and journalists, but also from diplomats within the EU's own ranks, with the EU's former ambassador to Palestine von Burgsdorff warning that the EU's response to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza had been reduced to mere rhetorical condemnation, unaccompanied by any meaningful political action. He argued that, the "moral authority it gained by standing up to Russia is being diminished by its timidity on Israel" and that consequently, "the EU is also undermining its credibility as a champion of international law" (von Burgsdorff, 2025).

Additionally, *feminism*, as discussed by political commentators, extends beyond numerical gender balance (Dell'Aquila, 2024) and requires a different approach and mindset, involving a not only political will but accurate implementation of values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (ibid.). The period under review provides fertile ground to examine how these feminist principles interact with the realities of EU

external action. By focusing on von der Leyen's presidency, this study can analyse a period marked by both explicit commitment to gender equality at the highest level and concrete policy examples of external engagements that invite scrutiny regarding the (in)consistent application of feminist principles as defined within the contemporary EU discourse.

4.2. Data selection

Due to the scope of this paper, direct interviews, speeches or comments made by Kallas, von der Leyen or other power EU spokespeople have not been considered, yet are fervently encouraged for the purpose of expanding this research. Instead, with the delineated temporal scope and thematic scope (feminist discussions during the von der Leyen administrations), this study chose to examine a selection of policy documents drawn from diverse branches of the EU's administrational landscape, differing not only in origin but also in character. In total, 9 documents were analysed amounting to 350 pages.

Firstly all documents were found through the official EU websites, notably the EEAS newsroom and EU publications library. Given the specificity required from the data, the early selection process of the documents followed a preselection round, firstly considering their title and inclusion of key words like 'women' 'gender' or 'mainstreaming', in order to assure their analytical relevance. Unfortunately, while policy documents mentioned continuous and mid-term reports, this was only the case for the Gender Action Plan, whose two mid-term reports (one produced independently by a combination of EU policy think tanks and the other one produced internally by the European Commission). Rooted in Decoupling theory, the final selection tried to have a similar number of documents representing the 'policy and means' side of external action in contrast to the 'practice/ends) side. Consequently 5 documents represent policy documents and policy declarations directly related to feminist values whilst the remaining 4 made up the reviews and implementation reports of policies directly related to feminist values.

A listing of the documents is available in Appendix I, it contains a table listing the documents in order of publishing and includes a short summary, along with the institution issuing it (Commission, Parliament, etc) and its primary audience.

4.3. Method and analytical design

Given the nature of this work and its core theoretical framework, this thesis has chosen to adopt a qualitative multimethod approach, that integrates CDA with document-based outcome tracing. This is because of the two main interests of the analysis. With regards to outcome tracing, this essentially refers to the analytical focus on the end product. Given that the theoretical framework grounds itself particularly in decoupling (as well as MLG), the documents are analysed in terms of what the policy promised in terms of feminist-grounded objectives, against the outcome side of policy, looking into what the reports say in terms of ends and objectives achieved. Similar to process tracing, which aims to trace "causal mechanisms using detailed, within-case empirical analysis of how a causal mechanism operated in real-world cases" (Beach & Pedersen, 2019, p.9), this analysis slightly deviates from the method by giving full attention to the outcome of our selected (policy) processes. This approach is, notwithstanding, complementary to CDA. Embracing a critical approach to social research, this thesis is deeply interested in understanding how these documents are being written, how these feminist objectives are framed and how their outcomes are discussed. In order to achieve, this research relies on discourse analysis.

While there is no one single version of discourse analysis, all its variants begin from the premise that language is not neutral but rather a form of social practice. This perspective allows researchers to observe how language influences and reflects the ways in which people think, behave, and organise themselves (Bryman, 2016). It focuses on exploring how meaning is made and negotiated through discourse and how this relates to social structures and change (Wodak, 2011). For numerous scholars, discourse analysis is not only a method but also a theoretically grounded methodology in its own right (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Similar to feminist discourse explored in the literature section, Alejandro and Zhao (2023, p. 2) explain that discourse analyses "encompasses both an analytical framework—based on the idea that discourse plays a role in society and world politics—and a set of methods of analysis to empirically investigate this idea."

Wodak (2011) emphasises that discourse must be analysed in its full institutional and historical context, as meanings are embedded in time, space, and political struggles. Her approach in particular, focuses on how specific word choices, omissions, and frames are used to manage institutional contradictions or legitimise contested positions. However, as mentioned before, there is no one unique method to discourse analysis, rather, a

multiplicity of approaches exists, often employing linguistic analysis alongside sociological, psychological, or historical perspectives to understand texts and their interplay with broader social reality. Wodak's insights exemplify CDA, the typology of discourse analysis this thesis has chosen to employ given its usefulness in a case study dealing with power structures not only in policy creation and implementation but also in terms of its impact, aiding or impeding the dismantling of oppressive patriarchal power structures.

Zooming in on this thesis' case study, gender equality and feminist values are treated inconsistently in foreign policy. Such inconsistencies are not just technical, they are discursive, in the sense that different EU institutions, representatives and administrations are framing their commitments to gender equality and feminism principles differently. CDA offers a particularly fitting methodological lens considering the motivation of this thesis. This is because the project is not only concerned with whether feminist principles appear in EU foreign policy, but with how they are constructed, contested, diluted or decoupled, aligning directly with the concerns of both discursive institutionalism and Decoupling theory.

As stated in earlier instances of the chapter, this investigation employs CDA, particularly following Fairclough's (1995) model which shall now be explained. The discourse analysis of the material thus proceeds across three levels, following Fairclough's model: textual (accounting for keywords, modality, silences), discursive (regarding institutional positioning, speaker/audience) and social (concerning the broader geopolitical or institutional context). The aim is to identify patterns of legitimation, dilution or contradiction in how feminist principles are framed and subsequently trace where discursive commitments diverge from practice, a key signal of symbolic adoption and decoupling. In this way, by employing a critical approach to discourse analysis, this method not only works as textual analysis, but a critical tool for interrogating the EU's identity as a normative power at a time when its values are under increasing scrutiny.

Viewing language as a social practice (Fairclough, 2013), CDA allows for an in-depth analysis of how power, ideology and historical context shape discourse (Meyer, 2011) within the different administrations and institutions of the EU like the Commission, the EEAS, the Parliament and the Council. Fairclough's approach highlights the role of discourse in maintaining or challenging dominant ideologies, a key insight for this study, which critically engages with the EU's self-identification as a normative power in the

international arena. CDA emphasises the importance of understanding power in dominating discourses and tries to answer the questions "who uses language, how, why and when" (van Dijk, 1997, p. 2).

CDA's focus on bridging the micro-level of texts with the macro-level of institutional practices and social structures (van Dijk, 2015), is crucial for understanding how language functions within the EU's socio-political context and external relations. This critical lens, is thus particularly well-suited for this projects' aim of clarifying opaque power relations, enabling a critical examination of *why* the inconsistency of the EU's commitment to feminist values in practice.

Further, returning to the contribution of document-based outcome tracing as a complementary approach in this multimethod qualitative methodology. To complement this discourse-oriented approach, a qualitative multimethod design by integrating document-based outcome tracing was chosen as the best methodological avenue. This allows for the systematic comparison between policy commitments and practical outputs, in line with both policy–practice and means–ends decoupling (Bromley & Powell, 2012). By examining how institutional follow-up not simply takes shape across the ecosystem of EU reporting but rather is delivered by the institutions, this investigation can clearly discover evidence of MED and PPD, since outcomes of policy efforts will be brought into investigation. As mentioned earlier, in most cases regarding the available data, policy documents announced mid-term reviews or evaluations that were not published or not accessible, instead, objectives from a one strategic document were absorbed into broader reporting frameworks, complicating outcome tracing. Rather than seeking one-to-one input–output pairings, this method followed the dispersed trail of monitoring, implementation and accountability documents to assess how (and whether) the EU reflects on the outcomes of its feminist policy commitments. This tracing of institutional behaviour and omissions is central to identifying patterns of decoupling.

4.4. Operationalisation and analysis

With regards to the operationalisation of the theoretical concepts, accommodating them to fit an analysis through CDA and particularly CDA, this sub-charter explicates the analytical process undertaken.

Following Fairclough's (1995) model, the texts were read and analysed in close relation to the three dimensions: a textual dimension, a discursive dimension and a social

dimension. Throughout the analysis, feminist principles were operationalised into identifiable discursive indicators based on a codebook developed iteratively during close reading of the material. This CDA was carried out using Atlas.ti, where each document was coded in-depth using a set of codes grouped under the three dimensions. Codes were applied to excerpts ranging from keywords to longer discursive segments like sentences. This enabled both granular textual analysis and comparative synthesis across documents, making visible recurring rhetorical patterns, framings of gender, and tensions between feminist principles and institutional constraints.

The codes were therefore generated inductively from recurring patterns in the texts, while being informed by the theoretical framework, this meant that dimensions included the theoretical knowledge of the theoretical background and framework. For instance, examples of soft language/modality, strategic ambiguity/qualifying phrases, responsibility diffusion or instrumentalisation of gender, concepts related to discussions in previous chapters, were repeatedly found, adding them into the codebook as codes of their own. In total three coding rounds occurred in the process, to make sure that everything was well coded and new codes were able to be evaluated against the text. This rendered a total of 18 codes, bundled into textual, discursive and social code groups.

Importantly, while attention is evidently paid to the *presence* of gendered vocabulary and key words like mainstreaming, representation and intersectionality, this study focused on how these values within feminist discourse were framed, employed or omitted across institutional material. These principles were not conceived of as goals in this investigation but rather seen through their potential use as tools for legitimacy or rhetorical markers.

With regards to questions on how the data was handled in order to do a document-based outcome analysis, policy documents were analysed alongside implementation reviews to assess whether objectives such as increased participation, intersectional awareness, or structural reform translate into observable outcomes. Particular attention is paid to gaps, delays, or rhetorical persistence in the absence of institutional change. This dual approach not only was able to reveal how feminist commitments are represented discursively but also enabled a more grounded diagnosis of symbolic versus substantive policy enactment.

4.5. Reflexivity and limitations

As anticipated, any methodological choice is accompanied by potential limitations. Firstly, regarding the choice of multimethod analysis, Alejandro and Zhao (2023, p. 6)

warn of the "challenge of dissolution", the risk that combining methods may dilute the specificity and strengths of each. This is a valid concern and one that does manifest to a certain degree, since clearly, the analytical weight and efforts fall heavily on the CDA, using document-based outcome tracing to further enhance and enrich the findings. This does not mean its inclusion is redundant, on the contrary, the application of document-based outcome tracing is essential. Given the centrality of decoupling to the theoretical framework, tracing how institutional commitments are followed up, monitored, or avoided is necessary to assess the divergence between means and ends, and between policy and practice. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond rhetorical commitments and examine how (and whether) those commitments materialise in institutional action, revealing gaps, silences, or strategic shifts that may otherwise remain obscured.

Secondly, Wetherell and Potter warn against the limitations of employing discourse analysis since, "work of this kind is not suited to the production of the kind of broad empirical laws which are commonly the goal of social psychological research" (Wetherell and Potter, 1988, p. 182). This research acknowledges and agrees with such a statement, it is not viable to make a dataset as small as the one this research employs able to be representative of the entire EU climate, its overall external action or even its complete position with regards to feminism. Rather, this investigation serves as a reflection on a brief snapshot in time, following a very niche topic, through a deep analysis of a limited amount of public policy documents. As will be mentioned in the concluding remarks of this study, future works are welcome to expand this research and question it.

Another significant critique especially applicable to feminist research and critical and discursive forms on analysis is the accusation of bias. This relates to researcher's political stance and prior ideological commitments. Critics of CDA and critical approaches to social research (and foreign policy) argue that maintaining an ideological stance throughout the research rather than undertaking a neutral stance, risk failing true reflexivity and accuracy, since their normative stance may tamper with the findings. In other cases, biases may occur in the selection of data sets supporting a preferred interpretation. (Meyer, 2011). Faced with this limitation a critical approach entails, this research can only but embrace its positionality as part of engaging in transparent and reflexive research, aiming not for neutrality but for critical awareness as its methodological rigour – and being transparent in all steps of the production of this work.

Lastly, with regards to the choice of sampling method, the use of purposive sampling instead of random sampling, while admittingly limiting the capacity of this research to provide broader generalisation (Bryman, 2016), has been selected for central reasons. Purposive sampling ensured that the selection of documents and materials were as relevant to the project as possible. This approach allowed for a theoretically informed and context-sensitive analysis aligned with the aims of CDA and the topic in question, which was confined to particular parameters in order to ensure relevance and scientific rigour. Thus, while it is indeed relevant to acknowledge, that this research is not generating universally applicable findings, this was never its intention. Instead, it aims to offer valuable insight within broader academic and political discussion and invite further reflection into the matter.

5. Findings

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the thesis, based on a qualitative multi-method approach integrating CDA with document-based outcome tracing. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model, the analysis explores how feminist principles are articulated, marginalised and/or contested across different stages and institutional sites of EU foreign policy. The findings are presented and grouped into three distinct decoupling outlooks. The first focuses on instances where policy practice decoupling was identified, the second presents instances of means ends decoupling, whilst the third decoupling outlook focuses on findings relating to institutional and structural aspects of decoupling.

5.1. Decoupling 1: Rhetoric without robust implementation

The analysis of EU policy and implementation documents reveals evidence of PPD in the EU's feminist commitments, in which formal policies are adopted signalling compliance with institutional norms, but are not completely put into practice. A persistent feature present across multiple policy documents is the heavy reliance on soft modality and governance language, prioritising encouragement and guidance rather than mandates or robust enforcement mechanisms. For example, the GAP III (2020), described as an "ambitious agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment in EU external action" (p.1), demonstrates strong rhetorical commitments, mentioning in several occasions concepts like 'intersectionality' and 'transformative change'. However, its heavy reliance on soft governance tools like training or guidance raise questions about concrete implementation. Further, key deliverables and measures within the GAP III such as

‘gender mainstreaming’, ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’ are often included without enforceable standards or strategies, lacking tangible accountability mechanism.

Similarly, the WPS Action Plan (2019) demonstrates a strong rhetorical commitment to embedding gender equality and a gendered perspective within its peace and security efforts, yet CDA reveals that concrete mechanisms for enforcement, budgeting or sanctions are once again, either deferred or undefined. The document tends to use words like EU Member States and other stakeholders ‘are encouraged to do likewise’ or ‘as appropriate’, rather than providing firm obligations. Similar to the GAP III, the accountability framework in the WPS Action Plan primarily outlines ‘mid-term and final reporting reviews’, currently restricted to the public (if produced already) and ‘consultation’ with civil society, lacking clarity in monitoring ambitions or enforcement mechanisms for non-compliance.

The CSDP Action Plan (2021) also exhibits soft enforcement language, with implementation being ‘encouraged,’ ‘supported,’ or ‘promoted,’ rather than mandated. Monitoring is mentioned but not detailed. In the same vein, the Civilian CSDP Compact (2023), despite articulating gender mainstreaming as one of its priorities, employing assertive feminist vocabulary and quantitative targets, still employs soft monitoring mechanisms (e.g. staff surveys) and notes that target-setting (e.g. 40% women in leadership) lacks binding mechanisms. Furthermore, the documents’ reliance on qualifying phrases, like ‘as appropriate’, ‘where States’, enables opportunities of non-compliance or selective implementation.

The WPS Council Conclusions (2022), issued as a press release, while being non-binding, it does however function as a powerful political declaration. Overall, while at first glance it projects a unified pro-feminist identity outwards, a closer look shows that it offers limited substance in terms of evaluating policy implementation or pushing for institutional transformation. The language used involves encouragements, recognitions and reiterations, rather than mandates or commitments. These rhetorical choices reflect the strategic ambiguity inherent in general Council conclusions, which allow broad agreement without enforcing contentious or politically costly changes at Member State level. Further, while condemning external aggressions and crackdowns (Ukraine, Iran or Afghanistan), it maintains certain strategic silences regarding specific internal EU gender regressions (e.g. Member State non-compliance to SRHR) or any self-critique beyond the general acknowledgment of a “need to address new issues and challenges” (WPS Council

Conclusions, p.1). This highlights a geopolitical externalisation of feminist concern, common in EU foreign policy discourse, where feminist commitments are deployed outwardly but not internally.

Beyond soft language, the analysis found further evidence of PPD, found through instances of symbolic adoption in which institutions conceal non-compliance to manage conflicting demands or maintain a façade of legitimacy. For instance, the documents gesture at multilevel coordination, alluding to 'civil society engagement' or including 'internal accountability structures' (e.g. the inclusion of gender advisors in CSDP mission) to their policies, but at the same time avoid specifying *who* is responsible, by when or with what resources.

Furthermore, the Independent GAP Evaluation (2023), offering a more critical assessment of the GAP III's performance, introduces vivid terminology like "gender dilution" (p.26) and "gender significance shopping" (ibid.) to describe symbolic compliance and operational gaps. It notes a "scarcity of gender expertise" (p.16) and internal awareness of GAP III which "cannot be taken for granted" (p.14), displaying how a lack of capacity can also be an involuntary cause of PPD. The Baseline Study Report further corroborates PPD, explicitly stating that "the integration of human rights, a gender perspective and WPS is not yet systematic and consistent in operational planning documents" and that inclusion "remains generic" (p.93). This demonstrates a clear decoupling of high-level policy from consistent operationalisation.

Similarly, the EP CFSP Resolution discursively reiterates existing policy frameworks however does not introduce substantive new strategies. This reflects a tendency towards rhetorical repetition as opposed to critical propositions. Overall, these instances collectively showcase an arguably strategic use of formal gendered external action policies by the EU, to manage its image as a feminist normative power, satisfying legitimacy demands without necessarily ensuring the disruptive changes that FFP calls for.

5.2. Decoupling 2: Instrumentalised goals and stagnant progress

While more subtle, MED was found to be a prevalent form of decoupling, showcasing that while policies can be technically implemented, their outcomes are weakly connected to the original stated goals. The findings provide threefold evidence of MED, particularly

through the instrumentalisation of gender, the narrowing of its scope and perhaps the most apparent, the persistent failure to achieve quantitative targets.

The instrumentalisation of gender equality covers instances where it was framed as a means to achieve broader economic, security or in several cases, reputational objectives, rather than being pursued as an inherent political or ethical goal. For instance, the GAP III, despite its strong discursive ambitions, displays variable alignment between means and ends, by introducing an instrumentalisation of gender. It presents gender equality as linked to the "credibility of democratic institutions", this framing, as echoed by feminist academics discussed in previous sections, can dilute the emancipatory potential of feminist principles, reducing them from transformative ends in themselves to tools for enhancing the EU's global reputation in this case.

Furthermore, discourse analysis uncovers a narrow understanding of gender and gender equality within the texts, focusing disproportionately on victimhood rather than addressing structural inequalities comprehensively. To illustrate, the Civilian CSDP Compact's practically exclusive association of gender with conflict-related sexual violence limits its scope to victimhood. Similarly, the Council Conclusions on WPS, condemn the "disproportionate effect that armed conflicts continue to have on women and girls worldwide" (p.1) primarily addressing the prevalence of "sexual and gender-based violence" (ibid.). This presents a difficult tension in feminist scholarship; while the acknowledgement of these realities is crucial in advancing gender justice, consistently framing women in such terms may invertedly sideline broader feminist critiques aimed at dismantling systemic power structures.

Finally, strong evidence of MED arises from the analysis through document-based outcome tracing and CDA, revealing a consistent failure to achieve stated quantitative targets and a stagnation of progress. For instance, the Strategy and Action Plan to Enhance Women's Participation in Civilian CSDP Missions acknowledges that despite "strong commitments since 2004" and the "ambitious Civilian CSDP Compact," the "average percentage of mission personnel made up by women... has not increased since 2017" and "seems to have stagnated at around 24 %" (p.3). This stagnation persists despite explicit targets like "40 % representation across all missions and staff categories by 2024" (p.7).

Moreover, the EEAS GAP Mid-Term Review provides stark figures, explicitly stating that "only 3.7% of new actions targeted gender equality as a principal objective, falling

short of the 5% goal" (p.9). This report further acknowledges that gender parity in management positions falls short of the 50/50 target, with 47% in the Commission but significantly lower in the EEAS (31%) as well as (28%) in civilian CSDP (p.22) indicating an internal decoupling between policy and institutional reality. The report's decision to extend GAP III until 2027 can be seen as a pragmatic alignment with general EU's Multiannual Financial Framework (which runs from 2021 to 2027), but also as a realistic acknowledgement of the need for more time to realistically achieve the documents' goals. In addition, the discourse analysis reveals a pattern of admitting shortfalls however often reframing them as areas requiring "effort" or "further scope" rather than outright failures.

Finally, the EEAS Report on the Follow-up Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality into the EU's CSDP reveals severe MED with respect to accountability mechanisms. It states that "the integration of (…) a gender perspective and WPS is not yet systematic and consistent in operational planning documents" (p.93). Another example of this is "the fact that there is no centralised CSDP record" of complaints for gender-related misconduct "results in the EU not being able to easily retrieve information about past complaints and how they were addressed" or "ensure that staff who have been investigated are not re-hired into another mission" (p.70). This is a clear and severe case of decoupling of accountability. The report also confirms the stagnation in women's representation, noting that "the representation of women in CSDP M/Ops remained unchanged over the five-year period between the two studies" (p.95). Lastly, it observes that "activities to support women in leadership positions and gender-responsive leadership training targeting both men and women are not widely rolled out" (p.9), and that the EU "has 'not developed any specific guidelines on CRSV (Conflict-Related Sexual Violence)" (p.78).

These findings collectively underscore a pervasive pattern where implemented actions and initiatives fail to translate into their intended transformative outcomes, highlighting a significant and widespread form of means-ends decoupling.

5.3 Decoupling 3: Structural/Institutional decoupling

The intricate architecture of the EU, understood through the lens of MLG, emerges as a key explanatory factor for the fragmentation and uneven implementation of feminist principles within the EU's external action framework. The inherent structural duality

within the EU's MLG system, which mixes both Type I (hierarchical, bundled competencies) and Type II (polycentric, task-specific, overlapping jurisdictions) governance models, is a foundational explanation for policy misalignment and inconsistency, and consequently a key finding in this research.

MLG directly contributes to dispersed responsibility and structural fragmentation, which in turn fosters practice multiplicity, a micro-mechanism of decoupling in which the existence of numerous practices complicates the task of keeping policy application coherent across the different institutions it encompasses and targets. The GAP III, for instance, despite being an ambitious agenda, notes that the implementation of its measures rely on coordination across numerous actors including the 'European Commission and the High Representative', 'EU Member States' embassies', 'EU Delegations, CSDP operations and missions', to name a few. This dispersed responsibility across multiple EU bodies and even actors outside of it underscores the inherent complexities in carrying out EU external action effectively and efficiently.

A recurring code in the CDA which focused on social practice was repeatedly employed during the analysis of the WPS Action Plan, particularly indicating MLG governance. In the case of the WPS Action Plan, several sentences acknowledged that "the responsibility for the implementation of the WPS Agenda lies with the EU Member States as well as with all relevant European Union Services and Institutions" (p.3). This distributed accountability creates structural fragmentation. For instance, "All EU Member States adopt and implement their respective (...) National Action Plans on R1325" (p.9), showcases a reliance on numerous, independent actors for comprehensive implementation.

The CSDP Action Plan also acknowledges that implementation responsibilities are dispersed across the EEAS, CPCC, and Member States. Yet, it fails to resolve this by lacking strong coordination mechanisms or initiatives, actively allowing for ambiguity and potential fragmentation. The Civilian CSDP Compact also leverages MLG in assigning 'joint responsibility' to the EEAS and the Member States and mission actors. Additionally, its discursive reliance on 'collective targets' enables individual Member State shortcomings to be covered by averages. Overall then, the unclear distribution of responsibility across institutional layers and external partners risks advancing structural fragmentation and diluted follow-through.

Crucially, MLG provides insight into institutional misalignment, divergent interests and power imbalances that influence where and when feminist commitments are advanced or resisted. The EU's hybrid polity inherently fosters policy heterogeneity, leading to feminist principles facing obstacles in translation to coherent practice due to this institutional fragmentation. The tension between shared rule and self-rule within the EU is particularly evident in its external action and foreign policy, which is primarily a competence of the Member State, resulting in divergent preferences and obstacles for coherent practice.

The European Parliament, for example, and as noted earlier by Ahrens and Rolandsen Agustín (2021) was the "early adopter of institutionalized gender equality machinery" (p.106), acting as an advocate for FFP and often driving gender equality policy forward whereas in contrast, the Council system is characterised as "less gender-friendly" (ibid). In this way, the EU, as powered by the Parliament in terms of legislative proposals, faces difficulties in the adoption of gender equality policies, later reviewed by the Council, constrained by its nature as a representative of national preferences (including for instance Hungary and Poland, known for its less feminist and conservative ideals). Policy domains directly related to gender equality often require unanimous decision-making, an almost impossible outcome for such initiatives. The rise of far-right populism and the politicisation of gender issues across Europe (Kriesi, 2016) intensify these challenges, leading to ideological divides that deter the inclusion of gender conversation to the debating table, often resulting in lowest-common denominator policy documents with limited potential for structural change.

While the European Commission and the EEAS have arguably made progress, their initiatives often rely on soft measures, leading to criticisms of inconsistent implementation. Asides from both branches facing disparities in gender balance, it seems that despite the EU's normative role, within the Commission and EEAS security and defence issues continue to take precedence over a feminist agenda (which includes demilitarisation). Additionally, the Baseline Study Report explicitly highlights how the "nomination of candidates is the responsibility of the Member States" and the EEAS "has no direct influence on their recruitment" (p.64). Furthermore, "it is the Member States' responsibility to provide pre-deployment training to seconded staff, and it is likely that not all Member States include human rights and gender in that training" (p.95),

demonstrating how distributed accountability within MLG allows for variable political will to dilute feminist principles in practice.

Finally, MLG's inherent complexity contributes to opacity and causal complexity, making it difficult to trace clear cause-and-effect relationships between specific feminist initiatives and their ultimate transformative impacts. This is compounded by the fact that policy documents are not paired with their own reviews and reports and so objectives are reviewed diffusely. This obscurity facilitates symbolic implementation without generating genuine, measurable change. The framework also highlights how power and politics significantly influence how decoupling unfolds, with decisions to decouple or resist implementation being contingent on actors' influence, interests or proximity to external pressures. Powerful institutions, like the Commission, might strategically decouple FFP commitments if they conflict with other entrenched interests, such as economic or security agendas. This aligns with the "iron law of multilevel governance" (Pazos-Vidal 2019), where the final form of any initiative is contingent on satisfying the individual interests of the actors involved, even if it leads to suboptimal outcomes (Kern et al.), explaining why transformative feminist ideals are often compromised in policy output. Overall then, the complex interplay of fragmented authority, diverse institutional capacities, and competing interests across the EU's multilevel governance structure collectively creates an environment where decoupling is not merely a possibility but a persistent feature of its foreign policy on gender equality and feminist principles.

6. Discussion

This chapter moves from the descriptive presentation of findings to a critical interpretation, attempting to explain the importance of the identified patterns of decoupling within the EU's foreign policy on gender equality and feminist values. Drawing on the literature review and theoretical framework established earlier, this discussion critically links empirical observations to conceptual insights, in order to contribute to the broader academic debate surrounding the rhetoric versus reality of EU feminist commitments.

6.1. Soft governance and PPD

The findings have shown a general presence of PPD in the EU's approach to feminist pledges, where formal commitments have frequently been coupled with vague and weak

implementation. This observation confirms to a certain extent Meyer and Rowan's (1977) foundational insight that organisations, particularly in legitimacy-sensitive environments, will fall pray to superficially adopting formal policies in search of increased legitimacy. The EU, as an actor consistently portraying itself as a normative power committed to values like human rights and gender equality, shows evidence of engagement in this ceremonial adoption, to uphold its international identity.

The reliance on soft governance like dialogue or guidance, alongside a strategic avoidance of binding obligations in key policy documents like the GAP III and the WPS Action Plan, illustrate PPD. By framing deliverables and accountability frameworks employing words like 'are encouraged to do likewise' or 'as appropriate', the EU is able to project an image of commitment to feminist values without incurring the political or financial costs of comprehensive or directly enforceable implementation. This premise aligns with Brunsson's (1989) concept of organisational hypocrisy, which suggests that the EU juggles conflicting institutional expectations through the separation of talk and action. This enables the EU to simultaneously satisfy its internal need for flexibility (and balance of power amongst its stakeholders) as well as its external demand for a value-driven foreign policy at the same time.

Furthermore, a sophisticated form of PPD was found in the texts through the materialisation of a phenomenon labelled earlier as the geopolitical externalisation of feminist concern is evident in the WPS Council Conclusions, where condemnation is directed outwards (e.g., Ukraine, Iran) while strategic silences are maintained regarding internal EU gender regressions or Member State non-compliance. This allows the EU to project an image of committed feminist identity and relevant normative power, without being held accountable for non-compliance. This strategic avoidance also resonates with Bromley and Powell's (2012) argument on decoupling strategies including "concealing non-compliance and buffering technical structures" (Bromley & Powell, 2012, p.27).

In addition to this, the findings have also advanced the understanding of PPD, showing that it is not solely a product of strategic choice. The Independent GAP III Evaluation's observations of a "scarcity of gender expertise" (2023, p.16) and low internal awareness of GAP III, suggest that PPD can also be an involuntary result endemic to institutional factors such as lack of capacity or resources. Such an observation adds valuable nuance to the discussion, not only in decoupling academic circles but also those discussing EU policy management as well as those focused in advancing feminist commitments within

policy, showcasing that whilst strategic calculation does play a significant role, it is also possible that genuine institutional limitations affect or even create a gap between rhetoric and practice.

6.2. MED in the dilution of transformative feminist objectives

A significant manifestation of MED found within the policy documents was through the instrumentalisation of gender equality, present in several of the sources, with gender equality frequently framed as a means to achieve broader objectives, such as enhancing the EU's "credibility" (GAP III, 2020; WPS Action Plan). Echoing the concerns of feminist scholars discussed in the literature review section, rather than being transformative ends in themselves, feminist principles risked being reduced to functional tools for improving the EU's operational efficiency or global reputation. An example of 'add women and stir', which again, contrasts sharply with the fundamentally emancipatory and transformative aims of FFP articulated in the literature chapter, which seeks to "disrupt racist, colonial and patriarchal power dynamics" (Papagioti, 2023, p.8).

In addition, narrow understandings of gender and gender equality, as warned by feminist scholars (like Rosamond & Cheung, 2025), where often visible in the documents, disproportionately focusing on victimhood rather than comprehensively addressing structural inequalities, contributes to MED and sideline broader feminist critiques that aim to dismantle systemic power structures. Such a narrow framing prompt *means* (actions addressing victimhood) to be decoupled from the *ends* (transformative dismantling of oppressive systems), defeating the purpose to a certain extent.

Arguably, the most compelling evidence of MED is observed in the repeated failure to achieve quantitative targets and the stagnation of progress visible in several of the policy implementation reviews and discussed in the previous section. Continuous underperformance and meeting of targets, as well as insufficient gender parity in management positions and a lack of understanding by EU workers of feminist policies in most institutional tiers highlight that, while actions and *means* are undertaken, they are visibly not achieving the intended *ends.* The findings further revealed a severe form of MED in accountability mechanisms. The absence of a "centralised CSDP record" of gender-related misconduct complaints as found in the EEAS Report on Human Rights and Gender Equality in CSDP means the EU cannot easily retrieve information or prevent re-hiring of investigated staff, exemplifying how the *means* of addressing misconduct

(e.g. internal reporting) are severely decoupled from the *ends* of accountability and systemic change. Showcasing "behavioural invisibility" and "practice multiplicity" as highlighted by Jabbouri et al. (2019), the lack of consistent and exhaustive implementation by the EU institutions allows actions or deviations from intended goals to remain obscured, while nevertheless, outwardly maintaining a facade of compliance.

6.3. MLG as a systemic enabler of decoupling

This research has found the complex sui-generis architecture of the EU to be deeply shaped by MLG dynamics. This thesis argues MLG emerges as the key systemic factor explaining the fragmentation, institutional misalignment and uneven implementation of feminist principles, all of which combined, amount to the foundational explanation for the presence and endurance of decoupling.

The empirical findings have illustrated the internal dynamics within and between institutions and stakeholders. The European Parliament, identified as the louder advocate for feminist principles, drives gender equality policy forward. In contrast, the Council's nature as a representative of national preferences, including states insistent in their anti-feminist and deeply conservative views like Hungary or Poland. Clearly, this significantly constrains the adoption of progressive gender equality policies and in fact, the GAP III was feared to be vetoed by the two countries, who voiced strong opposition against it due to its screening of gender equality and ideological overreach (Von der Burchard, 2020). Since Council conclusions for endorsement require unanimity, Hungary and Poland's opposition meant the Council could not formally endorse GAP III as a joint political declaration and instead the Commission moved forward unilaterally, implementing GAP III without Council endorsement. This validates and encapsulates Kern et al.'s (2017) argument that power and politics deeply influence how decoupling unfolds, with decoupling or resisting full implementation depending on stakeholder's interests and degree of influence. Consequently, the Council's structure, deeply manipulating the EU's multi-level structure, can enable or block FFP and importantly, enabling PPD and MED to persist. This strikingly links to the "iron law of multilevel governance" as proposed by Pazos-Vidal (2019), where the final form of any multilevel initiative is contingent on satisfying particular (and often contrasting) interests of the actors involved, frequently leading to suboptimal outcomes.

MLG's inherent complexity directly contributes to opaqueness and causal complexity of policy in external action, blurring the trace of cause-and-effect relationships between feminist policy initiatives and their ultimate effects. The fact that policy documents are not systematically paired with their own reviews and reports further leads to objectives being reviewed diffusely, additionally contributing to this obscurity. To this formerly discussed phenomena like 'causal complexity' and 'behavioural invisibility' facilitate symbolic implementation provides the structural conditions under which decoupling flourishes. The institutional dispersal of authority within the EU's system of multi-level policymaking directly contributes to 'practice multiplicity', making consistent application of FFP principles across diverse institutions as well as Member States fundamentally difficult, where feminist principles are interpreted and applied heterogeneously across EU bodies and national contexts. Rather than an isolated failure, this is a structural reality, systemically enabling MED and PPD.

Further, the functionalist logic of efficiency, as discussed in previous literature sections, often clashes with identity-driven demands for autonomy from Member States or powerful institutional actors. This provides an explanation for why, despite significant advocacy from actors like EP parliamentarians or civil society groups, a truly comprehensive stand on feminism at the EU level remains absent. The interactions and competences of institutions, such as Member States prioritising national preferences within Council meetings or the Commission/EEAS prioritising security over feminist agendas, lead to common denominator outcomes in the topic, resulting in FFP principles remaining "symbolic, subordinate, and loosely coupled to other institutional goals", as maintained by Mackay et al. (2009, p.258). The instrumentalisation of gender thus, represents the rational outcome of a battle of interests within the MLG structure, where transformative feminist aims are bargained and shrank in favour of more easily accommodated interpretations.

The integrated framework of decoupling along with MLG, allows us to diagnose that the EU's commitment to feminist principles in foreign policy, not only exhibit decoupling alone but a series of multi-faceted decouplings, facilitated by the very design of its governance.

6.4. Implications for the EU's normative power identity

The persistence of decoupling, as enabled by MLG, consequently raises questions regarding the credibility and legitimate position of the EU as a normative power. The findings of this research align with existing critiques of the NPE framework, which question whether the EU's actions are genuinely driven by universal humanitarian and democratic norms or merely reflect its own interests or a specific cultural bias. The instrumentalisation of gender, strategic avoidance of internal feminist introspectiveness and the continuous prioritisation of security and defence issues overriding feminist agendas demonstrate PPD and strongly suggest that strategic interests seem to overrule value-based feminist commitments. This pattern further undermines the EU's infamous assertion of "leading by example" (GAP III, 2020). Terms like "gender dilution" and "gender significance shopping" vividly describe this symbolic compliance, indicating that the EU prioritises managing its image as a normative power over ensuring deep, systemic internal changes

In addition, the increasing militarisation of the EU's external action, points to a "weakening of the normative claims" as Manners (2006, p. 183) already warned. The findings have shown that, despite clear rhetorical commitments, the emancipatory objectives of FFP, as explicated in the theoretical background sections, inherently pursuing a redefinition of what security and peace mean (and are achieved), are continuously compromised by existing power dynamics and competing priorities. This verdict, thus, joins those of other feminist scholars, who have previously analysed the FFPs of countries like Sweden or Canada (Rosén Sundström et al., 2021; Thomson, 2020). This reiterates a display of 'feminist-washing', where the language of democratic values, gender equality and feminist ideals are used for legitimacy and image management, while lacking the practice and means for the structural change it professes.

All in all, the findings observe a clear disjuncture between the EU external action's aspirational rhetoric and fragmented reality in implementing feminist principles. In other words and in terms of the EU's normative presence, it has been shown to be struggling to genuinely embody the values it seeks to promote globally. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that, unlike some decoupling scholars would diagnose in other instances, this thesis argues that the case of poor follow through in feminist values in EU external action does not stem from a premeditated desire to decouple in order to advance legitimacy.

These internal failures and irregularities are driven by institutional design and competing institutional interests.

Nonetheless, this still raises critical concerns for the future of the EU as a credible actor and its EU's role as the worlds' normative advocate in international relations. This research demonstrates that while the EU continues to articulate strong feminist principles, through a plethora of its documents and institutions, the intricate dynamics of its multilevel governance enable decoupling at a global level, thwarting the follow-through of feminist promises and ultimately hindering the transformative realisation of a coherent feminist foreign policy action, no matter how small. This nuanced understanding is crucial for moving beyond normative prescriptions and towards a more accurate and analytical assessment of EU external action, in terms of what it is doing and what is should do. Having critically discussed the implications of the identified decoupling patterns for the EU and its identity in external relations, the final section of this thesis will now turn to its overall conclusions, implications and limitations. It will synthesise the core arguments and findings, while also offering policy recommendations for improving the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's commitment to gender equality in its external action, provided, of course, that such a commitment reflects genuine political will rather than serving merely as a symbolic façade.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has sought to comprehensively diagnose how feminist principles are integrated, marginalised, or contested within the European Union's foreign policymaking, particularly during Ursula von der Leyen's presidency (2019-2024). The central inquiry found and assessed inconsistencies in the EU's foreign policy with regards to its commitments to feminist values like gender equality, gender mainstreaming or sexist misconduct. A central theme questioned whether these inconsistencies stemmed from strategic choices or were systemic products of its complex governance structure. To address this, a qualitative multimethod approach was employed, integrating CDA with document-based outcome tracing. This methodology allowed for an in-depth examination of how language constructs and reflects social practices, bridging the micro-level of textual analysis with the macro-level of institutional behaviours and socio-political contexts.

The findings, interpreted through the combined lens of decoupling and MLG, offer a robust diagnosis of the EU's fragmented commitments. The empirical findings revealed a clear mismatch between the EU's rhetoric and its practice and implementation, conceptualised through the lens of decoupling. The true explanatory power of this thesis lies in the synthesis of the two theoretical frameworks, institutional decoupling and MLG since, while decoupling identified the *nature* of the commitment gap, MLG provided an explanation of the *systemic conditions* that enabled such gaps to persist and thrive across the European external action landscape.

The analysis identified pervasive PPD, characterised by the EU's reliance on soft governance tools and a strategic avoidance of binding obligations in key policy documents as well as a nuanced form of PPD, observed as the geopolitical externalisation of feminist concern. Furthermore, the analysis revealed considerable MED, highlighting how many policies were technically implemented, yet their outcomes were weakly connected to truly feminist transformative goals and rather focused on women's identity as victims. Arguably the most significant evidence of MED emerged from the consistent failure to achieve stated quantitative targets as well as failures to institutionalise accountability mechanisms, such as the absence of a centralised record for gender-related misconduct complaints in CSDP, fostering behavioural invisibility and practice multiplicity.

MLG was identified as the systemic enabler for these pervasive forms of decoupling. The EUs multifaceted distribution of authority across numerous levels and actors, from the Commission and High Representative to Member State embassies and individual CSDP missions, makes consistent policy application greatly difficult, yet not impossible. The EU's institutional architecture is here to stay, however having diagnosed the symptoms of decoupling as a result of MLG, a broad range of targeted actions can be undertaken in order to facilitate recoupling and better address foreign policy objectives.

7.1. Broader implications and policy recommendations

The findings of this thesis carry significant implications not only for the future of feminist foreign policy but also points to some major challenges faced by the EU.

Firstly, the findings highlighted the limitations and consequences of relying on soft governance for policy change. The reliance on non-binding language, encouragement, and the drafting of vague mechanisms was shown to foster PPD, with institutions

symbolically enacting policy change without translating into internal reforms. This approach allows for strategic ambiguity, with broad agreement across Member States and institutions but at the cost of genuine enforceable and measurable progress.

Secondly, the research has clearly demonstrated how the EU's MLG structure serves as a intrinsic enabler of decoupling. The inherent fragmentation of authority, coupled with divergent national interests and institutional power dynamics, creates an environment where consistent policy goals and application are a chronic challenge, with cunning compromise often resulting in lowest-common-denominator outcomes, watering down feminism's deeply transformative ideals.

Finally, regarding FFP, the research highlights that the EU's approach to foreign policy in combination with feminist values like gender mainstreaming or gender equality remains largely symbolic, instrumentalised, and narrowly defined, falling short of the transformative, emancipatory goals central to FFP scholarship. The pervasive "add women and stir" or "feminist-washing" tendencies mean that while gender equality is verbally championed, it barely disrupts deeply embedded patriarchal power dynamics or challenges the traditional security-centric paradigm. As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis begins acknowledging the reality that an EU foreign policy is far beyond our reach today and in the near future. However, for the EU to genuinely embrace its current feminist strategies currently existing within its foreign policy (enacted by the policy documents analysed in this study), it requires a profound shift from rhetorical commitment to structural and cultural transformation, a serious consideration of these policies as genuine global mission rather than a mere tool for diplomatic credibility.

In this degree, the inconsistencies in applying ethical conditionalities in external action are a red flag for an EU claiming to lead by example (GAP III, 2020). The "geopolitical externalisation of feminist concern," exposed in policy documents within this study or the flagrant contrast between the EU's swift response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its restrained approach to Israel's actions in Gaza, along with the new increases in militarisation efforts within the Union, further undermine the EU's credibility as a champion of peace and international law. This "timidity on Israel" flagged by one of the EU's very own ambassadors or the continuous externalisation of feminist concern against the bigger picture of geopolitics, resonate with Sven Kühn von Burgsdorff's (2025) warning: the EU risks becoming a "paper tiger loud in rhetoric but toothless in practice".

Based on these implications, the following concrete and realistic policy recommendations are suggested to improve the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's commitment to gender equality in its external action:

Firstly, a more robust implementation of accountability framework is needed. The default reliance on soft governance tools and vague language have been shown to directly contribute to PPD. In order to counteract this, the EU should move towards clearer mandates, providing clear obligations to achieve targets rather than merely encouraging action. This would involve revising key policy documents like GAP III and the WPS Action Plan to clear timelines, explicit enforcement mechanisms and legally binding targets where possible, even if merely setting a minimum threshold.

Secondly, the EU should prioritise transformative gender justice as an inherent objective. The findings revealed a continuous gravitation to the instrumentalisation of gender equality, reducing feminist ideals from into tools, creating MED. To counter this, the EU should explicitly and consistently frame gender equality as an inherent ethical and political goal, rather than a functional tool, broadening the understanding of gender beyond a narrow focus of victimhood. Echoing feminist assessment discussed in previous chapters, policy development should actively promote intersectional awareness. Funding allocations in external action should be evaluated not simply on increased reporting on gender but rather on their material long term impacts in gendered power relations.

Along with this; and addressing the scarcity of expertise addressed in several of the analysed documents in this research (e.g. EU Report GAP III, 2023, p.16), the EU should strengthen its internal capacity and progressing true gender expertise within its institutions, with the same guidelines for all bodies. For instance, it could launch mandatory, comprehensive and regular gender equality training programmes for all staff across the Commission, EEAS, and CSDP missions, working with feminist think tanks or expert organisations, in order to go beyond basic awareness and rather educate a comprehensive. Regarding its budgetary and human resources, these should be ensured at all levels of its external action apparatus, tracking implementation and results.

Finally, the EU must respond to its systemic MLG-induced fragmentation through enhanced coordination. The inherent structural duality of the EU's MLG system, leads to inconsistent policy application across different EU institutions and Member States. To mitigate this, the EU must develop stronger, formalised coordination mechanisms across

all actors involved in external action and establish clear lines of responsibility and transparent reporting frameworks that track the implementation of feminist principles cohesively.

7.2. Limitations and suggestions for future research

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge certain methodological and empirical limitations within this research. Firstly, as mentioned previously in the methodological section, the qualitative multimethod approach here employed is limited in its suitability to generate generalisable empirical laws. Additionally, the scope of study, not only temporally but also in terms of its case study and its reliance on a purposive sample of documents, though carefully selected for relevance, inherently limits the study's generalisability. Moreover, the researcher's feminist and critical stance, while embraced as part of reflexive research, opens the study to potential accusations of bias.

Notwithstanding, this work has produced and developed insights which act as a stepping stone for future research. A step into a valuable direction, would be to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews with institutional actors across the different tiers involved in external action. This would provide a vital insider view, uncovering the practical understanding of feminist norms and the complex dynamics that shape policy cycle, shedding light on the current handling of challenges like causal complexity or behavioural complexity from stakeholders involved.

In addition, research could dive further into specific interfaces of the EU's MLG system, analysing and evaluating the established mechanisms through which for instance, EP advocacy for FFP translates (or fails to translate) into actionable policies by means of policy cycle tracing.

Finally, subsequent scholarly work could conduct a longitudinal study extending beyond the 2019-2024 period in order to monitor whether the identified patterns of decoupling persist or if any recoupling occurs over time. This would involve tracking the evolution of policy language, implementation reports, and actual outcomes under new EU leaderships, such as Kaja Kallas's role as High Representative. In a similar vein, academics should particularly investigate how major global crises and geopolitical events impact the prioritisation, articulation and implementation of feminist principles within EU foreign policy. This could explore whether crises lead to a further instrumentalisation of gender or conversely, create opportunities to take feminist in external action forward.

By addressing these limitations and advancing research on these dynamics, academics and practitioners will be able to deepen their understanding of this complex interplay between rhetoric, practice and institutional design. This not only informs EU academics and professionals but also has the potential to foster a meaningful impact how EU's foreign policy and external action is conducted.

In times marked by escalating global crises and world leaders committing heinous crimes against humanity, the EU faces an inflection point. If it fails to translate its feminist and democratic claims into credible and consistent action, it risks permanently damaging its identity as a normative power. As this work has demonstrated, the persistent gaps between rhetoric and implementation are not merely accidental, they are structurally enabled by the EU's complex system of MLG, promoting various forms of institutional decoupling. Recoupling, as discussed in this thesis, is possible, but addressing these deficiencies requires more than discursive reaffirmation or a female Commission president. It demands targeted policy reform, enforceable accountability mechanisms and a sustained effort to transform its fragmented commitments into operational realities.

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Appendix I

Table 1. Chronological overview of analysed EU gender and foreign policy documents.

(Those related to direct policy proposals have the cells coloured whereas the implementation reviews and reports are left blank).

No	Document Title	Author	Audience	Publishing Date	Summary
1	EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) 2019–2024 WPS Action Plan	European External Action Service (EEAS)	Delegations: Political and Security Committee	5 July 2019	Outlines six key objectives to implement the EU's Strategic Approach to WPS, focusing on participation, protection, prevention, and recovery in conflict contexts.
2	EU Gender Action Plan GAP III	European Commission and the High Representative	European Parliament and the Council	25 November 2020	Sets policy framework for promoting gender equality in EU external action from 2021–2025, across six key thematic areas.
3	Strategy and Action Plan to Enhance Women's Participation in Civilian CSDP Missions 2021–2024 CSDP Action Plan	EEAS and CPCC	CivCom	21 December 2021	Presents a strategy to increase women's participation in all roles and levels of civilian CSDP missions, aiming for gender balance by 2024.

4	Report on the Follow-up Baseline Study on Integrating Human Rights and Gender Equality into the EU's CSDP Baseline Study Report	European External Action Service (EEAS)	Delegations (Political and Security Committee)	17 May 2022	Evaluates progress in mainstreaming human rights and gender equality into CSDP operations since 2015, identifying achievements and challenges.
5	Council Conclusions on Women, Peace and Security WPS Council Conclusions	Council of the EU	EU institutions and Member States. Guidance for EEAS and Commission	14 November 2022	Reaffirms commitment to the WPS agenda, emphasizing integration into EU policy and action amid current geopolitical challenges.
6	Mid-Term Evaluation of the Implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan III Independent GAP III Evaluation	EU Policy Consultancies: Particip, Ecorys, ECDPM, Mancala (for the European Commission)	European Commission DG INTPA	April 2023	Independent evaluation assessing the impact of GAP III, identifying contributions, lessons learned, and recommendations.
7	Civilian CSDP Compact: Towards More Effective Civilian Missions Civilian CSDP Compact	Council of the EU and Member State representatives, in cooperation with the EEAS	Member States, HR/VP, European Commission, relevant EU institutions	22 May 2023	Outlines strategic guidelines and commitments to enhance the EU's civilian CSDP missions. Focuses on topics like rapid deployment, gender equality, cyber resilience or climate responsibility.

8	Joint Mid-Term Report on the Implementation of the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III) EU Report GAP III	European Commission and the High Representative	European Parliament and the Council	20 November 2023	Provides a mid-term review of GAP III implementation (2021–2023), highlighting achievements in advancing gender equality in EU external action.
9	Implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy – Annual Report 2024 – EP Resolution EP CFSP Resolution	European Parliament	European Council, Commission, HR, Member States' governments & parliaments	2 April 2025	Articulates the Parliament's stance and goals for CFSP in 2025.