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Constraints, Dilemmas and Challenges for EU Foreign Policy in Venezuela

Anna Ayuso ^a, Tiziano Breda ^b, Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir ^c and Marianne Riddervold ^c

^aBarcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB); ^bIstituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome;

^cNorwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo

ABSTRACT

Years of increasingly authoritarian rule and economic mismanagement by President Nicolás Maduro have turned Venezuela into a source of regional instability. The European Union's (EU) main foreign policy objective towards the country has been a peaceful transition to free and transparent elections and its re-introduction into regional and global trade and political frameworks. The strategies pursued by the EU to mitigate the constraints on its foreign policy towards Venezuela have helped to bring about more EU unity, but have failed to have a significant impact in the country itself. Multipolar competition between the EU and the United States (US) on the one hand and between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia on the other, have undermined the EU's attempts to contribute a peaceful solution to the process. Most recently, the war on Ukraine has created a new dilemma for the EU in its dealings with Venezuela, that is, having to navigate between maintaining pressure on the Maduro regime, keeping up momentum for negotiations and deciding whether to follow the US in resuming oil trade with Caracas to mitigate the energy crisis in Europe.

KEYWORDS

European Foreign and Security Policy; Venezuela; diplomacy; sanctions; multipolarity

Venezuela has become a matter of growing concern for the European Union (EU) since President Nicolás Maduro seized power in 2013. Years of increasingly authoritarian rule and economic mismanagement have turned the country into a source of regional instability. The situation descended into open crisis in 2019 when the opposition-controlled National Assembly designated its speaker, Juan Guaidó, as interim President to protest against the irregularity of Maduro's re-election the previous year. Meanwhile, the population faced a severe social and humanitarian crisis. Since 2013, falling oil prices, sanctions, economic mismanagement and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic led the Venezuelan economy to crash. The economic and political crisis prompted the largest migration crisis in the region's history, with around seven million Venezuelans forced to flee to neighbouring countries, the United States (US)

CONTACT Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir  elsa.lilja@nupi.no

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and Europe (Rodríguez 2022). Against this background, the EU's main foreign policy objective has been to promote free and transparent elections and to re-integrate Venezuela into regional and global trade and political frameworks. So far, however, not much has changed on the ground. Neither sanctions, nor the diplomatic efforts of an EU-supported International Contact Group (ICG), nor a mediation process in Mexico led by Norway (again backed by the EU) – also referred to as the 'Mexico talks' – have managed to drag Venezuela out of its prolonged political crisis and dire humanitarian predicament, as the few agreements reached have been partial and not fully implemented.

What have been the main challenges facing the EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP) towards Venezuela? How has the EU tried to overcome these challenges in the formulation and implementation of its foreign policies? In this article we argue that intra-EU contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition have all affected the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's foreign policy, but to differing extents. While the EU initially agreed on sanctions and later was relatively successful in mitigating challenges linked to internal EU contestation, the case of Venezuela illustrates the limitations of EU foreign policies in the face of increased geopolitical competition, which also created or exacerbated tensions in the region. Venezuela's alliance with powers such as the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia and the interlinked political polarisation of the American hemisphere, have undermined sanctions imposed by the EU and other actors and hindered effective mediation attempts. This article therefore makes several contributions to the existing literature on EUFSP towards Venezuela. First, in line with the main aims of this Special Issue, the article sheds light on how the EU mitigates challenges emanating from internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition in the formulation and implementation of EUFSP by implementing different strategies (Alcaro and Dijkstra 2024, this Special Issue). Second, it adds insights into other factors that affect the EU's ability to influence foreign policy developments, in particular how multipolar competition increasingly challenges the EU's ability to achieve its foreign policy aims (Ibid. See also Alcaro *et al* 2016; Tonra 2015).

To tease out the factors that have constrained EU policies towards Venezuela and the mitigating strategies the EU has applied to address them, the article is organised as follows. We first explain the factors that, according to the literature, often constrain a coherent EU foreign policy – referred to in the Introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra 2024, this Special Issue) as internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition – to then elaborate on the key mitigating strategies or measures developed by the EU in its attempts at dealing with these challenges. As the Introduction to this Special Issue explains, these can be categorised under three main typologies: institutional, functional, and diplomatic/coalitional.

The second section applies this framework in an empirical analysis of EU foreign policy towards Venezuela. We find that intra-EU contestation related to the political orientations of member states and their view on the EU's role in the world explains the Union's failure to achieve unity on the recognition of Guaidó. To mitigate those divergences, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission have transcended internal member state contestation and regional fragmentation with various *institutional, functional and diplomatic/coalitional* measures. At the

institutional level, the EEAS and the Commission played a prominent role in devising alternative foreign policy tools using their own competences. While the *functional* measures included the deployment of election missions and an increase in humanitarian aid, the *coalitional* measures revolved around the launch of a European-regional ICG diplomatic initiative in 2019.

We thereafter analyse how multipolar competition, exemplified by Russia and the PRC's political and financial backing of Maduro, reduced the EU's ability to encourage his regime to engage in negotiations through the use of sanctions. Divergences of objectives between the EU and the Trump administration also reduced the EU's diplomatic scope. Therefore, the EU's mitigation measures, which mostly consisted of *diplomatic* measures, such as support for regional diplomatic initiatives and the strategic partnership with the US, failed to change the domestic situation in Venezuela. However, the election of Joe Biden and Russia's invasion of Ukraine created space for the EU to rekindle diplomatic engagement with Washington and other like-minded partners in the region, in an effort to defuse multipolar competition by offering Maduro sanctions relief in exchange for progress in negotiations. This opening has been further reinforced by the shift to the left in most Latin American countries.

In fact, regional fragmentation, fuelled by ideological divides between mostly conservative governments and the Maduro regime, has hampered the EU's ability to coordinate diplomatic actions with Latin America's multilateral forums. Fragmentation within Venezuela, exemplified by internal disputes surrounding successive electoral processes, resulted in politicising humanitarian aid and made it more difficult for the EU to identify legitimate interlocutors in the country. The recent emergence of a more ideologically cohesive region has therefore provided the EU with an opportunity to make the most of its mitigation strategies. At the same time, coupled with the recent developments in the global arena, it presents the EU with difficult choices on how to balance engagement with the regime to find solutions to the crisis with the need to live up to its normative foreign policy standards.

Conceptual framework: constraining factors and mitigating strategies

In response to the political and humanitarian crisis facing Venezuela, the EU's policies have revolved around four interlinked components (Gratius and Ayuso 2020): promoting dialogue between the government and the opposition; pressuring the regime into negotiations by implementing sanctions and targeted measures (the freezing of assets and visa restrictions) against officials of the Maduro government; offering humanitarian aid to both Venezuelans fleeing and neighbouring states struggling to cope with massive immigration flows; and deploying electoral observation missions (Council of the EU 2019b). However, the results failed to match these ambitions.

The Introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra 2024, this Special Issue) identifies three main factors that together hamper the EU's ability to decide on and implement coherent and effective policies: internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition. *Internal contestation* refers to the domestic roots of the EU's internal struggle to reach a consensus on common policies. Despite the EU taking big steps forward in foreign and security policy integration, there is still much disagreement between member states in the domain of EU foreign policy, in particular as regards

Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) issues where decisions are reached through unanimity (Jørgensen *et al.* 2011; Schunz 2021; Smith 2022).

The analytical frameworks *regional fragmentation* and *multipolar competition* acknowledge that the international context in which the EU operates may be as, if not more, important for understanding its (in)ability to reach its foreign policy aims when dealing with external crises and conflicts. Regional fragmentation refers to how the conduct of EUFSP may be hampered by factors linked to the specific context in which it operates. Regional fragmentation factors may be linked to the type and intensity of the conflict, or to various institutional factors such as the lack of state and regional authority, or governance mechanisms. Following the Special Issue framework, regional fragmentation hence refers to the process by which state authority (the state holding the legitimate monopoly over the means of violence and the ability to set and enforce rules) and regional rules of engagement erode or collapse altogether. At the state level, such fragmentation means that the EU may struggle to find legitimate counterparts or that it has to engage with a large number of different actors who may have very different views on what constitutes a solution to the crisis. Multiple actors and weak regional governance structures also make it more difficult for the EU to develop comprehensive and well-informed analyses and action plans (Levallois *et al.* 2021).

Lastly, EUFSP is evolving in a changing and volatile international environment that informs the various conflicts and crises the EU seeks to address. Most International Relations (IR) scholars agree that the international order is changing from unipolarity under US hegemony to what is referred to as multipolarity, or what Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth (2016) refer to as an a-polar system (see also Alcaro *et al.* 2016). Underlying this argument is not so much that the US is becoming weaker, but rather that other countries are becoming more powerful. The rise of emerging and more assertive powers – including the PRC and Russia – is altering power relations amongst states and thus challenging the international order that the EU is built on and seeks to uphold. As explained in the Introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra 2024, this Special Issue), these changes mean that the EU increasingly faces strong competition from other countries when trying to address crises. Often, this challenge comes from Russia and the PRC, which are attempting to expand their influence in the countries and regions where the EU operates. But the EU also faces competition from regional powers such as Turkey and Iran (Tonra 2015). Hence, both regional conflicts and rivalries, as well as broader geopolitical confrontations such as the war against Ukraine, are likely to continue to impact EUFSP towards Venezuela.

All these factors hinder the EU's ability to carry out an effective and sustainable EUFSP. In order to mitigate the effects that these constraints have on EUFSP, the EU and its member states have developed measures that the introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra 2024, this Special Issue) categorises under three main typologies: institutional, functional and diplomatic/coalitional. The *institutional* mitigation measures usually refer to those situations in which the member states that spearhead the EU's officially intergovernmental foreign policy, formally or informally delegate crisis-management tasks to EU institutions such as the EEAS and the Commission, or to a restricted group of member states. Such delegation allows the member states to indirectly support some common EU policies, even if they disagree on certain aspects in a particular situation. *Functional* measures refer to how the EU mitigates constraining

factors by focusing on specific policy areas in a given crisis or conflict situation. These can take the form of ‘compartmentalisation’ strategies, by which EUFSP actors insulate progress on certain issues from other areas of concern; or as ‘issue-linkage’, through which, on the contrary, EUFSP actors link decisions on certain issues with developments in others. Finally, *diplomatic/coalitional* measures refer to situations where EUFSP actors seek to mitigate constraints by engaging with local, regional or global players. This could be done through *strategic partnering* (especially with the US), where the aim is to increase the EU’s leverage, or *multilateralisation*.

Methodologically, the article draws on several sources: first, a comprehensive analysis was carried out of EU and member state documents and EU internal discussions on Venezuela from 2017, when the first sanctions against Venezuela were adopted, until mid-2023. Additionally, ten interviews were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 with EEAS staff, diplomats and experts/officials from different countries, members of the European Parliament and national parliaments.¹ Finally, these primary sources were triangulated with secondary sources, such as academic literature and news articles.

Explaining the EU’s failed response to the Venezuelan crisis

Mitigating internal contestation in a fragmented context

While there was little disagreement on the EU’s overall policy objectives in Venezuela, the disagreements between member states on the best strategy to achieve them were linked to the political orientation of certain governments that questioned Brussels’s apparent meddling in the domestic affairs of another country. All member states supported a peaceful resolution of the crisis and the restoration of democratic norms and practices, including the promotion of international mediation. The implementation of sanctions to put pressure on the Maduro regime was not openly contested. However, national political dynamics prevented the EU from responding collectively regarding the recognition of the interim presidency of Juan Guaidó.

The EU’s bone of contention: Juan Guaidó

Following the presidential election of May 2018, which appeared to have been rigged in Maduro’s favour, the then speaker of Venezuela’s National Assembly (the parliament) Guaidó, backed by the National Assembly, announced he would assume the role of interim President of the Republic on 23 January 2019. Immediately, the US, the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the Lima Group (an informal network of countries comprising most Latin American states and Canada) supported the initiative. On 26 January 2019, then High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission (HRVP) Federica Mogherini reaffirmed, on behalf of the EU, that the May 2018 elections were neither free nor credible. She warned that, “in the absence of an announcement on the organisation of fresh elections with the necessary guarantees over the next days”, the EU would recognise “the country’s leadership in line with article 233 of the Venezuelan constitution” (Council of the EU 2019c), the legal basis for Guaidó’s

¹Ten interviews were conducted between November 2022 and January 2023 with guarantees of strict confidentiality. They included a person from the EEAS staff, a German diplomat, a Norwegian diplomat, a Spanish diplomat, three members of the European Parliament, and two members of the Spanish Congress and a Greek academic.

elevation to the (interim) presidency. On 31 January 2019, the European Parliament adopted a (non-binding) resolution recognising Guaidó as the legitimate interim President (until new elections could be called) and asked EU member states to follow suit, with 439 votes in favour, 104 against and 88 abstentions (European Parliament 2019) – a symbolic show of support. However, in the EU Council, where EU foreign ministers meet to agree on the general political direction of the Union, nine member states (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) opted not to recognise Guaidó on the agreed deadline (Stott 2021).

This stood in the way of a joint EU statement. These disagreements can be attributed to the political orientation of some member state governments: left-leaning governments and coalition governments including leftist forces tended not to support the EU's recognition, whereas right-leaning governments were more strongly in favour of Guaidó and against the Maduro regime. Another factor underlying the policy positions of some EU member states was their governments' view of the EU's role in the world. Greece, for example, stated that the EU should "not to drag [itself] behind the initiatives of other great powers" (Greece Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019a), by which it meant the US, that under President Donald Trump (2017-21) had come to support Guaidó's claim to the interim presidency as a way to weaken the Maduro regime. Italy was most firm in rejecting a collective EU recognition. Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte explained his government's position as stemming from a desire "not to provoke further radicalisation on either side and contribute to a spiral of violence that would worsen the situation for the Venezuelan people" (*Washington Post* 2019). But the lead-up to the Italian position was not so clear-cut. Mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties urged the government to support a united EU response, but Italy's Five-Star Movement, then the senior party in the ruling coalition and Conte's own party, said they would "never recognise people who appoint themselves president" (*Reuters* 2019).

However, most member states that had not issued a formal recognition of Guaidó later changed their positions because of various factors, including: changes in political composition of governments, disagreements within ruling coalitions, pressure from other EU states and developments in the crisis itself. Romania, for example, explained the turnaround – which occurred in only four days – partly with the fact that it was holding the EU Council presidency and hence felt the responsibility not to stand in the way of EU unity (Romanian Presidency 2019). Six months after it had refused to recognise Guaidó, Greece announced that it would adapt its policy "in accordance with the common EU position in the statement of the EU High Representative" (Greece Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2019b). While the reason for the change was not elaborated publicly, it came just four days after Greece's left-wing government was replaced by a centre-right government. A similar trend could be seen in Slovakia's position. Only Italy's and Cyprus's position remained consistent.

The issue of recognising Guaidó eventually faded as the whole political manoeuvre failed to compel Maduro to call new presidential elections. Furthermore, botched attempts by military and paramilitary forces to overthrow Maduro in 2019 and 2020, discredited the self-declared interim President (Borger *et al.* 2020).² Furthermore, while the

²In April 2019, Guaidó, sided with a few dozen military personnel, called for a military insurrection aimed at the removal of Nicolás Maduro, as part of what he labelled "Operation Freedom". In May 2020, a group of 60 mercenaries, including

EU as a whole decided not to recognise results of the legislative elections in 2020 (European Council 2020), when the new National Assembly was established, the legal argument in support of Guaidó's elevation became much more tenuous. EU member states eventually withdrew recognition of Guaidó in early 2021, referring to him as a representative "of the outgoing National Assembly" (Council of the EU 2021).

Overcoming the divergent positions of member states

The lack of consensus in the recognition of Guaidó was dubbed a "missed chance to show EU unity" (*Deutsche Welle* 2019). But while EU member states were unable to agree on a common position on Guaidó, institutional, diplomatic/coalitional and functional measures were deployed to mitigate the effects of that disagreement on the ability to carry out an effective and coherent EU policy. In terms of an institutional mitigation measure the EEAS and the Commission took on a more prominent role to work out alternative foreign policy tools using their own competences.³ EUFSP actors identified areas in which the divergences on the Venezuelan crisis could be set aside, prompting the adoption of at least two functional measures and one diplomatic/coalitional measure. The functional measures included the deployment of election missions and the increase of humanitarian aid to Venezuela and countries in the region receiving an influx of Venezuelan migrants. The coalitional measure revolved around the launch of the ICG European-regional diplomatic initiative to mediate between government and opposition. In doing so, they aimed not only to work around divisions between member states over Guaidó, but also Venezuela's internal fragmentation. Indeed, the EU election observation and the provision of humanitarian aid have been among the few issues over which the Maduro regime and opposition parties have managed to find some common ground.

The deployment of an electoral observation mission (EOM) to Venezuela was not without controversy. Initially, there was disagreement amongst the member states and between the EU institutions about the relevance of such missions due to concerns that, as the elections were clearly neither fully free nor fair, electoral observation could eventually 'whitewash' the Maduro regime's undemocratic practices.⁴ The initiative also risked creating an impression of ambiguity, with the EU refusing to recognise the legitimacy of elections under Maduro while at the same time engaging in an electoral observation mission. According to HRVP Josep Borrell (in office since late 2019), the decision to send in the mission was made by the EEAS when it was certain that most of the Venezuelan opposition parties supported it (Jiménez 2022).

Electoral observation has provided a degree of mitigation to intra-EU differences and seemed to have had an impact on the ground. The EU deployed an EOM to monitor local and state elections in Venezuela on 21 November 2021, at the request of Venezuela's National Electoral Council (European Union External Action Service 2021). The mission concluded with a set of recommendations for improvement which offered a roadmap for the future. These included: reinforcing the separation of powers and confidence in the independence of the Supreme Court; suppressing any government

two former US Green Berets, attempted to infiltrate Venezuela by sea and capture Maduro in order to remove him from power, in what is known as "Operation Gideon". Both attempts failed.

³Interviews with EEAS staff and EU Parliament members, November and December 2022.

⁴Interviews with European parliament members, December 2022 and January 2023.

prerogative to deprive citizens of their fundamental right to stand for election; strengthening the sanctioning powers of the electoral commission by introducing a control system; balancing the coverage of state media during electoral campaigns; and repealing any law that limits freedom of expression (EU Election Observation Mission to Venezuela 2021). Although this mission was controversial at first in both the EU and the US, it eventually proved successful, with support not only across the EU, including the European Parliament, but also from the US and the Venezuelan conflict parties. The EOM carried out such detailed work that its recommendations were also endorsed by US officials, initially sceptical of the endeavour.⁵

Another functional mitigating strategy of intra-EU contestation was the focus on humanitarian aid. Initially, humanitarian aid was heavily politicised, with Guaidó in 2019 trying to force aid into Venezuela and Maduro rejecting the idea that the country needed it (Dupraz-Dobias 2019). However, two donor conferences co-hosted by Spain in 2020 and by Canada in 2021 managed to defuse the politicisation of aid in two ways: first by framing aid as mostly directed to Venezuelan migrants in host countries; and second, through multilateralisation, since aid was organised through UN agencies and the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V) (European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations 2023). In late 2022, after talks had resumed in Mexico, both the Maduro government and the opposition committed to the distribution of humanitarian aid through the UN, further contributing to a depoliticisation of humanitarian assistance (*Europa Press* 2023). The US and EU countries have since agreed to unblock up to three billion dollars of previously frozen state funds on the condition that they are used for social programmes under the supervision of the UN (Guzmán and Rico Benitez 2020).

The EU also applied a diplomatic/coalition mitigating strategy by contributing to the creation of the ICG in order to “build trust and create the necessary conditions for a credible process to emerge, in line with the relevant provisions of the Venezuelan Constitution” (EEAS 2019). The ICG initially comprised six Latin American countries and eight EU member states (including Italy), plus the EU. Thus, even though the EU could not find a common position on Guaidó, and in spite of the limited success of the ICG, it did embark on a diplomatic effort to foster negotiations between conflicting parties (Council of the EU 2019a).

In other words, the EU has used election monitoring, aid and diplomatic engagement as measures to mitigate internal disagreements over the recognition of Guaidó. But EU policies have also had an impact on Venezuelan politics. Being issues on which both the government and the opposition, for very different reasons, could agree upon, the first two of these measures have helped reduce internal fragmentation in Venezuela. For Maduro, electoral observation meant that the EU recognised him as a legitimate interlocutor (even though not as the legitimate President) and gave the 2021 local elections greater legitimacy. While for the opposition, election monitoring exposed the country’s flawed democratic process and helped it win some seats in local and regional governments. Paradoxically, internal EU contestation over Guaidó facilitated Maduro’s acceptance of the mission. The European Parliament also played an important role in convincing the opposition to participate in monitored elections.⁶

⁵Interview with a European Parliament member, November 2022.

Humanitarian aid worked in a similar fashion. Maduro could accept it by blaming sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic for the economic collapse, whereas the opposition could claim it had always advocated for relief measures. It remains unlikely, however, that the EU can use these strategies to leverage the government and the opposition to make further progress in the negotiations, particularly if the government does not comply with the EOM recommendations before the 2024 presidential elections.

Overall, the European Commission and the EEAS took on a more prominent role which, despite initial resistance by some member states and the European Parliament, was eventually tacitly accepted, translating into a *delegation* strategy to mitigate the problem of intra-EU contestation. This finding supports the institutionalist argument that EU foreign policy gridlock can be overcome by strategies of delegation. As member states could not reach a consensus on the recognition of Guaidó, the Union's institutions were able to draw on their competences to create EU foreign policy 'outputs'. Such outputs – electoral monitoring and humanitarian aid – were in themselves strategies of selective engagement with the Maduro government aimed at reducing Venezuela's fragmentation amongst others. Other measures adopted by EUFSP actors (of the diplomatic/coalitional type) included strategic partnering with like-minded countries through the creation of the ICG comprising Latin American and European countries, as well as multilateralising and depoliticising humanitarian aid, by organising it through the UN. The effectiveness of these various measures has so far been modest, however. It was another major factor impacting EUFSP, multipolar competition, which limited the EU's policies the most.

Multipolar competition: the lingering challenge to EU policies

Although the EU managed to mitigate the effects of internal contestation by refocusing its efforts elsewhere, geopolitical factors linked to multipolar competition have continued to undermine its objectives towards Venezuela. The EU attempted to mitigate these constraints by fostering regional diplomatic initiatives and by launching an EU electoral mission. However, its initial policies and alignment with the US on issues such as sanctions or Guaidó's recognition led Maduro to seek and accept support from other actors to alleviate Western pressure, thus eventually exacerbating multipolar competition.

Venezuela as a hotspot for the regional interests of great powers

Some have identified Venezuela as a battlefield in the broader competition “between the West and the rest” (Gratius 2022). In our analysis of how multipolar competition has shaped the effectiveness of EU foreign policy towards Venezuela, we focus on the prominent competing powers – the EU and the US on one side, and Russia and the PRC on the other – while being aware that other actors were also involved, such as Iran and Turkey, which support the Maduro regime in similar ways. Over the years, the US and EU have strongly condemned the Maduro regime and its actions, imposed sanctions and scaled down diplomatic relations with Caracas. By contrast, the PRC and Russia – as well as Iran and Turkey, albeit to a lesser extent – have helped the regime circumvent the

⁶Interviews with European Parliament members, November and December 2022.

sanctions and continued to trade, including in arms, even if they officially backed the Mexico dialogue process (Gratius 2022; Smilde and Ramsey 2020).

The US has strong strategic, political and economic interests in Venezuela and the region more broadly (Gratius 2022; Stolk and Mesones Rojo 2022). Under President Trump, the US openly pursued regime change in Venezuela – even suggesting that military intervention was an option – through a ‘maximum pressure’ strategy aimed at creating fractures in the regime that would eventually lead to its collapse. To this end, in 2019 the Trump administration imposed a *de facto* oil embargo on Venezuela by targeting the national oil company PDVSA, a former parent company of the US-based Citgo.⁷ However, Trump’s maximum pressure policy also hindered the EU’s stated objective of facilitating talks between the government and the opposition (Palestini 2023). After all, as also the target of EU condemnation and sanctions, the Maduro regime could hardly see any difference between the US and EU approaches at the time. After Biden was inaugurated as President in January 2021, the US showed greater openness to some form of limited dialogue, especially after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine caused a deficit of oil supply in Europe. US officials have since met with Maduro over a prisoner swap and allowed the oil company Chevron to partially restart its activities in Venezuela. The Biden administration has also seemingly dropped any language reminiscent of regime change. This shift has reduced the gap between the approach of the EU and US to the Venezuelan crisis, therefore creating more favourable conditions for the EU to pursue its goals.

Limiting the success of EU foreign policy have been the policies of Russia and the PRC. Russia’s policy towards Venezuela is driven by three primary interests: ideology, energy and geopolitics. President Putin and Maduro share an ideological aversion to Western liberalism (Gratius 2022). In geopolitical terms, Russia’s policy towards Venezuela is linked to its broader goal of undermining a Western-led international order (Hoffman 2018). The extent of Russia’s involvement in Venezuela is exemplified by the fact that it is the ‘accompanying country’ on Maduro’s side in the Mexico talks. The Russia-Venezuela energy relationship is also strong, with Russia having invested billions of US dollars in oil and gas in Venezuela (Gabuev 2019). In 2019, when Trump’s maximum pressure was in full swing, Russia’s state-run energy giant Rosneft helped the Maduro government skirt sanctions by becoming the main trader of Venezuelan oil and taking care of shipping and marketing to buyers in India and the PRC (Yagova *et al.* 2019, Gratius 2022; Smilde and Ramsey 2020). In doing so, Russia has reduced the impact sanctions and made Maduro less inclined to make concessions.

By contrast, the PRC’s approach to Venezuela is economically oriented and not overtly political. Beijing has been Venezuela’s biggest lender for the past decade, as well as its biggest creditor and oil investor (Garcia 2021; Navone 2021). Since 2003 the PRC has provided massive loans to Caracas in exchange for Venezuelan oil. Before Venezuela’s economy collapsed in 2016 – even though the first signs of fatigue date back to 2014 – this arrangement contributed to boosting both countries’ economies, given the high demands for energy from Chinese industry (Navone 2021). The PRC is also the second largest seller of arms to Venezuela after Russia. Venezuela is an important part of Beijing’s trade in Latin America, as more than 40 per cent of all Chinese investments in the region

⁷Citgo cut ties with PDVSA in February 2019 to avoid being impacted by US sanctions.

have been made in Venezuela. Venezuela is also greatly indebted to the PRC as it has not been able to pay back its debt since the collapse of its oil production in 2016. Estimates from 2021 suggest Venezuela owes the PRC 20 billion US dollars (Garcia 2021). While Beijing has supported a negotiated solution to the political crisis in Caracas, it undermines EU policy by continuing trade and has dismissed the recognition of Guaidó as interference in Venezuela's internal affairs (Hernández 2020).

Russia and the PRC are not the only external countries that have extended support to Maduro. Turkey intensified trade with Venezuela after the failed coup against President Erdogan in July 2016 (Oner 2018). It has also signed agreements with Venezuela on trade, energy and air transport, and became one of the biggest importers of Venezuelan gold – a key source of income for the Maduro regime after the decline in oil exports. Iran has also strengthened ties with Venezuela after both became targets of harsh sanctions under the Trump administration's maximum pressure strategy, providing Caracas with materials such as gasoline, equipment and assistance to keep oil production afloat (International Crisis Group 2022).

Mitigating multipolar competition

In order to mitigate the effects of multipolar competition, the EU resorted mostly to diplomatic measures, such as supporting regional initiatives and the strategic partnership with the US. The latter's coherence and effectiveness, however, depended on the strategy adopted by Washington. Trump's maximum pressure strategy to topple Maduro initially limited the EU's capacity to adopt an independent role and contributed to heightening multipolar competition over the Venezuelan crisis. The election of Joe Biden, who has favoured a more pragmatic approach towards Venezuela, especially after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, aligned EU and US strategies on means as well as goals.

The Maduro regime has retained close ties with Moscow since the latter invaded Ukraine and in December 2022 agreed to closer cooperation, such as the possibility of including Venezuela in the Russian payment system Mir (Luján 2022). Maduro has blamed the West for escalating the situation in Ukraine, describing Western sanctions as a "madness" whose goal is the destruction of Russia (Tarasenko 2022). At the same time, the war in Ukraine has presented the EU with a new set of options concerning Venezuela and compelled it to pay closer attention to the conflict. The very costly war effort in Ukraine is likely to impact Russia's global projection, including in Latin America, while European attempts at curbing Russia's oil and gas exports have created a need to diversify the EU's fossil fuels supplies, including potentially from Venezuela.

The economic and political consequences of the Ukraine war contributed to reviewing the sanctions policies. At the end of 2022, after the government and the opposition reached a humanitarian agreement in Mexico, the US, EU, United Kingdom (UK) and Canada announced their intention to review sanctions policies should the regime make meaningful democratic progress (US Department of State 2022). The EU has yet to end its sanctions regime and other import and export restrictions (Tarasenko 2022). However, the fact that EU states are "very concerned with getting the same conditions for their firms as US firms, of getting a level playing field," following Washington's re-engagement and Chevron's resumption of oil operations in Venezuela, suggests that the EU is focusing on how to re-engage its energy trade relations with Caracas.⁸ In line with this, HRVP Borrell has hinted at the possibility of reviewing

sanctions if progress between Maduro and the opposition is achieved (Villaamil 2023), at the Foreign Affairs Council on 23 January 2023 (Council of the EU 2023). European diplomats have also engaged with the Venezuelan government to grant a licence to European companies Repsol and Eni to extract and export Venezuelan gas to Europe (Zerpa 2023).

Regional fragmentation and Latin America's 'left turn'

Regional polarisation has also had very negative effects on regional cooperation mechanisms in Latin America (Legler 2020). The recognition of Guaidó split the region. The Lima Group, an anti-Maduro regional platform created in 2017 comprising over a dozen Latin American countries (mostly run by right-wing governments) as well as Canada, joined the US and most EU countries in supporting Guaidó's claim as the legitimate interim President. By contrast, traditionally anti-Western regimes from the region such as Cuba or Nicaragua, as well as Bolivia and some Caribbean islands, unconditionally supported Maduro. Leftist political forces also formed the pro-Maduro Puebla Group in July 2019 (Malamud 2022).⁹ Over the next five years, however, there has been a gradual shift towards left-leaning governments in most Latin American countries, including key ones such as Colombia, Chile, Brazil and Argentina. Despite continuing differences over how to deal with Maduro after the flawed 2020 elections, the region's greater ideological homogeneity, coupled with the change of government in the White House, has contributed to reducing regional fragmentation, providing the EU with greater latitude to seek strategic partnering with regional actors.

A highly polarised Western hemisphere

At the regional level, however, divergences between states and the absence of well-functioning multilateral governance structures in the region have made it difficult to find institutional conflict resolution frameworks where the EU could become involved (Sanahuja 2022). The dispute spilled over into regional bodies such as the OAS and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), preventing them from playing a mediating role and making it difficult for the EU to engage in meaningful regional dialogue. A thin majority vote in the OAS, which includes the US and Canada, gave Venezuela's seat to Guaidó's representative, whereas the Maduro government continued to represent Venezuela in the CELAC (Melimopoulos 2019). Due to this division and polarisation, EU-CELAC Summits have not been held since 2015 (Serbin and Serbin Pont 2018).

To mitigate this, the EU initially sought strategic partnering with the US/Lima Group in an effort to delegitimise Maduro while also pressing him to make concessions through the ICG and the Mexico talks. Efforts to undermine Maduro were short-lived and had limited impact. Due to the political polarisation in the region mentioned above, the ICG was perceived as a biased platform. Subsequently, the EU backed other diplomatic

⁸Interview with EU officials, November 2022.

⁹The Puebla Group is a forum composed of presidents, former presidents, politicians and academics from 19 Latin American countries, Spain, Portugal and Italy, founded in July 2019 in the Mexican city of Puebla, with the objective of articulating progressive ideas, production models, development programmes and state policies. In practice, it has provided political support to left-wing authoritarian governments.

initiatives such as the Norway-facilitated talks in Mexico, but apart from an agreement on humanitarian aid, progress has been hampered by disagreements and divisions between various factions of the opposition.

The EU's initial efforts also failed because of the gap between US (under Trump) and EU objectives: unlike the Trump administration, the EU has never openly sought regime change and has rather aimed to restore democratic processes. This divide eroded the credibility of EU efforts to promote intra-Venezuela talks and its ability to provide Maduro with incentives, given that sanctions relief from the EU could scarcely materialise in the presence of strong US sanctions. Furthermore, the aforementioned support of Maduro by external actors such as Russia, the PRC, Turkey and Iran (Gratius 2022), and the regional fragmentation of Latin America, affected the impact of the EU's mitigation measures, as they prompted Maduro to entrench his position rather than give concessions to the opposition.

EU mitigation amid a regional political shift

The Union has also gradually been looking to adjust its strategic partnering with regional actors, particularly after the region's progressive 'turn to the left' in recent years. The victory of left-leaning leaders in most Latin American countries, including Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and Chile, has created a less polarised regional environment, reviving intra-regional engagement on the Venezuela issue. In 2020 and 2021, Mexico hosted the first CELAC Summits since 2013. While inviting Maduro sparked controversy (Brazil, for example, refused to participate), this was less controversial in the 2023 summit hosted by Argentina, when Maduro ultimately decided not to attend. Perhaps the clearest shift in the region's engagement with Venezuela is the decision by the Colombian President, Gustavo Petro, to restore diplomatic relations and reopen the border between the two countries. Petro also asked Venezuela to be a guarantor of the peace talks with the Colombian guerrilla National Liberation Army (ELN) and has invited Venezuela to re-join the Inter-American human rights system. In another attempt to unblock the slowly progressing negotiation process between the government and the opposition, Petro hosted an International Conference on the political process in Venezuela in April 2023, with the participation of 20 countries, including the EU HRVP Borrell. Although the only tangible result of the conference was a shared statement on the need to agree on an electoral calendar and to revive dialogue between the parties, it rekindled the regional diplomatic engagement on the country's crisis and could serve as a basis to revive the Mexico talks. The EU has supported these intra-regional engagements and has revived the EU-CELAC political dialogue on a number of issues, including Venezuela.

Against this backdrop, the EU has resorted to a revamped regional multilateral strategy, as attested to by the recent restoration of EU-CELAC relations, which has been translated into a common declaration (only opposed by Nicaragua) that includes a call for a constructive dialogue between the Venezuelan government and opposition in the Mexico talks (European Commission 2023). The EU has coupled these diplomatic measures with more explicitly adopting a policy of issue linkage, where sanctions relief is linked to concessions by Maduro in negotiations with the opposition. This was mentioned during a meeting at the EU-CELAC Summit between the EU's High Representative and the presidents of France, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina and Colombia, as well as envoys representing both Venezuela's Maduro government and the opposition (Osborn

Table 1. Constraining factors on EUFSP towards Venezuela.

EUFSP constraint	Operationalisation	Impact on EUFSP
Intra-EU contestation	<i>Contestation from governmental actors</i> Member states' divisions over recognising Guaidó as interim President	EU's inability to take a unanimous position, affecting its image as interlocutor
Multipolar competition	<i>Narrow competition</i> US maximalist approach under Trump <i>Zero-sum competition</i> Russia, China, Iran and Turkey's support to Maduro	Ineffective punitive economic measures, such as sanctions, bypassed by Maduro thanks to Russia, the PRC, Iran and Turkey Difficulty in promoting dialogue between conflict parties
Regional fragmentation	<i>National level</i> Dispute over electoral outcomes Politicisation of humanitarian aid <i>Regional level</i> Polarisation of regional governance bodies	Identification of viable or legitimate interlocutors Difficulty in handling a worsening humanitarian crisis Unfruitful dialogue with ideologically-biased regional groups such as the Lima Group Unsuccessful initiatives such as the International Contact Group

2023). The fact that the US government under Biden also hinted at the possibility of providing sanctions relief if the country moves to restore democracy a few weeks later suggests that this was coordinated with Washington (Parraga *et al.* 2023). After all, the economic benefits of sanctions relief would likely outweigh what Russia can offer Maduro (Tarasenko 2022).

Together, these measures have the potential to reduce Venezuela's internal fragmentation while also boosting mechanisms for regional governance. If the EU and the US agree on clear conditions for lifting sanctions, these conditions may be used to leverage Maduro into giving further concessions, particularly in view of the 2024 presidential elections. Maduro is apparently willing to take advantage of the US and EU's eagerness to re-engage by playing both sides in the diplomatic realm, siding with Russia and the PRC but also engaging in negotiations with Western countries (Berg 2022). However, a slow resumption of oil and gas trade may improve the economic situation in Venezuela and, if revenues are rightly redistributed, may have positive effects on the humanitarian situation. In what seems to be an effort to appease Western concerns about the country's kleptocratic mismanagement of the oil industry, Maduro has even embarked on an anti-corruption campaign, although many observers fear that this is just a façade operation (Moleiro 2023). While the West's rapprochement with the Maduro government is certainly a divisive issue for the opposition (Goodman 2023), it could also help create the conditions for a renewed engagement between the government and opposition on the minimal conditions for granting a more level playing field in the 2024 presidential elections. It may also foster greater regional engagement, with a growing number of Latin American governments now calling for a relaxation of sanctions as a step to re-integrate Venezuela into the inter-American system (Osborn 2022).

Conclusion

The EU operates in an environment of intra-EU divisions, geopolitical rivalries and regional fragmentation that affects its ability to implement a coherent and effective foreign and security policy. This article set out to explore the main challenges facing EUFSP towards Venezuela (Table 1), focusing on how the EU has tried to mitigate

these challenges in the formulation and implementation of its policies, and the ways in which the strategies used to mitigate one constraint may have contributed to mitigate or alternatively exacerbate another.

Intra-EU divisions on the recognition of Guaidó as interim President initially limited the formation of a coherent EUFSP towards Venezuela. Intra-EU contestation was caused by the domestic politics of member states, not by disagreements over the primary EU objectives in Venezuela. EU member states worked around their divisions by refocusing efforts and *delegating* rather uncontroversial policies, such as electoral monitoring and humanitarian aid, to the EEAS and the Commission.

Electoral monitoring and humanitarian aid were in themselves part of a broader attempt by the EU to reduce Venezuela's fragmentation by way of *selective engagement* with the Maduro regime. Also relevant to this effort was the *multilateralisation* of the EU's humanitarian aid – which was important for depoliticising the issue – and *strategic partnering* with other like-minded countries through the formation of the ICG or the Mexico talks and closer alignment with the US under Biden.

Table 2. Strengths and limits of mitigation strategies.

Strategy/Action	Mitigation of intra-EU divisions	Mitigation of domestic/regional fragmentation	Mitigation of multipolar competition	Limit
<i>Selective engagement</i> Humanitarian aid and electoral observation	Focus on less divisive issues (aid and electoral observation)	EOM and aid played in both parties' interests, helped ease talks/negotiations	Positioned the EU as a more independent actor than initially perceived by both domestic players and global powers	Unlikely to foster talks on other issues
<i>Delegation</i> EEAS and Commission lead	Helped overcome the stalemate in engagement with Venezuela			
<i>Multilateralisation</i> UN involvement in distribution of aid		Helped depoliticise aid		
<i>Regional facilitation</i> Support to ICG and Mexico talks Resumption of EU-CELAC dialogue	Helped overcome member states' divisions on Guaidó's recognition through dialogue with regional partners	Aimed to reduce polarisation among regional partners	Aimed to defuse multipolar competition by giving greater agency to regional actors	Too divided region (before the recent shift to the left) impeded real progress
<i>Strategic partnering</i> Coordination with US and like-minded countries			Prevented other powers support for Maduro translating into annihilation of the opposition	Pressure was defused by support of Russia, the PRC, Iran and Turkey to Maduro Estranged Venezuela from the region, particularly when the Lima group was the main interlocutor
Issue-linkage Sanctions relief and progress in talks		May play into both sides' interests, in view of 2024 elections	Increased leverage on Maduro, particularly since Ukraine war	Yet to be seen

In Table 2 we summarise the EU mitigation strategies relating to the three main constraints on EUFSP towards Venezuela, their effects and limits. One of the main conclusions is that mitigation strategies against internal contestation have worked reasonably well over an issue where ideological positioning has an important weight. On the contrary, the main limits and weaknesses arise in the face of multipolar competition in which the EU is constrained by the strategies of Russia and the PRC, but also by changes in the US administration. Regarding regional fragmentation, the EU has resumed interregional dialogue to facilitate progress, but the strong internal polarisation remains a constraint difficult to overcome.

Overall, these strategies significantly reduced the impact of intra-EU contestation on EUFSP towards Venezuela and had some positive effects on the ground. However, they were not sufficiently effective for an agreement between the Maduro government and the opposition to be reached. Major constraining factors were multipolar competition – dynamics between the EU and other external actors – and the corresponding fragmentation of regional governance bodies. While the EU always favoured a negotiated way out of the political impasse in Venezuela, it also pursued a policy of *delegitimisation* and strong economic pressure on Maduro, which seemingly put it in sync with the Trump Administration's regime change policy. This weakened the EU's credibility to act as a mediator and increased polarisation in the region, hence making a negotiated solution more difficult.

Most importantly, Maduro could resist Western pressure thanks to continued support by Russia and the PRC, as well as other countries in the region and Turkey and Iran. The failure to address the effects of multipolar competition was the greatest constraint on EUFSP towards Venezuela. As long as the PRC and Russia, and aligned countries in the region, continue to support the Maduro regime, the impact of the EU's policies is destined to remain limited.

Recent events within and outside the region have changed the EU's policy options. Following Russia's war on Ukraine and the energy challenges facing Europe, and in line with the Biden administration's cautious *rapprochement* with Venezuela, the EU is now considering limited re-engagement with the Maduro regime through a strategy of transatlantic strategic partnering.

Given Venezuela's capacity to supply much needed oil and gas after Western states cut their imports from Russia, the US is now more open to dialogue with the Maduro regime as well as pursuing sanctions relief, energy cooperation and resumption of oil and gas trade (*The Economist* 2022; Luján 2022). Prior to imposing sanctions on Caracas, the US was among the biggest buyers of Venezuelan oil (together with India and the PRC). Ironically, due to sanctions, the US replaced oil imports from Venezuela with increased imports from Russia in 2018 (Tarasenko 2022). Now, the situation may be reversed again.

On the other hand, Venezuela has traditionally not been an important trading partner for the EU. EU investments in Venezuela are well below those of the PRC, which since 2000 has invested more than 60 billion dollars in the country (Ormaetxea 2021). However, in the context of reduced oil and gas imports from Russia, Venezuelan imports to Europe could help diversify European supply sources, even if the immediate effects would be limited due to production capacity limitations after decades of low investments.

Furthermore, the election of progressive presidents in countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Chile offers an opportunity to revitalise intra-regional cooperation and

thus reduce fragmentation. Against this background, the EU has pursued a renewed focus on economic interaction, especially through a trade deal with the South American trade bloc Mercosur, which could be used as an incentive for Venezuela to re-engage. With these changes, the EU is however facing a new dilemma. The pragmatic nature of the shift towards greater openness to dialogue with the Maduro government, along with the prospect of an improving Venezuelan economy due to resumed oil trade, may help build the necessary conditions for a relatively fair election in 2024, one in which opposition candidates are not prevented from participating or even arrested, but at the cost of sacrificing EU's normative commitment to the protection of democracy and human rights. Either way, the political, social and humanitarian crisis facing Venezuela will not be resolved soon and the EU should continue to be actively engaged in a long-term peaceful solution to the many challenges the country is facing. Multilateral competition and the weakness of America's regional cooperation institutions will continue to determine the limits of EU policy towards Venezuela.

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Notes on contributors

Anna Ayuso is a Senior Research Fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Barcelona, Spain. Email: aayuso@cidob.org

Tiziano Breda is a Researcher in the Global Actors Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Rome, Italy. Email: t.breda@iai.it

Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir is a Junior Research Fellow at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway.

Marianne Riddervold is a Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), Oslo, Norway. Email: mari@nupi.no

ORCID

Anna Ayuso  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1301-851X>

Tiziano Breda  <http://orcid.org/0009-0002-1166-1448>

Elsa Lilja Gunnarsdottir  <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-9664-8659>

Marianne Riddervold  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3010-8031>

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