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EFFECTIVENESS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN TODAY'S POLITICAL AFFAIRS

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## Effectiveness of the European Union in Today's Political Affairs

The European Union (EU) is an international body consisting of 27 member states that are predominantly from the Europe region. As a representative of a regional block, the EU engages in political negotiations involving member states and political discussions between the European block and other external parties. The Union represents a 'single' voice of European countries, which draws power from economic governance, military resources, and other frameworks that allow for the consolidation of power. Although the EU can draw power from its formalized defense cooperation, the problems stemming from its internal organization and poor strategic approach have a negative effect on its efficacy in the modern-day political environment regardless of context.

### **Internal Organization**

The central-peripheral narrative that characterizes the EU has dire implications for its collective negotiating power due to a consensus on economic direction. According to Sepos (2016), the center-periphery divide in Europe is a consequence of the financialization model, where the central countries, such as northern European member states, profited significantly through the collection of interests on loans extended to peripheral countries, like southern, central, and eastern European member states, to support their growing consumption of peripheral households, especially center-manufactured goods (p. 44). The attempt to drive economic growth within the Union created a sense of dependence of peripheral countries or debtors on center countries. At the start, this model did not present obvious problems because there was a general sense of economic stability with central countries having strong economies and surplus capital. However, the ever-increasing current account deficit in peripheral countries resulted in the

increased susceptibility of the countries to the economic crisis of 2007-2008, which laid the foundation for the Eurozone's debt crisis.

Given that the EU is composed of states that play two distinct roles economically, it is likely that the creditors and debtors have opposing economic priorities. Following the economic downturn, the Union responded implemented austerity policies to offer relief to debt-ridden countries, which peripheral countries find to be misguided because they place "the burden of adjustment on debtors and workers, and all but leaves creditors and capital owners off the hook" (Sepos 2016, p. 48). The forced implementation of austerity policies in peripheral countries during the Eurozone's economic crises creates a precedent for the hierarchy of economic interests within the Union. Periphery countries may emphasize the need to create a freer market to create opportunities for reducing their dependence on central countries, while central countries may seek to protect their position in the Eurozone's economy. As a result, the conflicting interests may undermine the EU's power to negotiate across-block trade agreements because of the lack of unity.

Besides the dominant-controlled status of member states, there seems to be some controversy over the goal of the EU as a whole, which may complicate the process of decision-making given concerns of a decline in member state sovereignty. The former President of the European Commission (EC), Jean-Claude Juncker, supports the idea of "further integration," where the EC "generally seeks to respond to crises by pressing member-states to accept 'European' solutions that involve extra powers for EU institutions" (Grant 2016, para. 3). The idea of empowering the Union as a federal government is a source of contention because countries are becoming increasingly concerned about their sovereignty with regard to national matters. Donald Tusk, the former President of the European Council, stated that in the obsession

“with the idea of instant and total integration, we failed to notice that ordinary people, the citizens of Europe, do not share our Euro-enthusiasm” (Grant 2016, para. 4). European countries have different motivations for participating in the Union. However, the member states are not necessarily interested in giving EU institutions excessive power to the extent that their national sovereignty is threatened.

This problem of sharing of power between the EU and individual member states’ government structures is worsened by the rise of politically dominant states. Germany has become a dominant member state in the Union following Brexit and the notable French weakness, which has created major concerns because Germany played a major role in determining the EU’s response to issues, for instance, the refugee crisis, the Russia-Ukraine war, and Eurozone crisis (Grant 2016, para. 7). Germany consolidated much power in the Union. Voeten (2019) argues that “states with greater ability to achieve their preferred outcomes without cooperation can leverage the threat to act unilaterally to shape multilateral institutional rules,” resulting in a situation where the institution’s design favors or advances its interests (p. 153). Consequently, peripheral member states are worried over the rise of Germany above other central countries. The internal power wrangles among member states and competing ideologies have an adverse effect on the power of the EU on the international stage because of the obvious absence of internal coherence.

### **Military Power**

Although defense cooperation among member states presents a source of power, the complexities of leveraging military power make it an unreliable source of power. Prior to the 2014 invasion of Ukraine by Russia, attempts to formalize defense cooperation among EU member states were sluggish, with commitments to the European Security and Defense

Cooperation, European Security Strategy, and European Defense Agency remaining voluntary (Zielinski & Schilde 2021, p. 30). Initially, the EU had limited access to the military as a power resource. However, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine created a sense of urgency in formalizing defense cooperation that resulted in the formation of the European Defense Fund (EDF) and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), which "transferred significant aspects of decision-making authority from states to the European level" (Zielinski & Schilde 2021, p. 29). The formalized commitment of member states ensures that the Union can leverage its military capabilities in the political sphere. Nonetheless, military power presents as a defensive rather than an offensive tool, which is problematic because diplomatic and political discussions require the EU to have positive coercive power that can incite voluntary cooperation rather than harden the political stance of the target country.

### **Strategic Approach**

Assuming that the EU can resolve its internal issues and appropriately leverage its military power in political negotiations, the success of the EU seems to be undermined by its poor strategy. According to Grant (2016), the EU "will not want the exit talks to be pain-free, easy or pleasant for the United Kingdom (UK), since they wish to deter others from following the British's example," yet it is unlikely that other members will leave the Union in the foreseeable future (paras. 2, 14). The EU appears to be focused on teaching Britain a lesson even though Brexit does not threaten the existence of the Union. According to the World Economic Forum (2018), the process of loosening ties with Britain is expected to have an adverse effect on income and employment within the Union regardless of the nature of the trade agreement that the EU formed with Britain (para. 6). Interestingly, the Union seems to be oblivious of the adverse effects of its 'revenge mission' on the well-being of its member states. Moreover, countries that

are overly dependent on trade with the UK, such as Ireland, Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, and the Czech Republic, will shoulder a significant proportion of the expected output decline caused by Brexit in the long run (World Economic Forum 2018, para. 11). The decision to frustrate the formation of post-Brexit relationships with the UK will have substantial impacts on EU member states that had large trade volumes with the UK. The EU risks losing the political support of member states in the pursuit of an objective that is difficult to justify, given the significant effects it will have on the Eurozone's economies. Based on this case, the choice of strategy is essential in preserving and growing the EU's political power by redefining its economic relationships with major trading partners. As a result, the EU's poor strategy in handling economic relationships could undermine its political power, which is partly dependent on economic superiority.

### **Context**

Assessing the political effectiveness of the EU requires an evaluation of the role of situational circumstances in influencing the realized power. According to Forsberg (2013), "power resources are always relative to the specific issue at stake," which provides a reasonable explanation for the "unrealized power" of the EU in certain cases (p. 30). Given the multiple issues that may need political intervention, it is important to understand that political power is only useful if the EU can utilize it to influence the factors that contribute to an issue. In EU-Russian relations, "Russia has had limited opportunities to influence its decision-making or the issues related to the sovereignty of its member states or enlargement policies of the Union," which enables the EU to continue to define the terms of engagement and prevent Russia from defining the relationship's design (Forsberg 2013, p. 35). It is commendable that the EU is independent of the influence of Russia from a sovereignty standpoint. Under these

circumstances, the Union holds significant power in political negotiations presuming all other factors that could influence the negotiations are favorable to the EU.

### **Conclusion**

The Union's internal power struggles and its tendency to employ poor strategy in handling politically charged problems undermine the institution's political power. The central-peripheral hierarchy, ideological differences, and the emergence of dominant countries within the EU create much tension among member states resulting in a situation where they cannot advance a single political agenda. Political power derived from military capability cannot ensure success in political negotiations with other international powers. The EU's effectiveness is contingent on its ability to employ strategic approaches to political negotiations. Equally important, the EU's realized political power is dependent on the situational circumstances surrounding the political issue.



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