

# Ontological Security and the European Union: Routines, Biographical Continuity, and the Search for Stability in a Changing World

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the European Union's position in the international system through the lens of ontological security theory, with particular attention to how the Union constructs and sustains identity stability through routines and biographical continuity, as well as through its internal biography and relations with external actors. The central argument of the study is that recent developments such as Brexit, the migration crisis, debates over strategic autonomy, and the war in Ukraine constitute not only institutional and political challenges but also profound ontological threats to the identity narrative historically constructed by the EU. In this context, the tension between the EU's self-positioning as a "normative power" and its increasingly assertive identity as a "strategic actor" generates vulnerabilities in the Union's capacity to preserve its biographical continuity. The article draws on the contributions of Anthony Giddens, Jennifer Mitzen, and Brent J. Steele to the ontological security literature as its theoretical foundation and employs a qualitative, interpretive discourse analysis of official documents, political discourses, and policy texts that reflect the EU's identity and foreign policy orientations. By integrating the internal and external dimensions of ontological security, this approach elucidates the interaction between the EU's internal identity construction and its external strategic behavior, and offers an original contribution to the literature by conceptualizing the Union's evolving role in global politics from an existential security perspective.

**Keywords:** European Union; Ontological Security; Routines; Biographical Continuity; Internal and External Biography

**Özet:** Bu çalışma, Avrupa Birliği'nin uluslararası sistemdeki konumunu ontolojik güvenlik kuramı perspektifinden ele almakta; özellikle rutinler ve biyografik süreklilik kavramları ile Birliğin iç biyografisi ve dış aktörlerle kurduğu ilişkiler üzerinden kimliksel istikrarını nasıl inşa ettiği ve sürdürdüğünü incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel argümanı, Brexit, göç krizi, stratejik özerklik tartışmaları ve Ukrayna savaşı gibi son dönem gelişmelerin yalnızca kurumsal ve politik zorluklar değil, aynı zamanda AB'nin tarihsel olarak inşa ettiği kimlik anlatısına yönelik derin ontolojik tehditler teşkil ettiğidir. Bu bağlamda, AB'nin kendisini bir "normatif güç" olarak konumlandırması ile giderek daha iddialı hâle gelen "stratejik aktör" kimliği arasındaki gerilim, Birliğin biyografik sürekliliğini muhafaza etme kapasitesinde yapısal kırılganlıklar üretmektedir. Makale, ontolojik güvenlik literatüründe Anthony Giddens, Jennifer Mitzen ve Brent J. Steele'in katkılarını kuramsal zemin olarak benimsemekte; AB'nin kimliğini ve dış politika yönelimlerini yansıtan resmi belgeler, politik söylemler ve politika metinlerine dayalı nitel ve yorumsamacı bir söylem analizi yöntemi kullanmaktadır. Ontolojik güvenlik kuramının içsel ve dışsal boyutlarını bütünleştiren bu yaklaşım, AB'nin iç kimlik inşası ile dışsal stratejik davranışları arasındaki etkileşimi açıklamakta ve Birliğin küresel siyasetteki dönüşen rolünü varoluşsal güvenlik perspektifinden kavramsallaştırarak literatüre özgün bir katkı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Avrupa Birliği; Ontolojik Güvenlik, Rutinler; Biyografik Süreklilik, İçsel ve Dışsal Biyografi

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## Introduction

In the post-Cold War era, the European Union (EU) has constructed a distinctive identity, defining itself as a “normative power” within the international system. This identity has been anchored in values such as peace, democracy, human rights, and multilateralism, through which the Union has established its normative legitimacy in foreign policy and security. However, developments over the past decade—Brexit, migration and energy crises, the rise of populist movements, uncertainties regarding the global role of the United States, and the war in Ukraine—have posed significant challenges to the EU’s foundational identity. While striving to maintain internal cohesion and narrative continuity, the Union is simultaneously under pressure to redefine itself as a strategic actor within the international system. Against this backdrop, the central research question of this study is: How does the European Union preserve its identity continuity and existential security in the international system? This question seeks to analyze the EU’s strategies for coping with external crises (e.g., the war in Ukraine) and internal transformations (e.g., the search for identity after Brexit) from an ontological security perspective. The theoretical framework draws on Anthony Giddens’ (1991) concept of ontological security, as well as the works of Jennifer Mitzen (2006) and Brent J. Steele (2008), which extend the concept to international relations.

The ontological security approach posits that actors pursue not only physical security but also identity stability and continuity. In this context, the EU produces a coherent “narrative of self” through its foreign policy routines, normative discourses, and institutional practices; this narrative underpins both the Union’s internal legitimacy and its position in the international system. Disruptions to these routines or inconsistencies in the identity narrative threaten the EU’s existential security. This study examines the ontological security of the EU along two fundamental dimensions: routines and biographical continuity, i.e., the practices and narratives that sustain the Union’s identity stability; and external states and internal biography, i.e., the processes through which the EU redefines its identity in relation to external actors. By integrating these two dimensions, the study develops an analytical framework for understanding both the EU’s internal cohesion and its external strategic positioning. Accordingly, the article approaches the EU’s contemporary global role not merely through power balances or normative capacity, but also through the lens of identity security and existential continuity, thereby providing theoretical depth to the Union’s process of redefining itself in a changing international environment.

## Conceptual-Theoretical Framework

The concept of ontological security was first developed by Anthony Giddens in his seminal work *Modernity and Self-Identity* to explain individuals' pursuit of continuity and meaning at an existential level (Giddens, 1991, pp.35-41). According to Giddens, ontological security refers to the sense of "existential stability" necessary for actors to maintain their identity consistently over time. Individuals generate a "sense of order" through daily routines and predictable social interactions, which forms the foundation of identity continuity (Giddens, 1991, pp.71-77; Huysmans, 1998, pp.228-233). Therefore, ontological security encompasses not only the absence of physical threats but also the experience of identity as a coherent and meaningful whole. Jennifer Mitzen's work is particularly significant in adapting this concept to international relations. Mitzen argues that states, like individuals, pursue identity continuity and achieve it through diplomatic and institutional routines (Mitzen, 2006, pp.346-353; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, pp.240-256). States maintain their existential stability through predictable relationships and recurring foreign policy practices (Mitzen & Larson, 2017, pp.5-11; Riemer, 2023, pp.218-229). However, when these routines are disrupted, for example, during periods of war, crisis, or identity transformation, the ontological security of states is undermined (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017, pp.4-10; Zarakol, 2017, pp.51-62). Thus, states' foreign policy behavior can be explained not only by the pursuit of material interests but also by concerns regarding identity (Subotic, 2016, pp.615-621; Pratt, 2016, pp.78-85).

Brent J. Steele deepens this approach by introducing a moral dimension. According to Steele, states, driven by the need to maintain a coherent self-narrative, interpret their actions in light of identity consistency. In this sense, ontological security encompasses not only a stable sense of self but also the pursuit of moral integrity. States act out of concern to maintain an identity consistent with their past, which sometimes results in political choices that go beyond rational interests (Steele, 2008, pp.96-118; Rumelili, 2020, pp.260-269). This theoretical perspective allows security to be reconceptualized in terms of identity stability and self-narrative continuity rather than material threats. From an ontological security perspective, security is understood as the practice of preserving the continuity of the self (Phipps & Ozanne, 2017, pp.366-377). Since the 2000s, ontological security theory has also been employed as a productive analytical framework in studies on the European Union (EU) to examine the relationship between identity, belonging, and foreign policy. Rumelili contends that the EU defines its identity in relation to "others" and establishes predictable foreign relations to safeguard the Union's ontological security (Rumelili, 2018, pp.283-290; Kinnvall, Manners, & Mitzen, 2018, pp.249-

265). Browning analyzed the EU's security policies through the lens of ontological security, particularly focusing on the Union's strategic discourse and practices aimed at preserving identity stability during the migration crisis (Browning, 2018, pp.339-350). Croft and Vaughan-Williams highlighted how the EU's self-narrative is reproduced during times of crisis (Croft & Vaughan, 2017, pp.15-26).

While these studies are important for addressing the EU's identity and security at an ontological level, they have largely employed a one-dimensional approach. One stream of literature has focused on the EU's external relations (e.g., neighborhood policy, Russia, or migration issues) and attempted to explain the Union's identity in relation to the 'other' (Nogues, 2018; Mitzen, 2018; Gellwitzki & Houde, 2023). Another stream has concentrated on the EU's internal identity construction, including European identity, normative power discourse, and the integration process (Manners, 2011; Diez, 2021; Karjalainen, 2023; Kaunert & Deus Pereira, 2023). However, studies that connect these two levels i.e., those that analyze the dynamic interaction between the EU's internal biography and its external actions remain limited. Drawing on this gap, this article makes a unique contribution to the literature by placing the two fundamental dimensions of ontological security, routines and biographical continuity along with external states and internal biography, at the center of the analysis. The interplay between these dimensions offers a new explanatory framework for understanding how the EU maintains its identity continuity. The article demonstrates how the EU's biographical continuity, rooted in its 'peace project' and 'normative power' narrative, has evolved in a tense relationship with its increasing pursuit of strategic autonomy in foreign policy. In this way, the study conceptualizes the EU's position in the international system not only from normative or rational-interest perspectives but also from the perspective of identity continuity and existential security, thereby providing an innovative analytical framework for the ontological security literature.

### **The EU's Internal Biography and the Transformation of its Routines**

The ontological security of the European Union is grounded in a self-narrative historically founded on peace, prosperity, and normative values. This biographical narrative, stemming from the principle that Europe would experience no further wars after the Second World War, has transformed the Union from a purely economic integration project into an actor with a moral identity (Diez, 2021, pp.7-14; Manners, 2024, pp.820-831). This identity has been reproduced through institutional routines centered on normative principles such as member solidarity, the rule of law, human rights, and shared prosperity. These routines have ensured both the EU's internal stability and its role as a normative power in the international system. However,

three major crises over the last decade, Brexit, the migration crisis, and the war in Ukraine, have significantly disrupted the routines underpinning this self-narrative, creating identity fractures that threaten the EU's biographical continuity (Flochart, 2020, pp.18-28; Lax, 2023, pp.11-26; Hakansson, 2023, pp.28-36; Anders, Braun & Libman, 2025, pp.508-518). In this sense, Brexit represents not only an institutional loss in terms of the EU's ontological security but also a profound identity trauma (Nogues, 2018, pp.531-540). This development has prompted a reassessment of the notion of "irreversible integration" within the EU's existential narrative. From an ontological security perspective, Brexit is an event that interrupts the continuity of "who the EU is": Europe's borders, the meaning of membership, and the definition of "being European" have been reopened for debate. In response, the EU has sought to reconstruct its biography by establishing new routines in the post-Brexit era, such as the discourse on "strategic autonomy" and the renewed emphasis on the value of EU citizenship (Roshier, 2022, pp.24-30). Thus, Brexit has ontologically destabilized the EU while simultaneously triggering a process of "self-redefinition."

The post-2015 migration crisis has profoundly disrupted the EU's internal narrative, which is grounded in "human values" and "solidarity." During the crisis, the principle of solidarity among member states weakened, national borders were reinstated, and in some countries, such as Hungary and Poland, policies challenging the discourse of "European values" emerged. From an ontological security perspective, the migration crisis has called into question the applicability of the normative routines that constitute the EU's identity, particularly the principles of solidarity, open society, and human rights (Bachleitner & Betts, 2024, pp.471-480). Throughout this process, a form of "moral cognitive dissonance" has emerged in the Union's self-narrative: the EU claims to be the "protector of human values" while simultaneously implementing strict security policies at its external borders (Tsourdi, Ott & Vankova, 2022, pp.91-100). This identity tension has generated inconsistencies in the EU's internal biography and weakened its ontological security. The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, has created both a rupture in the EU's internal biography and a process of reconstruction. The conflict has tested the limits of the EU's peace and normative power identity within its existential narrative, compelling the Union to act in the domains of security, defence, and geopolitics for the first time (Hakansson, 2023, pp.28-36). Although this situation appears to contradict the EU's identity as a "peace project," it simultaneously signals the emergence of a new biographical continuity in terms of ontological security. The EU has now begun to position itself not only as the "bearer of peace" but also as the "guarantor of Europe's security." This transformation can be interpreted as the reproduction of existential stability through the establishment of new routines, as Mitzen suggests (Mitzen, 2006, pp.348-356).

The creation of the Defence Fund, the institutionalization of military aid, and the reinforcement of the discourse on strategic autonomy are concrete manifestations of the EU's efforts to rebuild its ontological security in line with current threats.

Brexit, the migration crisis, and the war in Ukraine threaten the EU's ontological security at different levels, yet each of these crises has triggered a process of transforming the Union's routines and redefining its biography (Della Sala, 2023, pp.366-371). The EU now sustains its existential security not by remaining loyal to the past, but through its capacity for change and redefinition. In this context, the Union dynamically reproduces its identity stability by cultivating the ability to "preserve continuity within change," as proposed by Giddens (Hebel & Lenz, 2016, pp.478-486; Greve, 2018, pp.860-881). These observations indicate that the internal biography of the European Union, its collective self-narrative and the institutional routines that sustain it, operates in the ontological security literature through two types of practices: normative routines (the rule of law, discourses of solidarity, discourses of enlargement) and practical routines (Schengen practices, economic coordination mechanisms, common policy-making processes) (Kinnval, Manners & Mitzen, 2018, pp.253-261; Ralph, 2025, pp.6-18). These two categories of routines establish the existential framework that provides the EU with both internal legitimacy and predictability in the international arena. Brexit, the migration crisis, and the war in Ukraine have disrupted biographical continuity by affecting different dimensions of this framework; each has triggered a distinct rupture mechanism in ontological security. Brexit dismantled the myth of the "irreversibility" of integration, creating a rupture in the Union's core narrative of progress; this highlighted questions about the continuity of routines and generated a need to re-legitimize the EU's self-narrative (Bouza Garcia, 2017, pp.285-290). The migration crisis, by undermining normative routines in practice, exposed the cognitive dissonance between the Union's discourse on "human values" and its policies; the erosion of solidarity practices intensified debates on legitimacy and identity within internal public discourse (Mitzen, 2018, pp.1376-1386; Bachleitner & Betts, 2024, pp.5-14). The war in Ukraine, meanwhile, has the potential to transform the EU's biographical narrative: during this period of testing its peace-based identity, the Union has acted to rebuild its existential stability by defending its practical routines and extending them toward defence and geopolitical capacity building.

The combined effect of these three factors demonstrates that the EU's capacity to safeguard its existential security derives not only from its ability to manage external threats, but also from its capacity to maintain internal continuity that is, its institutional routines, identity narratives, and forms of social belonging. From the perspective of ontological security theory, "routines" serve as existential

anchors that allow actors to position themselves within a stable order in which they recognize themselves in the world (Arfi, 2020, pp.296-301). “Biographical continuity” represents the narrative dimension of this order; it is the actor’s capacity to construct a coherent story linking their past, present, and future (Subotic, 2016, pp.616-625). In this context, the EU reproduces its internal ontological security across discourse, institutions, and identity. The discourses produced by EU institutions during crises have served to interpret and reframe the uncertainties threatening the Union’s existential continuity. During the Brexit process, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and negotiators’ emphasis on “the Union is indivisible” demonstrated that the EU was rhetorically rebuilding its internal identity integrity in response to the risk of fragmentation (EU Commission, 2018; Browning, 2018, pp.338-352). The repeated invocation of “European values” and “humanitarian responsibility” during the migration crisis created a discursive defence mechanism aimed at preserving identity consistency on an ethical basis (Browning & Joenniemi, 2016, pp.33-45; Çöpoğlu, 2024, pp.95-97). In the context of the war in Ukraine, statements such as “Europe has found its soul” or “This war is about who we are” have revitalized the EU’s collective self-narrative, reinforcing its ontological security around a narrative of normative solidarity (Kaunert & Pereira, 2023, pp.1137-1142). These discourses have transformed crises that might have interrupted the EU’s biographical continuity into narrative turning points where identity is actively redefined.

The EU’s internal ontological security is being rebuilt not only through normative identity narratives produced at the discursive level, but also through institutional routines and governance practices that preserve continuity during crises. As Mitzen notes, routines enable actors to achieve identity stability by producing predictability in the face of existential uncertainty (Mitzen, 2013, pp.105-116; Ejodus & Recevic, 2021, pp.30-43). In this context, during crises such as Brexit, the migration crisis, and the war in Ukraine, the EU has ensured its continuity at both practical and symbolic levels by maintaining the institutional framework of its decision-making processes (Qualified Majority Voting, Council configurations, and comitology system). For example, the creation of the “Article 50 Task Force” during Brexit implemented the institutional response in an ad hoc yet procedurally consistent manner; the European Council’s preservation of its decision-making structure with 27 members ensured internal cohesion and governance stability (Koutrakos, 2017, pp.32-52). During the migration crisis, the European Commission’s development of coordination mechanisms (Hotspot Approach, Relocation Scheme) (European Parliament, 2020) within the framework of the “European Agenda on Migration” reproduced ontological security through governance tools (Fontana, 2021, pp.467-482). Similarly, the

introduction of mechanisms such as the European Peace Facility and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) after the war in Ukraine demonstrates that the EU has reinforced its identity continuity through military and strategic capacity building (Houde & Wessel, 2022, pp.1327-1344). These examples show that despite its post-sovereign nature, the EU has developed “routinised reflexes” in crisis management, responding to even unexpected situations with bureaucratic and procedural continuity. Thus, routines become institutional guarantors not only of governance efficiency but also of ontological security. Consequently, for the EU, routines represent the material foundations of identity continuity, subjectivity, and existential stability, extending beyond technical-administrative tools.

The deepest dimension of ontological security is observed in the European Union’s capacity to maintain its identity integrity within its own public sphere and elite discourse. Giddens’ conceptualization of “self-identity as reflexively understood biography” connects actors’ ontological security not only to external regularities but also to their ability to sustain their own identity narratives (Giddens, 1991, pp.37-48). From this perspective, the EU’s ontological security rests on the social reproduction of European identity beyond institutional frameworks. Steele and Mitzen define this process as the subject’s capacity to construct a narrative consistent with their past; in the EU context, this materializes in the reinterpretation of “European identity” during periods of crisis (e.g., post-Brexit or during the Ukraine war) (Steele, 2024, pp.216-225; Mitzen, 2018, pp.1378-1386). Public opinion surveys, particularly Eurobarometer data, provide empirical evidence of this process: the rise in the adoption of “European identity” among EU citizens after Brexit shows that identity cohesion has strengthened even under crisis conditions (Aiello, Reverberi & Brasili, 2019, pp.676-689). At the elite level, themes frequently repeated in the discourse of Commission, Parliament, and Council leaders, such as “unity through diversity,” “European values,” and “solidarity,” become narratives that support the symbolic construction of identity cohesion (Manners, 2011, pp.246-261). This indicates that the EU mitigates the potential ontological fractures created by its post-sovereign nature by reintegrating them at social and discursive levels. Therefore, this dimension of the EU’s ontological security relies on reflexive identity construction and cultural-social identification rather than institutional regularities (Della Sala, 2018, pp.268-276; Nogues, 2018, pp.531-540). The redefinition of European identity within the internal public sphere preserves not only the political but also the existential integrity of the Union.

Thus, the EU experiences crises not merely as managerial tests but as processes of “re-encountering itself”; this enables both the reproduction and transformation of identity integrity, the deepest form of ontological security. In this context, the

EU's ontological security should be understood as the capacity of a collective subject to reconstruct its identity during crises, along a spectrum ranging from Giddens' concept of continuity of self to Steele's emphasis on self-consistency (Krickel Choi, 2022, pp.6-17). This analysis demonstrates that the EU reproduces its ontological security at the internal level across discursive, institutional, and identity layers. In times of crisis, the Union has defended its identity continuity at the discursive level, transformed its institutional routines into stabilizing practices, and redefined forms of social belonging to mitigate the risk of fragmentation. Thus, the EU's internal ontological security has been re-established at both the administrative and symbolic levels through the repetition of routines and the rewriting of biographical narratives. This internal security foundation is also a prerequisite for understanding the existential dynamics that emerge in relations with external actors, since the EU's interactions with external "others" redefine the boundaries and stability of this internal biography.

### **Foreign States and Internal Biography: The Reconstruction of Ontological Security through Others**

The existential security of the European Union is shaped not only by the continuity of its internal routines but also by its capacity to redefine its identity through external "others." Ontological security theory posits that an actor's security involves not only the preservation of their physical existence but also the continuity of their identity (Bachleitner, 2023, pp.26-45). This continuity depends on the individual or collective experiencing themselves as a "recognized subject" within the social world that surrounds them. However, this self-definition is never established solely through internal processes; interaction with the "other" is an element that both defines and challenges the boundaries of identity (Vieira, 2016, pp.294-309; Steele, 2024, pp.117-133). Therefore, external states are indispensable components of the ontological security of a post-sovereign actor such as the EU, for the Union's identity consistency is constantly reproduced through external differences. This point highlights that actors require not only a stable environment but also a stable network of relationships. This situation is defined as "ontological dependency": an actor may prefer to maintain a continuous relationship even with another that threatens it, because this relationship provides identity consistency (Wearing, 2022, pp.923-931). Viewed from this perspective, the EU's foreign policy practices often function as an existential process of self-recognition. Brexit, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and fluctuations in relations with Turkey are moments when the EU tests its "own identity" anew. Each crisis brings the question "who are we?" back to the fore, leading to the EU's internal biography being rewritten through external interactions.

In this context, the statement emphasized by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in 2022, “Europe stands with its values; our unity is our strength,” demonstrates that the Union’s identity consistency is reproduced through the stable relationship between values and unity (European Commission, 2022). Similarly, European Council President Charles Michel’s 2023 statement, “We are not just a market; we are a community of destiny,” reveals that the EU seeks ontological security at an existential level of belonging, beyond its economic identity (Council of the EU, 2023). The theme, “Europe must recover the sense of who we are, what binds us together,” repeated by French President Emmanuel Macron in his Sorbonne (2017) and Strasbourg (2022) speeches, emphasizes that identity integrity lies at the core of the EU’s ontological security (Presidence De La Republique, 2017; Permanent Mission of France, 2022). These discourses exemplify how elites reconstruct the Union’s internal biography during crises through normative and identity-based language (Kirsch, 2025, pp.14-21). The discourse is not merely an ideological position but also functions as an ontological security mechanism that reinforces the EU’s collective identity and existential stability. In the face of external threats and crises, elite discourse emerges as a fundamental tool that renders the EU’s internal identity coherence visible and meaningful; thus, the Union reproduces itself as a “coherent and continuous subject” both within its internal public sphere and on the international stage. In this context, external crises are not merely threats to the EU’s ontological security but also serve as a means of identity consolidation.

Therefore, crises involving external actors often strengthen rather than weaken the EU’s existential security. For example, Brexit enabled the EU to reconstitute its legitimacy narrative as a “post-nation-state” subject, while Russia’s aggression repositioned the Union as a normative actor. This situation also aligns with the concept of “ontological security through difference”: actors produce their own identity integrity through differentiation and opposition (Browning & Joenniemi, 2016, pp. 36-45). While much of the ontological security literature treats sovereign states as the primary unit of analysis (e.g., Russia, the US, China), the EU’s “post-sovereign” nature poses a unique challenge to this theoretical framework. Unlike a nation-state, the EU possesses not a singular “self” but a multi-layered identity system; therefore, its ontological security should be defined not through an “integrated self” but through the stability of a relational network (Pratt, 2017, pp.78-85). Within this framework, the EU experiences its identity not as a “singularity” but as a “process” in its relations with external others. Crises with external actors (e.g., Brexit or Russia) guide rather than disrupt this process, the EU rewrites its narrative and relationally reproduces its identity continuity with each external shock (Friedrichs & Sommer, 2025, pp.129-146). External crises involving actors such as Brexit or Russia do

not merely coincide with the persistence of the EU's identity; rather, they actively contribute to its reproduction through identifiable practices.

Identity continuity is maintained, first, through discursive reframing, whereby crises are narrated as external deviations from the EU's normative order rather than as internal ruptures, thus preserving the coherence of core self-descriptions such as normativity, multilateralism, and rule-based governance. Second, continuity is reproduced through relational differentiation, in which external actors are positioned as constitutive others whose perceived norm violations reaffirm the EU's identity boundaries. Finally, the routinization of crisis management within existing institutional frameworks stabilizes identity by presenting external shocks as exceptional challenges to be managed, rather than transformative events requiring fundamental self-redefinition. Through these mechanisms, crises do not disrupt the EU's identity but become moments through which identity continuity is relationally and performatively reproduced. At this point, the theoretical contribution of our study is to interpret the EU's ontological security through the concept of "externalized internality"; the Union's identity stability becomes an internal biographical continuity through others in the external world. Thus, foreign policy becomes not only a strategic field but also an ontological arena in which the EU reconstitutes its own selfhood.

In light of these points, Giddens's conceptualization of the "reflexive self" should be reconsidered to understand the EU's ontological security. According to him, modern actors narratively reproduce themselves within constantly changing social contexts (Giddens, 1991, pp.18-29). Similarly, the EU behaves as a reflexive subject in its relations with external actors: it is influenced by others and simultaneously reconstructs its own identity by responding to them. This reflexivity is clearly evident in the EU's reconstruction of identity narratives such as "liberal values," "peace project," or "geopolitical agency" during times of crisis (Scalise, 2015, pp.598-610). This reflexivity becomes empirically traceable in the discourses of key EU institutional actors and in authoritative policy texts produced during periods of external crisis. In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, European Council conclusions and European Commission communications repeatedly reaffirm the EU's self-understanding as a community grounded in liberal values, the rule of law, and peaceful cooperation, often juxtaposing these principles with the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw (Corner, 2023). Similarly, in response to Russia's actions in Ukraine, speeches by the President of the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs increasingly articulate the EU as both a "peace project" and a geopolitical actor, a framing also embedded in strategic documents such as the EU Global Strategy and subsequent security and defence communications (Freire, 2020).

Taken together, these texts illustrate that identity narratives are not abstract rhetorical claims but are systematically reproduced across elite discourse and official documentation, thereby anchoring identity continuity in identifiable and recurring discursive practices. Therefore, the EU's relationships with external others shape not only its security policy but also its existential continuity. This discussion proposes a significant expansion of the state-centric structure of ontological security theory. The EU example demonstrates that ontological security is a two-way process involving both internal routines and external relationships. Interaction with external actors both threatens and reinforces the EU's internal biography; this dynamic requires understanding the EU's existential security through relational ontology (Manners, 2002, pp.10-21). Thus, while the EU maintains its ontological security through dialectical relations with external others, it also legitimizes its existence within the normative order of the international system.

The EU's foreign policy discourses reveal the discursive reproduction of ontological security. In the ontological security literature, discourse is not merely a communicative tool but a fundamental instrument of identity construction and existential stability. This approach, which argues that identity is shaped through relational structuring and explains ontological security through routine forms of interaction, positions foreign policy discourses as a constitutive dimension of identity subjectivity (Resende, Sandrin & Solomon, 2023, pp.2-9). In this context, the EU preserves its existential continuity by defining both the "we" identity and the "other" through its foreign policy discourse. It is emphasized that foreign policy discourses are a way for actors to position themselves within a familiar normative order. In the specific case of the EU, this is embodied in concepts such as "normative power Europe," "values-based diplomacy," and "strategic autonomy" (Karjalainen, 2023, pp.295-312). These discourses enable the EU to position itself as a subject based on normative foundations, distinct from other international actors; thus, the Union counters external uncertainties with identity stability. For example, the phrase "Europe stands for peace and democracy," frequently used after the war in Ukraine, is not merely a foreign policy statement but an identity-based response to existential shocks threatening the EU's ontological security (Della Sala, 2023, pp.364-372). Therefore, the EU's foreign policy discourses should be regarded as performative manifestations of ontological continuity rather than as strategic communication directed solely toward the outside world.

The articulation of "we" and "other" identities in EU foreign policy discourse becomes particularly discernible in the speeches of prominent institutional representatives, especially in relation to the war in Ukraine. For example, European

Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has repeatedly framed the conflict in terms of fundamental principles when addressing the European Parliament, stating that Russia's aggression is directed "against the values [Ukraine] share[s] with us" implicitly positioning the EU and Ukraine as co-defenders of shared liberal norms against an external violator (European Commission, 2024). Additionally, in broader strategic debates, von der Leyen emphasizes the EU's role in securing a "just and lasting peace" that upholds sovereignty and territorial integrity, underlining the normative commitments that constitute the EU's self-understanding. Similarly, High Representative Joseph Borrell's public addresses highlight the existential dimensions of Europe's engagement, portraying support for Ukraine as integral to preserving the European promise of freedom and democratic order (EU External Action, 2024). These statements exemplify how foreign policy discourse by named actors operationalizes identity boundaries, reaffirming a stable normative self-description ("we") in contrast to external threats ("other") through identifiable and repeated rhetorical practices.

Through these discourses, the Union simultaneously delineates its own boundaries by defining the other and reaffirms its internal identity narrative on the international stage. In this sense, the EU's foreign policy practices reveal a cyclical relationship between discourse, identity, and action in the external dimension of ontological security; discourse thus becomes both a reflection of identity and a mechanism for producing identity stability. From this perspective, the EU's foreign policy discourse constitutes a post-sovereign actor's mode of existential self-definition: discourse is not merely representational but operates as the reproduction of ontological existence itself. In parallel, the EU reshapes its institutional routines in response to crises arising from its interactions with external others. The consensus-based coordination of the 27 member states during the Brexit negotiations ensured that the Union preserved its integrity by maintaining established decision-making routines (Kauert & Deus Pereira, 2023, pp.1138–1142). Similarly, coordinated sanctions against Russia and the activation of the European Peace Facility have functioned as institutional practices through which ontological security has been reproduced in response to external crises (Genschel, Leek & Weyns, 2023, pp.347–358; Fiott, 2023, pp.449–457). The 2016 agreement with Turkey during the migration crisis further illustrates how the EU preserved its externalized border management and security perceptions by embedding them within its internal identity narrative (Gurkan & Coman, 2021, pp.279–301).

However, the most consequential transformation in the EU's foreign policy routines has occurred through the gradual institutionalization of a common defence

capacity. The war in Ukraine constituted a critical turning point, concretizing the Union's long-delayed objective of strategic autonomy. In this context, the 2022 *Strategic Compass* document stands out as the first comprehensive framework to institutionally integrate the EU's defence and security policies (EEAS, 2022). The document aims to enhance the Union's military preparedness, coordinate joint crisis management operations, and strengthen its strategic foresight capabilities in response to external threats. In addition, the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) mechanism has enabled collective action capacities to become institutionalized routines in times of crisis by ensuring the continuity of joint defence projects among member states (Blockmans, 2018, pp.1786–1795). These developments have generated a two-level transformation in the EU's foreign policy routines. First, the institutionalization of military coordination has provided the EU with a familiar and predictable scope for action in the face of external threats. In this sense, the Union has transformed its security policy from a reactive response to external shocks into a more autonomous strategic reflex. Second, the identity dimension of defence routines is reflected in the EU's reinterpretation of its "peace project" identity. As Mitzen argues in her ontological security framework, actors reproduce existential stability through familiar forms of action; for the EU, this familiarity has materialized in rendering the narrative of a "collective peaceful subject" compatible with the development of defence capacities, rather than undermined by militarization (Mitzen, 2006, pp.346–358). Accordingly, the EU's institutional restructuring in the defence sphere constitutes not only a strategic necessity but also an effort to preserve identity continuity.

This restructuring is deeply intertwined with the production and reinforcement of the EU's normative identity, as evidenced in the foreign policy discourse of its leading representatives. In multiple high-level speeches, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen frames the shift toward enhanced defence capabilities not merely as a strategic necessity but as a response to a transformed security environment that challenges the Union's normative foundations. For instance, von der Leyen has emphasized that "Europe must be responsible for its own security" and that this is no longer an option. This is a must (European Commission, 2025), thereby positioning strategic autonomy and defence preparedness as intrinsic to the EU's self-understanding in a world where traditional security guarantees can no longer be assumed. In another address, she warns that Europe faces an "open and present danger" and argues that the Union must be able to "defend and protect itself," framing defence capacity not only as a material requirement but also as an expression of collective identity and political agency.

Through such discursive moves, defence restructuring becomes a site in which the EU's normative "we" is reaffirmed in contrast to an increasingly insecure external

environment, suggesting that the construction of defence capabilities simultaneously articulates and stabilizes the Union's identity continuity. By foregrounding strategic autonomy, capability development, and the need to respond to hybrid and conventional threats as matters of existential significance, these speeches illustrate how defence discourse functions as a norm-constitutive practice that reproduces the EU's self-description as a distinct political community capable of shaping its own security destiny. The sustainability of ontological security depends on the mutual validation of an actor's identity narrative at the discursive level and its actions at the practical level. In this respect, the EU seeks to reinforce identity continuity by restoring institutional consistency between normative discourse and concrete action in the field of foreign policy. Values such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and multilateralism, central to the "Normative Power Europe" framework, have moved beyond a purely discursive role in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine and have increasingly functioned as guiding principles for tangible foreign policy instruments (Diez, 2021, pp. 8–14).

In particular, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), and the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime have operationalized the EU's normative commitments at the institutional level, thereby creating continuity between values and action (Altafin, Lukas & Nowak, 2020, pp. 81–111). Official communications surrounding the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime explicitly frame the regime as evidence of the Union's commitment to universal human rights, stating that the decision to renew listings "confirms the EU's commitment to take action against human rights violations wherever they occur," while emphasizing the indivisibility and interdependence of human rights as guiding normative principles of external action. This institutional language not only articulates a normative agenda but also constructs sanctions as practical embodiments of EU values, thus linking principles directly to foreign policy instruments. Similarly, the foundational texts of the European Neighborhood Policy frame cooperation with neighboring states around "shared values" such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, positioning these principles as core criteria for engagement rather than secondary objectives. Finally, the role definition of the European External Action Service consistently reiterates that EU external action is guided by democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, signaling that these norms are embedded in the institutional articulation of purpose rather than confined to abstract declaratory statements. External crises also function as processes that reinforce the EU's identity integrity through internal public opinion and elite discourse. From the perspective of ontological security theory, actors sustain their existence not only by protecting themselves against external threats

but also by reproducing their identity narratives through the interpretation of those threats (Pratt, 2017, pp. 78–85; Gustafsson & Krickel Choi, 2020, pp. 879–892). Within this framework, the EU has experienced disruptive events such as Brexit, the migration crisis, and the war in Ukraine not merely as governance challenges but as existential moments in which “European identity” has been reaffirmed. During such periods, EU institutions and political elites have reinforced internal legitimacy and collective identification by emphasizing discourses that highlight the Union’s value-based subjectivity.

## Conclusion

This study analyses the European Union’s position in the international system from an ontological security perspective, conceptually and empirically revealing the Union’s pursuit of identity continuity at both internal and external levels. The findings demonstrate that the EU’s ontological security cannot be reduced either to a purely normative identity narrative or to an exclusively strategic, interest-based orientation. Rather, the Union’s existential security emerges from the dynamic interaction between maintaining identity consistency within its internal biography and establishing relational stability in its external biography. This interaction has transformed both the EU’s internal routines and its relations with external others into sites through which identity continuity is reproduced. At the theoretical level, this study contributes to the ontological security literature in three main ways. First, it demonstrates that ontological security provides a functional explanatory framework not only for individuals or nation-states, but also for actors characterized by multi-level governance structures. Second, drawing on the EU case, it shows that ontological security should be understood not as static identity fixity but as a form of identity flexibility that can be reproduced and stabilized in times of crisis. Third, it argues that analyzing the axes of “internal biography” and “external others” together renders visible the connection between normative discourse and institutional practices in the reproduction of ontological security. In this respect, the study adapts the classical ontological security framework developed by Giddens and Mitzen to the European level, extending predominantly micro-oriented analyses in the literature to a macro-institutional context. The analysis further demonstrates that the EU’s ontological security is continuously reproduced through interactions between internal and external dimensions.

Discursive, institutional, and identity-based mechanisms complement one another, constantly reshaping the Union’s internal biography and identity boundaries through engagement with external actors. External threats thus function as ontological

resources that enable the EU to redefine itself not only as a political actor but also as an existential subject. From this perspective, the EU maintains its ontological security by preserving internal continuity while managing its relations with external others, a process that can be theorized through a relational ontology approach and that constitutes a significant contribution to the largely state-centric ontological security literature. At the policy level, the EU's pursuit of ontological security is likely to be decisive for the Union's future identity orientation. The rise of the discourse on "strategic autonomy" indicates that the EU has increasingly adopted an existential strategy grounded in internal consistency rather than external dependency. The success of this strategy, however, depends on the balance established between internal and external biographies: the Union must sustain solidarity and a value-based identity internally while simultaneously maintaining flexible and pluralistic relations with external actors. Events such as the war in Ukraine, migration crises, and Brexit have simultaneously challenged and reproduced this balance. The EU's future ontological security will therefore depend on its capacity to transform such crises into opportunities for identity integration. In conclusion, the ontological security of the European Union is not merely a quest for existential stability, but an ongoing struggle to maintain, reinterpret, and reaffirm its identity as a meaningful subject in the international system. By integrating its crisis-ridden internal biography with its uncertainty-laden external biography, the EU is evolving from a discourse centered on a "unity of values" toward a paradigm of "resilient identity." This transformation redefines the Union's position in the international system not only in terms of power relations but also in terms of its capacity to preserve ontological continuity. From this perspective, ontological security functions as an analytical compass for understanding both the EU's past trajectories and its future direction.

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