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Normative Power and Europeanization: The EU's Global Agenda for Gender Equality

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Abstract

This article explores how the European Union (EU) promotes gender equality beyond its borders, situating the analysis within broader debates on external Europeanization and normative power. While most studies have examined the domestic impact of EU policies, this paper focuses on how gender equality norms are projected internationally and conceptually investigates the mechanisms involved in their diffusion. Drawing on existing theoretical literature, the article analyzes how EU-level normative strategies may interact with domestic political, institutional, and societal dynamics in third countries, often in complex and contested ways. Rather than providing empirical testing, the study identifies core mechanisms—such as strategic communication, partnerships, and funding tools—and reflects on their limitations and the role of local agency in interpreting or resisting EU-promoted norms. The findings highlight the difficulty of isolating EU influence from other international and transnational drivers of norm diffusion, and the need for caution in attributing policy shifts solely to EU action. The article concludes that a better understanding of these processes requires more attention to domestic contexts, as well as future empirical research to complement conceptual analyses of Europeanization in sensitive policy domains such as gender equality.

Keywords: development cooperation; EU external action; Europeanization; gender equality; global governance; normative power; postfunctionalism; soft power

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1. Introduction

Gender equality and gender discrimination are two interrelated concepts that shape contemporary socioeconomic and political landscapes worldwide [1]. While gender equality refers to the state in which individuals of all genders have equal access to opportunities, resources, and decision-making power, gender discrimination represents the systematic barriers, biases, and inequalities that hinder such parity [2]. Despite notable progress, gender-based disparities persist in various domains, including education, employment, and political representation. Achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, as UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 supports, remains a pressing challenge, with reports indicating that, at the current pace, this target is unlikely to be met by 2030 [3]. Women's rights and gender social norms are stagnating, if not being reversed, across countries [4]. Addressing these challenges is not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for social development, as inclusive societies that leverage the full potential of all individuals tend to achieve higher economic resilience and social stability. Within this context, the European Union (EU) has positioned gender equality as a fundamental value,

shaping both its internal policies and external engagements, and by integrating gender mainstreaming into its foreign policy agenda, the EU seeks to promote structural changes in this realm beyond its borders.

This article examines how the EU advances gender equality as part of its external Europeanization process. For this purpose, we will go over two major intertwined themes: (1) Europeanization as a tool for spreading EU values and norms using a postfunctionalist theoretical view; and (2) normative power and the way the EU uses it in its neighborhood to promote gender equality through specific political initiatives or policies. Therefore, our research question concerns how the European Union's external Europeanization process can conceptually contribute to the promotion of gender equality beyond its borders, and what theoretical mechanisms may explain this influence.

For the EU, gender equality is a key political objective for meeting its internal and international commitments; e.g., in the SDGs and the Consensus on Development, where gender equality is placed at the center of the action for achieving a form of development that is fair for all [5]. One of the main processes through which this objective can be achieved is Europeanization, which takes place both inside and outside its territory.

This study explores the means through which the EU's external Europeanization process conceptually contributes to the promotion of gender equality beyond its borders. The aim of this article is to build a conceptual framework offering a theoretical lens through which future empirical studies can analyze the EU's role as a global gender actor. This conceptual approach explores the ideational, institutional, and symbolic mechanisms through which the EU articulates and diffuses gender norms internationally rather than attempting to measure the direct empirical effects of the EU's influence. Through this path, we address the complexity of norm transmission in foreign policy, particularly when dealing with diverse sociopolitical contexts in partner countries.

This article focuses primarily on the EU's engagement with neighboring countries under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), with a distinct reference to the Eastern Partnership (EaP). While some of the conceptual tools may apply more broadly to candidate or pre-accession countries, our illustrations and policy references are drawn mainly from the neighborhood context.

Our main hypothesis is that the EU's external Europeanization functions as a normative tool that can facilitate the diffusion of gender equality norms through both deliberate strategies (e.g., conditionality, socialization) and indirect pathways (e.g., imitation, externalization). We consider this assumption as being valid even if its actual influence is mediated by domestic political, cultural, and structural variables.

2. Materials and Methods

This article adopts a conceptual and theory-driven approach to investigate how the EU's external action reflects processes of Europeanization in the field of gender equality. Rather than measuring impact empirically, the focus is on identifying the ideational and institutional mechanisms through which relevant norms are articulated and projected abroad.

The analysis is grounded in qualitative research methods, primarily in the form of critical document analysis. The documents originate primarily from the European Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Parliament, development cooperation instruments (such as NDICI–Global Europe), and gender equality initiatives (e.g., those framed within the Women, Peace, and Security agenda). The selection of policy and strategic documents for this analysis was purposive, based on their relevance to the EU's external gender agenda and their visibility within institutional discourse. Most of the documents were issued between 2015 and 2024, although a few earlier sources were included for historical or contextual relevance, as we draw not only on EU strategic

frameworks or foreign policy documents, but also on public communications, and scholarly literature to identify the rhetorical patterns and normative logics through which gender equality is framed as a normative export. Given the conceptual nature of the article, the aim was not empirical representativeness but analytical relevance. We acknowledge the limitations of this approach, particularly the risk of selective interpretation, and have sought to mitigate this by focusing on official documents that are widely cited and central to EU external policy frameworks.

Even if it is often argued that most studies on Europeanization focus on the influence that the EU exerts over its older or newer member states—based on the assumption that the supranational level has sufficient formal and informal mechanisms to generate change [6–12]—this article does not aim to analyze domestic effects within EU borders. Instead, it seeks to conceptually extend the discussion beyond Europe and explore how the EU's external projection of gender norms is shaped by politicization and domestic constraints in third countries, particularly the EaP members.

Therefore, the following working hypothesis is proposed:

H: The EU's external Europeanization process functions as a normative tool that can facilitate the diffusion of gender equality norms abroad through various mechanisms, even if its influence is mediated by complex domestic and global dynamics.

In terms of clarity and analytical rigor, "influence" may refer to the explicit integration of gender equality principles into national strategic documents, the establishment or strengthening of institutions tasked with promoting women's rights, and the adoption of gender-focused public policies aligned with EU standards; nevertheless, we are mainly interested in references to normative influence, particularly the ways in which EU-promoted gender principles are interpreted, embedded, or resisted within domestic political settings. The focus is, therefore, on the consolidation of a normative framework in partner countries, in terms of discursive, institutional, and symbolic alignment with EU standards, rather than direct policy transfer or measurable impact (dependent on the formal adoption of legislation consistent with the *acquis communautaire* and the institutional capacity to implement and enforce such norms).

Explicitly conceptual in nature, this study acknowledges the methodological challenges of empirically tracing the diffusion and uptake of EU gender norms. Rather than testing causality, we seek to construct a theoretical framework that synthesizes insights from Europeanization studies, postfunctionalism, and normative power theory, aiming to provide a structured basis for future empirical research that examines how EU values—particularly gender equality—are negotiated, adopted, or resisted in diverse political environments.

2.1. The Process of Europeanization

Europeanization is a well-established concept that gained prominence in the 1990s, particularly following the Maastricht Treaty and subsequent treaty modifications, which transformed the EU into a global actor with an influential governance model. However, from its inception, Europeanization has carried multiple meanings, making it difficult to pinpoint a singular, universally accepted definition. In time, scholarly discourse generally focused on a top-down approach, emphasizing the EU's influence on national policies and governance structures. Over time, this perspective expanded, leading to the development of a distinct subfield examining Europeanization beyond the EU's borders—particularly in candidate states and those with formal agreements or under the EU's normative influence. Decades later, Europeanization remains a contested topic in EU studies, as scholars disagree on a unified definition, the nature of EU relations with its member countries, and the factors influencing compliance with the EU's agenda. The idea behind this process gets even more tangled when looking at the external dimension of Europeanization where things

take place beyond established EU borders. In this article, we will look at the process of Europeanization as a way through which the EU persuades not only its member states or countries aspiring to become member states to adopt its values and governance model, but also third countries with which its relations are looser yet significant.

We selected just a few well-known definitions of Europeanization that can be extrapolated to incorporate third countries in this process. According to Ion, it is important for a working definition to allow both an analysis of the formal and informal elements through which the supranational level generates changes at the internal level (not only in member states), as well as of the multiple areas in which these changes can appear and which we can synthesize as belonging to the polity–politics–policies triad [6].

The most quoted interpretation frames Europeanization as a process of change, consisting of "processes of (a) construction, (b) diffusion, and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, 'ways of doing things', and shared beliefs and norms; which are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy process and then incorporated in the logic of domestic (national and sub-national) discourse, political structures, and public policies" [7,8]. Henceforth, one way through which Europeanization can be defined is "an incremental process re-orienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that European Community political and economic dynamics become part of the organizational logic of national politics and policy-making" [9]. Whereas Schimmelfennig puts it more simply as being the "domestic impact of, and adaptation to, European governance" [10].

The discussion is not straightforward, as Europeanization, being a process of change, can lead to various outcomes at the national level, ranging from retrenchment to absorption and even transformation [7,11]. For a long time, it was primarily considered a unidirectional phenomenon, as the so-called "less Europeanized" sectors would only have had the possibility to change towards "more Europeanization". However, in recent years, attention has shifted towards situations where an initially change observed at t1, directly or indirectly determined by and compatible with EU's *acquis communautaire*, was followed by a reversal pattern, known as de-Europeanization [12]. This counter-movement to Europeanization has emerged both within and outside the EU, advocating for greater national autonomy and a rollback of EU influence. Generally speaking, this phenomenon can be found under many names, such as de-Europeanization, reversed Europeanization, Europeanization in reverse gear or counter-Europeanization [8,13–15]. Radaelli highlights that this movement that goes against Europeanization also stands against the regulations, identity formation, and socialization processes that already took place and were consolidated for decades [8] (p. 378).

The rise of de-Europeanization movements challenge EU-driven transformations while advocating for greater national autonomy, and these competing dynamics necessitate a more nuanced approach when analyzing its impact beyond EU borders, as EU's influence is neither linear, nor irreversible. Hence, understanding the interplay between compliance, resistance, and adaptation in third countries is crucial to making sense of how Europeanization operates as a tool of global governance in gender-sensitive policy fields.

2.2. Mechanisms of Europeanization

Europeanization, as a process of change, is not uniform or automatic, it operates through a variety of mechanisms and pathways that shape how EU norms and governance models spread within and beyond its borders. In this section, we will examine key theoretical models that classify the ways in which Europeanization occurs, focusing on both direct and indirect mechanisms, in order to assess the extent to which Europeanization influences third countries, particularly in areas such as gender equality.

First of all, in terms of mechanisms and processes used in Europeanization, we will firstly look at the classification proposed by Schimmelfennig (see Table 1) where he distinguishes between direct and indirect mechanisms of Europeanization, as well as the logic behind them in regards to consequences or appropriateness [10] (p. 4).

Table 1. Mechanisms of Europeanization.

	Direct	**Indirect**
Logic of consequences	Conditionality	Externalization
Logic of appropriateness	Socialization	Imitation

Source: [10].

On one hand, according to his theory, direct mechanisms include conditionality and socialization, which can be described as mechanisms through which the EU actively and purposefully tries to persuade foreign countries to adopt its model of governance. Conditionality works based on favorable cost–benefit calculations by highlighting the consequences of complying or not with EU norms and regulations. The EU implements this by leveraging the benefits that it can offer as a result of a closer relationship while at the same time underlining how lamentable their loss would be for the partner, sometimes coupling this argument with the threat of sanctions in the case of noncompliance. Meanwhile, socialization is shaped on the idea of how following the European model is the "appropriate" course of action and it entails convincing the other actor that the norms promoted by the EU are inherently better and more beneficial than other alternatives and henceforth should be applied [10].

On the other hand, indirect mechanisms include externalization and imitation, which focus on the promotion of EU models abroad as the result of unintended and sometimes unanticipated reactions. As such, externalization focuses on the foreign actor's self-set interest in adhering to the European model in order to secure closer ties to the EU for purposes like being granted access to its markets or gaining diplomatic or financial support for future projects. In the same vein, imitation is found in situations when actors emulate the EU's style of governance of their own volition because they consider it an appropriate and legitimate model that can be properly replicated to fit their own national circumstances [10].

Secondly, another conceptualization surrounding this process was provided by Didem Buhari Gulmez, who proposed three models of Europeanization: strategic, normative, and ritualized. In his vision, strategic Europeanization represents an expression of an optimized rational choice where countries try to maximize their interests within the available courses of action provided by the EU which works in a similar cost–benefit calculus to Schimmelfennig's logic of consequences. Likewise, normative Europeanization follows a similar pattern to the logic of appropriateness but differs from it through the fact that it relies more on the idea of bounded rationality. The most distinctive element of Buhari Gulmez theory is instead the concept of ritualized Europeanization, which constitutes "processes that emphasize the logic of heuristic decision-making and ritualized rationality underlying the intention to reach the prevailing global standards, models and scripts" [16].

Thirdly, returning to the works of Radaelli, Europeanization can be seen as comprising of three patterns of adjustment: pressure, competition, and learning. "Pressure", as described by him, refers to the pressure to adapt, which manifests through conditionality and its power to ensure compliance. "Competition" is a regulatory mechanism that works as a competition between systems of rules where the EU guarantees a level playing field in its free markets, which encourages new and old players alike to engage with its approach in order to remain relevant. "Learning", meanwhile, is more of an open method of coordination where the EU encourages rather than imposes socialization and emulation of its practices [8].

By analyzing these mechanisms, it can be assumed that Europeanization is a multi-layered and dynamic process, shaped by both deliberate EU strategies and the independent agency of third countries. While conditionality and socialization rely on intentional EU-driven persuasion, externalization and imitation indicate how domestic interests and global legitimacy dynamics contribute to the diffusion of EU norms. Making sense of the EU's role in promoting gender equality and enhancing women's participation across its neighbouring regions depends on a proper understanding of these mechanisms.

2.3. Postfunctionalism

The process of Europeanization is commonly examined through the lens of institutionalist theories, which emphasize how EU norms shape member states and candidate countries [6]. However, when looking beyond the EU's formal borders, different theoretical approaches are required to explain how European values are transmitted to third countries, particularly in the context of gender equality. To better understand this dynamic, we turn to postfunctionalism, a framework that provides insight into the role of public participation, competing ideologies, and identity politics in shaping the Europeanization process [17].

The focus of research in this field usually falls on member states or countries that are undertaking the accession process, in which cases, most research is devoted to one of the three variants of new institutionalisms often found in EU studies (rational choice, historical and, respectively, social institutionalism). Instead, our option is rather particular, because we want to look at the Europeanization process outside Europe, using a postfunctionalist framework in order to explain the way the European Union uses the international mechanisms that it has at its disposal to promote its values abroad. Although rule of law is one of the most mediatized of such cases, we cannot overlook the linkage between the spread and promotion of gender equality and the mechanism employed in its foreign relations with third countries, especially in its neighborhood. They can be said to range from economic and diplomatic treaties, economic and political regulations and agreements, to official development assistance (ODA).

Subsequently, Europeanization can be seen through the lenses of postfunctionalism as "a conflictual process arising from incompatible belief systems" [18]. The main features of postfunctionalism concern democracies, a multi-level governance style, the involvement of multiple actors in the integration process such as communities, political parties, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national and international organizations, and the important role played by public opinion, collective identities, and the electoral competing ideologies of political parties in swaying policies one way or another [17–19].

From our point of view, postfunctionalism is compatible with the main assumptions of sociological institutionalism (as can be seen in Table 2), which is one of the most popular theories used in Europeanization studies but it is still not enough for studying this process beyond the established EU borders or its expressed area of interest for enlargement. We decided to focus especially on the influence of EU institutions and their policies on changing the preferences, interests, and identities of actors, accepting, at the same time, several ideas from historical institutionalism; i.e., about how social norms manage to influence over time the definition of the preferences of state actors, so that the form of some institutions at t1 can be extremely different from the one agreed at t0, in an involuntary manner; in other words, without the political actors deliberately intervening in influencing the new institutional framework, according to a path dependency process [17,20].

We consider that the analysis of the diffusion of EU norms through Europeanization is very important for this research because gender equality has become contested in many countries, including inside the EU and by looking at it as an integral part of EU's identity we can outline facets of it that would not otherwise be available.

Table 2. Building blocks of postfunctionalism.

	Sociological Institutionalism
General assumptions	Postfunctional logic of self-determination Democratic mass and party politics of integration
Explanatory theories	Multi-level governance; democratic politics

Source: [17].

This postfunctionalist perspective contributes to better understand how EU-driven Europeanization interacts with local political and societal dynamics in third countries, and this perspective allows for a more comprehensive assessment of how Europeanization fosters gender mainstreaming beyond the EU's immediate sphere of influence.

3. Mechanisms of Influence

The following section presents the findings of our conceptual analysis on the EU's external Europeanization process and its role as a normative power, with particular attention to how the EU promotes gender equality in neighboring regions through various mechanisms of influence. We also critically engage here with competing perspectives on Europeanization, including discussions on soft power, conditionality, and the potential limitations of the EU's normative reach.

3.1. EU as a Normative Power

A highly debated and controversial term associated with Europeanization is the idea that the EU is a normative power, which implies the ability to diffuse its values and shape ideas worldwide.

As first postulated by Ian Manners, "[t]he concept of normative power is an attempt to suggest that not only is the EU constructed on a normative basis, but importantly that this predisposes it to act in a normative way in world politics. He was the one who first proposed the idea that the EU is a new type of actor on the international stage that has this quality through the virtue of its very existence and behavior. According to him, due to its historical context, hybrid polity and political-legal constitution, the EU evolved a value driven supranational and international form of governance that has at its core universal norms and principles. This in turn confers on it what the author called "power over opinion" or "ideological power" in its foreign relations, whereby it can "shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" because the values and ideas that it puts forward penetrate the recipient country and "shape its will" using culture (and not only) as one of its means. He also described the EU's normative power as consisting in more than a normative basis for its actions, but as a predisposition to act in a normative way in world politics which makes the EU "a changer of norms in the international system" [21].

The way that the EU operates this power according to recent studies is that it employs multiple sets of policies linking projects and initiatives to its norms and values, such as human rights, and enforces them through conditionality, especially in connection to financial assistance and foreign aid to partner countries [22]. There is no doubt that this concept has transcended the theoretical field and it has become more than a role that the EU can or should play, but a part of its identity and something that it strongly self-identifies with. As Manners stated himself, "the most important factor shaping the international role of the EU is not what it does or what it says, but what it is" [21] (p. 252).

Recent works, such as the one of Maxine David and her co-authors [23], linked the normative power of the EU with gender studies by using critical feminist theories to better understand and explain the behavior that the EU should have in its international relations as a player in planetary politics. This feminist reinterpretation of normative power was

based on the 4 'Es', namely: the ethic of care, empathy, emancipation, and equity. According to the same article, a superficial implementation of these 'Es' leads to a reproduction of pre-established power dynamics, which are rooted in fixed hierarchical orders of privilege.

However, this self-identification is not without its fair share of criticism, the normative character of the EU being subject to increasing scrutiny. Several scholars critiqued this notion and called for a more reflexive approach where the very notion of partnership could be questioned considering the asymmetrical relation between the EU and any developing country. Langan [24] calls this relation one-sided, self-interested, and paternalistic, underlying the idea that: "Rather than working to shape the hearts and minds of non-Europeans and to redirect their policy agendas towards humanitarian goals, Europe's actual normative power is better understood as its capacity to veil and entrench regressive policy agendas that further EU commercial and geopolitical interests under the guise of European values". To support this claim, he proposed a critical assessment of the connection between moral norms and material outcomes in EU foreign policies and pointed towards the discrepancies between EU norms being promoted in foreign countries and the empirical outcomes of the policies resulted from them. Similarly, other scholars have also argued that the EU's approach to exporting values and norms often reflects asymmetrical power dynamics rather than true partnership. For example, Del Sarto [25] frames this behavior as a form of "normative empire", especially in the context of the EU's relations with Southern Mediterranean countries during and after the Arab Spring, while Hettne and Söderbaum [26] warn against the risk of soft imperialism when normative agendas are imposed through conditionality and economic leverage rather than co-created with local actors.

Therefore, the title of a normative power cannot be claimed declaratively but through measurable outcomes. From this point of view, the actions taken by the EU abroad were described as only being veiled in a normative and moralistic discourse while at their core, they were in fact economic, materialistic, and self-interested. One of the main arguments highlighted is the ineffectiveness of the EU in ensuring the propagation and upholding of peace and democratic values in its immediate vicinity. Its main political tool in the area, the ENP, is described as more focused on security concerns rather than human rights and unable to properly leverage economic incentives with normative changes [27]. This can be linked with the expectation–performance gaps present in the EU's foreign affairs. These gaps manifest as persistent contradictions between what the EU says it does and what it actually achieves, which give rise to criticism and jeopardize the image of the EU as a normative actor and global leader [28].

A controversial and highly disputed approach supported by some authors is that the process of Europeanization is a continuation of Europe's imperial past, albeit a lighter version of it. In this sense, they consider that the EU behaves like an empire that is trying to ensure stability at its periphery for its own security and economic advantages through exchanges aimed to cultivate foreign elites in their image while promoting their own style of governance. This is considered to be linked with the "civilizing mission" that empires tended to take upon themselves whereby the interactions between the actors are marked by a striking asymmetry of power in favor of the EU, unbalanced exchanges, and unilateral imposition of norms, which gave rise to the argument that Europeanization is a form of normative or soft imperialism [25,26,29–35].

As a result, it is of no surprise that there have been multiple calls for the decolonization of EU external policies, including from Manners himself. The main points raised were that normative power should imply cooperation and the dispersion of power in such a way that it benefits the giver of norms, as well as the receiver. This refers to a shift from "power over" to "power to/with" which is a paradigm shift that is employed in critical social theory as used by feminist and postcolonial theories [23,28,36,37].

In this context, soft imperialism can be understood as an asymmetric power dynamic instead of a partnership where soft power is applied in a hard or forceful way in favor of the norms, values, and conditionalities of only one side [26]. This view is currently attached to what some perceive as "EU's increasing role in the authoritative allocation of values on the European continent and beyond" [17].

However, this perspective is not uncontested. Some scholars argue that such interpretations overstate the asymmetry of EU influence and overlook the agency of domestic actors and the EU's support for bottom-up democratic transformations. For example, as a counter-argument, Didem Buhari Gulmez has pointed out that the top-down and sender–receiver way of depicting Europeanization is flawed and that it overestimates the asymmetry of power between parties and it wrongly categorizes the distributions of EU norms as being unilaterally imposed. She also underlined the EU's focus on developing domestic civil societies and the support for democratization, which is a reflection of values promoted internally that also empowers local actors [16] (pp. 93–94).

When Manners later came back and revised his original stance on the issue, he stated that the EU can become a military power while remaining a normative one as well and that directing more attention towards security concerns in its foreign relations does not necessarily diminish its normative ones [38]. He described the normative role that the EU plays in global politics as being tied to the promotion of normative principles that are generally acknowledged to be universally applicable and not necessarily European specific. He also argued that the EU respects the three approaches that he considers as the basis for normative power, namely the principles of "live by example; be reasonable; and do least harm", which led Manners to argue that based on critical theory "the EU has been, is and always will be a normative power in world politics" [39].

We are of the opinion that the conception of an asymmetrical relationship between EU and third countries is a valid one but although power imbalances between the parties do exist, we also think that the normative discourse put forward by the EU is not undermined by the presence of interest-based calculations and conditionality in its foreign policies. We reached this conclusion based on the freedom of choice for third countries to opt in or out of the policies proposed by the EU as well as a certain flexibility that allows them to pick some areas while omitting others during the pursuit of their own national interests.

Ronald Holzhacker and Marek Neuman have described the progression of the EU normative power as a shift in paradigm from normative optimism based on ideationalism to normative instrumentalism [40] (pp. 22–24). Therefore, the apparent dichotomy between interest-based and value-based policies is not fitting for the relations in question because linking norms and values to instrumental strategic interests is not the same as instrumentalizing norms in the pursuit of one-sided gains.

3.2. Europeanization in the Neighborhood Area

The EU's engagement with gender equality has been extensively analyzed in the context of internal governance and policy-making [41,42]. Scholars have highlighted the tensions between rhetorical commitments to gender mainstreaming and the practical limitations of implementation. In the external domain, recent work [43] has shown how EU foreign policy increasingly references gender equality, although often in strategic and depoliticized terms. This section builds on such insights, extending the analysis to how gender norms are projected beyond EU borders via the Europeanization framework. In what follows, we explore the link between these internal normative patterns and the EU's external gender narrative. Throughout this article, we use "neighborhood countries" to refer to third states engaged through the ENP framework, excluding formal candidate countries unless otherwise specified.

It can be said that the external policies undertaken by the EU abroad have as a key objective the alignment and coordination of rules and practices of foreign governments with the European ones, especially in its vicinity, where we can see more proactive initiatives in this direction such as the ENP. Europeanization is a common element that links together the process of enlargement and the neighborhood policy which are similar enough to be addressed together in one directorate-general, the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR). They both have the common aim of securing stability, peace and prosperity inside and around the European continent, but, unlike enlargement, which has as a main selling point the prospect of eventually becoming a member state and enjoying the full benefits of stability, peace, and prosperity in Europe, the neighborhood policy lacks in strong incentives that can entice foreign government to comply with its principles.

The EU works on developing its member and candidate states economically, politically, and socially through different incentives as well, such as European funds focused on varied axes and disincentives in the form of punitive measures such as infringement procedures and other restrictive measures like freezing funds allocated to the country. Outside of Europe though, most of the measures employed have to be less intrusive although they follow the same principles. The EU notably uses preferential trade agreements and foreign direct investment as a leveraging point to promote the spread of EU values, especially when it comes to environmental and social principles.

All the points discussed so far on the topic of Europeanization are reflected in the speeches marking the occasion of the enactment of the neighborhood policy in 2004, its revision in 2015, and for the adoption of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument—Global Europe (NDICI—Global Europe) in 2021, through which the ENP is currently funded.

When the ENP initiative was announced, Romano Prodi, former president of the European Commission from 1999 to 2004, called it "a substantial contribution by the EU to global governance", where "the aim is to extend to this neighbouring region a set of principles, values and standards which define the very essence of the European Union", highlighting that as a prerequisite for other countries to implement needed reforms, the EU must represent a form of hope for the future, which is tied to a high level of trust that people need to have in the EU model in order for it to remain attractive. He also admitted that many elements of the ENP are taken from the enlargement process and declared that they offer "more than partnership and less than membership", the core principle being "sharing everything with the Union but institutions" [44].

In this discourse, we can notice the emergence of socialization and conditionality as main driving forces of the policy because of the focus given to the attractiveness of the EU model and the listing of multiple incentives such as market opportunities, a more stable economic and political environment, direct investments and economic growth, as well as a direct mention of how they will be leveraged depending on the partner country performance and the political will on both sides [44].

At the launch of the first Seven Action Plans under the ENP, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, Commissioner for External Relations and European Neighbourhood Policy at the time, also underlined the transactional aspect of the policy where in order for foreign countries to deepen their cooperation and integration into certain EU sectors, they have to fulfil different commitments towards the EU and that "the further a partner is ready to go in taking practical steps to implement common values, the further the EU will be ready to go in strengthening our links with them". She further outlined the benefits for both sides that were previously talked about by pointing out that this policy would guarantee EU an improved security, an increase in cross border cooperation, especially for tackling

issues from migration to organized crime, the opportunity to spread democracy and human rights, stronger commitments on the fight against terrorism and non-proliferation, as well as the peaceful resolution of regional conflicts. On the other hand, the benefits outlined in her speech for the partner countries are closer cooperation with the EU, greater financial assistance, the chance to participate in EU programs, assistance to bring their laws and regulations in line with European standards and, the biggest prize, access to EU's internal market [45].

This is also a period where a lot of the criticism regarding the policy is concentrated. Such declarations highlighted the issue of the asymmetrical relation between the parties where the EU was setting the agenda and the partner country had little to no say in its negotiation [35].

Things took a slight turn in terms of declared goals for the 2015 revision of the ENP, Johannes Hahn, then Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy & Enlargement Negotiations, reiterated EU's power as a pole of attraction for others but also pointed out some issues that had become apparent since the program's implementation. Namely that not all of the neighboring countries shared the same aspiration of being closer to the EU or the same degree of it and the union failed to properly account for this differentiation, that the ENP seemed skewed in favor of the EU and imposed by it which made projecting the image of the policy as a partnership actively chosen by the other side and the idea of co-ownership of ENP seem dishonest and lastly, he emphasized that the policy so far lacked focus and it was inflexible. Hahn also noted that although at basis of the creation of the ENP laid the belief that becoming closer to the EU was an irresistible offer even for countries that cannot aspire to membership, this vision proved to not coincide with the reality and thus, although not suggesting that the EU should give up on its values, he raised the question of whether the way in which the EU tried to transmit said values had the success it hoped for [46].

Fast forward to the present, and the financial instrument NDICI—Global Europe promises funding for actions in line with the SDGs, support for civil society organizations, enhanced political cooperation, and renewed support for regional cooperation while also highlighting yet again the strongest incentive that the EU is willing to offer through the ENP, integration into the EU's internal market [47]. This way, it can be said that the union tried to repackage their offer but, in terms of objectives and even incentives, the policy stayed mostly the same.

These critiques echo broader concerns about the EU's tendency to apply a one-size-fits-all model in its external engagements. Bicchi [48] argues that the EU often assumes that its norms and governance standards are universally applicable, downplaying local contexts and agency, while risking undermining the legitimacy of EU-promoted reforms and reinforcing perceptions of normative superiority.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay between Europeanization, normative power, and gender equality policies beyond the EU's borders. This section places our results in the broader context of previous research, addressing how the EU's normative influence aligns with or diverges from existing theoretical frameworks on Europeanization.

While the EU presents itself as a promoter of universal norms, including gender equality, it is important to acknowledge that its normative role is contested. As previously discussed [24–26], the EU's external action has often mirrored dynamics of soft imperialism, with limited room for co-production of norms. A more reflexive and context-sensitive approach may be necessary to avoid the reproduction of hierarchical power relations.

4.1. EU as an International Normative Gender Actor

By looking at the EU not only as an international actor with normative power, but as a global gender actor, we can analyze the advancement of gender equality through EU values-based policies. As stated in 2015 on International Women's Day by a group of important European decision-makers at the time, among them Frans Timmermans, Vice-President of the European Commission, Neven Mimica, International Cooperation and Development Commissioner, and Federica Mogherini, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, "Europe has been promoting gender equality since 1957—it is part of the European Union's DNA" and "the EU is and remains at the forefront of those advancing gender equality—inside the Commission and the European External Action Service, inside the European Union and in our relations with third countries" [49]. These statements perfectly encapsulate the initial ideas postulated by Manners that we previously detailed where the normative power possessed by the EU is the result of it identifying as a normative actor, which gives it the ability to project its values beyond its established borders.

In the same vein, scholars also noted that gender equality is something akin to a foundational myth of the EU and that this value has been ingrained into the consciousness of its institutions, which also makes it a part of its normative mission to mainstream it across national and foreign policies [50]. According to Stella Ronner-Grubačić, EU Ambassador for Gender and Diversity, "only if gender and diversity are fully integrated into all EU's analyses and responses to challenges, crises and conflicts, as well as to the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism, will the outcome be sustainable" [51].

Most recently, the current president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has stated that "for the first time in our Union's history—we have four women at the helm of the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the European Investment Bank" [52], which shows the EU's commitment towards gender equality internally and which can be extrapolated and given as an example to follow externally.

That being said, women in decision-making governmental positions are not enough for achieving gender equality: in fact, this represents only a corner of the "velvet triangle", a concept developed in the early 2000s by Alison Woodward and reiterated by multiple other authors [53–57]. Its initial description—as the interaction between three main categories of female players in predominantly male lead fields: governmental and other decision-making intuitions like the commission officials described earlier (also called femocrats), civil society, and academia—has limited direct applicability to external action. However, we propose a conceptual adaptation to the EU's foreign policy sphere, arguing that a similar triangular logic may emerge through cooperation between institutional actors (e.g., EEAS, EU delegations), transnational knowledge producers (e.g., policy consultants, think tanks), and international or local civil society organizations. While this adaptation lacks the feminist cohesion of the original formulation, it provides a useful heuristic for examining how gender norms could be promoted externally through cross-sectoral coordination, as these three corners of the triangle are supposed to work together and be replicated outside the Union as well. One of the proposed ways for achieving this goal is creating a feminist foreign policy that would reinforce the identity of the EU as a normative gender actor or as others call it, a Feminist Power Europe [50,58].

Based on the elements discussed so far, we can say that gender equality is seen inside the EU institutions as one of the fundamental values that it tries to promote abroad, which ties the subject to another important foreign policy instrument that the EU has at its disposal, the development cooperation policy. This policy represents one of the pillars of its external action service, together with foreign, security, and trade policies. A clear testament to the

importance of this particular pillar is that currently, the European Union is the largest donor of ODA in the world and that together with its member states donates more aid than all the other countries in the world combined [59].

Among the declared priorities for advancing economic growth and social development both inside and outside of the EU's borders is to promote gender equality and gender mainstreaming in all activities, as well as combating gender-based violence. Gender equality is one of the fundamental values of the European Union and it appears in multiple founding treaties, more specifically: the Treaty on European Union, the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and the Charter of Fundamental Rights [60].

Despite these claims, there is much criticism surrounding the image of the EU as a normative gender actor. Just like criticism surrounding its normative power presented in general terms, in this specific subject there are ongoing debates on the inconsistency of the implementation of gender equality norms abroad as well as the effectiveness of its means, especially as the situation seems to deteriorate domestically as well [43,50]. The idea of a velvet triangle in itself seems to have crumbled underneath its own weight as the institutional environment shifted and the policy arrangements that it promoted turned out to no longer be viable [57,61,62]. Woodward herself, the one that coined the concept, argued that "the idea that Europe primarily exports gender equality norms requires reconsideration" [61].

While the EU publicly embraces a normative identity rooted in gender equality and human rights, its external action is often marked by strategic ambiguity. Scholars have highlighted that gender-related initiatives may serve broader geopolitical objectives or be deprioritized when they conflict with other foreign policy goals [43,63]. Moreover, the EU's emphasis on technocratic tools—such as indicators, toolkits, or gender markers—may depoliticize gender and reduce it to a procedural concern rather than a structural transformation. This ambivalence challenges the image of the EU as a consistent promoter of feminist values and underscores the need for a more critical and reflexive analytical approach.

Despite formal commitments to gender mainstreaming, the EU has been also criticized for applying this principle inconsistently across policy areas. Scholars have noted that while gender considerations are more visible in development cooperation and social policy, they are often marginal or absent in domains such as trade, security, and migration [43,64], and this fragmented application raises questions about the coherence of the EU's normative agenda and possibly undermines its credibility as a gender equality promoter.

Our findings also suggest that even in the situations when the EU succeeds to position itself as a normative power, actively promoting its values and policies beyond its borders, its external Europeanization process is sometimes influenced by complex political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors in partner countries, and the interaction between EU-driven initiatives and domestic realities shapes the extent to which gender mainstreaming policies are successfully adopted. Additionally, while critiques of soft imperialism and asymmetric power dynamics highlight key challenges in the EU's external governance, evidence also supports the role of agency among third-country actors, which selectively engage with EU norms based on their national interests.

4.2. Gendering Normative Power Europe: Lessons of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda

One of the relevant aspects of normative power in the case of the European Union is the integration of gender equality into its foreign policy, particularly in connection with the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda [65]. Adopted by the United Nations Security Council in Resolution 1325 (2000), this agenda emphasizes women's participation in peace and security processes and advocates for women's rights in post-conflict reconstruction and security. The EU has been an active supporter of the WPS agenda and has integrated

these principles into its foreign policy, recognizing that gender equality is critical for peace, security, and sustainable development.

One of the most significant aspects of gendering normative power is understanding how gender equality intersects with peace, security, and sustainable development. The EU has increasingly applied the principles of the WPS agenda as part of its broader normative power strategy, influencing both internal policies within its member states and external relations with third countries. In this context, Normative Power Europe extends beyond the mere promotion of democratic values to integrate gender equality as a strategic element of peace and security policy.

Key lessons from the integration of the Women, Peace, and Security Agenda in the EU's external policy include: mainstreaming gender in peace and security policy; leveraging gender in diplomacy; and impact on global influence. First, the EU has integrated gender equality as a fundamental part of its external policy in the area of peace and security, applying gender mainstreaming in its interventions. Its foreign policy in the area of women, peace, and security focuses on increasing women's participation in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction, especially in conflict-affected regions. This reflects a broader approach to Normative Power Europe, where gender equality is directly linked to security and stability. Second, the EU has used gender equality as a tool of diplomatic influence to encourage third countries to adopt gender-inclusive policies in the context of peace and security. This was clearly seen in the EU's promotion of UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which emphasizes the protection of women's rights in armed conflicts and their inclusion in post-conflict peacebuilding processes. Thus, the EU has demonstrated how normative power can be strengthened by embedding gender equality in global security frameworks [21]. Third, by integrating the principles of the WPS agenda into its external strategy, the EU has consolidated its role as a global normative power promoting women's rights and gender equality. The EU has become a reference point in promoting gender justice in conflict zones, reinforcing its position as a key actor in global peace and security initiatives. The gendering of normative power has contributed to expanding the EU's influence in foreign relations with post-conflict regions and in global peace and security negotiations [21].

However, as Guerrina and Wright [43] argue, EU's engagement is often instrumental, aligning gender equality goals with security interests rather than feminist principles. Haastrup [63] further highlights how WPS implementation in the EU context is shaped by bureaucratic routines and constrained by institutional path dependencies. As such, the EU's role as a gender actor within WPS remains ambivalent—normatively ambitious in discourse, but often limited in practice. This analysis complements our broader argument that the EU's external gender agenda is neither coherent nor uniformly applied.

Despite the significant strides made by the EU in integrating gender equality into its external policy, other significant challenges remain in fully implementing these norms. These include political resistance in some regions or governments that do not prioritize gender norms. In countries from the Eastern Partnership and in regions affected by conflict, the challenges are cultural and sociopolitical, and the effective implementation of gender policies is often superficial, limiting the EU's influence [66,67].

4.3. Assessing the Validity of the Research Hypothesis

Reflecting on our initial research hypothesis, we can draw several key conclusions from the findings presented in this article.

Our hypothesis (H: The EU's external Europeanization process functions as a normative tool that can facilitate the diffusion of gender equality norms abroad through various mechanisms, even if its influence is mediated by complex domestic and global dynamics)

is partially validated. The analysis demonstrates that while the EU actively promotes gender equality through various instruments (e.g., ENP, NDICI–Global Europe, bilateral action plans), its influence varies significantly across the Eastern Partnership (EaP) region. Structural factors such as political resistance, limited administrative capacity, and cultural norms constrain the translation of EU-promoted values into concrete reforms. Nevertheless, EU engagement remains a key enabler for gender mainstreaming, especially where domestic actors (civil society, academia, select public institutions) actively engage with EU frameworks and leverage them for internal advocacy.

The political, institutional, and cultural factors are not presented as explanatory variables in a causal model, but rather as conceptual mediators that shape the conditions under which EU-promoted gender norms may be adopted, resisted, or reframed, these mediating factors providing a heuristic framework for understanding variation across contexts. Drawing on the Europeanization literature [7,10,11], we understand norm diffusion as being filtered through domestic opportunity structures. For instance, political alignment with EU agendas, the openness of public administration to external advice, or the presence of active women's movements may significantly influence the reception of gender norms. Conversely, authoritarian governance or donor fatigue may hinder such processes.

4.4. Limitations and Future Work

This study is primarily conceptual in nature, aiming to offer a theoretical lens for understanding how the EU's external Europeanization process may promote gender equality abroad. As such, it does not attempt to measure or causally trace the impact of EU action in specific third countries. This choice reflects both the scope of this article and the inherent methodological challenges associated with empirically isolating the influence of EU norms in complex political and social environments.

Tracing the diffusion of gender norms poses particular difficulties: it is rarely linear, often involves overlapping influences (e.g., UN agencies, bilateral donors, transnational civil society), and may be filtered or reshaped by local actors with their own agendas. Additionally, much of the EU's gender-related engagement operates through soft power tools—such as strategic communications, development partnerships, or programmatic funding—that do not always generate easily measurable institutional reforms.

While the EU's role as a normative power is evident, attributing policy shifts solely to EU influence is therefore challenging due to the complex interplay of national, regional, and global dynamics, as the success of EU policies depends on domestic political structures, public opinion, and economic conditions, all of which can shape the adoption or rejection of EU-promoted gender norms.

A key limitation of this conceptual approach is the reduced attention to local actors and their agency in shaping norm diffusion processes. While this article focuses on EU-level normative strategies, the actual implementation and reception of gender norms are mediated by national governments, institutions, and civil society organizations. These actors are not passive recipients but active interpreters that may adopt, modify, or contest EU-promoted values. Future research would benefit from empirical analysis of the perceptions and endeavors of other actors (various interest groups, civil society, citizens, media) in this de-Europeanization context.

The global diffusion of gender equality is not EU-specific. Norms are shaped by international actors such as the Council of Europe, OECD, UN, and the World Bank, and even the EU's own gender policies have been influenced by these multilateral dynamics. For instance, the principle of gender mainstreaming—often associated with the EU—was first introduced during the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, with substantial input from developing countries and civil society organizations [58].

Despite these limitations, our findings support the idea that the EU plays a significant role in shaping gender equality policies in its external relations, even if it is not the sole actor driving change. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that trace gender-related policy developments over time, distinguishing EU-driven initiatives from broader international influences. Also, we are aware that while this study offers a conceptual exploration of how the EU's external Europeanization can shape gender equality frameworks in neighbouring countries, it does not include case studies or a systematic comparative design. Future research should complement this conceptual work with empirical studies across different regional contexts, especially in countries under the European Neighbourhood Policy or the Eastern Partnership. Comparative analyses of policy uptake, elite discourse, or local civil society mobilization could shed light on how EU-promoted gender norms are interpreted and implemented—or resisted—on the ground. Moreover, greater attention should be paid to the role of domestic actors, electoral politics, and regional competition in shaping these processes.

5. Conclusions

This article has offered a conceptual exploration of how the European Union's external Europeanization process can function as a normative channel for promoting gender equality beyond its borders. Rather than empirically measuring the EU's influence, we have analyzed the theoretical mechanisms—conditionality, socialization, imitation, and externalization—through which gender norms are potentially diffused via EU foreign policy instruments.

Drawing on the literature on Europeanization, postfunctionalism, and normative power, we proposed that the EU's role in exporting gender equality norms is best understood not as a linear transfer of values, but as a multidirectional and contested process shaped by both EU intentions and domestic responses. While the EU positions itself as a gender actor in global governance, the actual uptake of these values depends heavily on local political structures, cultural contexts, and competing global influences.

The EU's normative power in gender equality does not operate in isolation. Other international actors, including the United Nations, OECD, and World Bank, also play a crucial role in shaping global gender norms. This raises important questions about the extent to which Europeanization is a distinct process or whether it is embedded within broader globalization trends. In particular, global cooperation will be crucial in counterbalancing the setbacks created by recent U.S. foreign policy decisions (which reduced USAID funding and imposed conditionalities on UN agencies), and continued efforts to strengthen the gender equality agenda will require increased collaboration across governments, international organizations, and civil society. Nevertheless, the EU's gender agenda abroad remains ambivalent—often constrained by geopolitical priorities and shaped by technocratic, rather than transformative, tools.

By reorienting the analysis toward a conceptual framework, this article addresses the methodological challenges of attributing causality in norm diffusion and responds to growing calls in the literature for a more critical, reflexive understanding of the EU's external role. This framework also highlights the importance of agency among third-country actors, as well as the limitations and contradictions of the EU's own normative agenda.

Future research could build on this framework by developing empirical studies that assess how EU-promoted gender norms are received, adapted, or resisted in specific country contexts. In particular, comparative case studies could offer valuable insight into the interplay between EU influence and domestic change, further clarifying when and how external Europeanization fosters meaningful gender equality reforms.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

EaP	Eastern Partnership
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EU	European Union
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

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