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EU NORMS À LA CARTE: A WAR IN UKRAINE, A “SITUATION” IN PALESTINE

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The European Union: A Normative Actor?

The European Union (EU) has long portrayed itself as a defender of human rights and a promoter of universal norms. The credibility of this positioning is not merely a theoretical concern; it also shapes the EU's influence and effectiveness as an international actor. Yet its responses to recent crises suggest a more selective application of these principles. The EU's strong and unified support for Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion stands in stark contrast to its continued strategic engagement with Israel amid the ongoing genocide in the Gaza Strip. This divergence raises a central question: are these principles truly universal, or are they ultimately shaped by geopolitical interests?

To explore this contradiction, this analysis focuses on public communication by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, specifically her tweets on Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. Comparing the language used across the two cases reveals how legitimacy, responsibility, victimhood, and morality are unevenly constructed within EU discourse.

The discussion draws on debates surrounding "Normative Power Europe," which conceptualizes the EU as a normative power with the ability to shape conceptions of what is considered "normal" in international relations.[1] Rather than treating this as a fixed label, it serves here as a lens to assess whether the EU's discourse aligns with its normative claims in practice.

A qualitative analysis of selected tweets suggests that the EU's messaging is not uniform across the cases of Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. While normative principles are strongly emphasized in the context of the war in Ukraine, they are not evenly invoked in relation to Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people. This uneven articulation of values raises questions about the consistency and credibility of the EU's normative positioning, pointing to the influence of geopolitical priorities in shaping its external discourse.

The Normative Framework

The European Union is often described as a normative actor, defined by its emphasis on human rights, multilateralism, and the promotion of universal values. Earlier debates framed Europe as a "civilian power," relying on non-military means to exert influence,[2] though this characterization was later challenged on the grounds that such influence remained dependent on broader strategic and military structures.[3] Building on these discussions, Manners' concept of Normative Power Europe gained prominence, referring to its ability to shape conceptions of what is considered "normal" in international relations.[4]

This understanding, however, has been widely contested. Critics have questioned both the coherence and the implications of the EU's claim to normative power, pointing to the absence of clear criteria for determining what constitutes normative action and the risk of reproducing Eurocentric assumptions when particular values are presented as universal.[5] Additionally, the idea that norms and interests can be separated[6] has garnered much criticism.[7] If the promotion of a certain set of norms also advances the EU's political and strategic objectives, it becomes difficult to determine whether its actions reflect a normative commitment or a strategic calculation.

The tension between normative commitments and strategic interests is particularly apparent when comparing how the EU characterizes the cases

of Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has solidified consensus in the EU that Russia is a major security threat.[8] Geographic proximity further heightens the strategic significance of the conflict, while the defense of Ukrainian sovereignty broadly aligns the EU's normative commitments with its security interests. The rules-based Union therefore perceives itself as confronting a revisionist actor that poses a challenge to European security.

Israel, by contrast, holds a different position in the EU's strategic landscape. The Union benefits from maintaining strong relations with Israel as a key economic and strategic partner, where both sides drive mutual growth through deep bilateral trade, significant foreign direct investment, and vital cooperation in research, innovation, energy, and security.[9] These two differing relationships make the cases particularly useful for examining how the EU navigates the relationship between its normative commitments and geopolitical interests.

Methodology and Analytical Framework

The official Ursula von der Leyen X account was analyzed across two cases: Russia's war in Ukraine and Israel's genocide in the Gaza Strip. As President of the European Commission, von der Leyen became a focal point of controversy, with statements widely perceived as inconsistent in the face of human rights violations.[10] Using X's advanced search, tweets were collected from the first six months of each conflict to ensure comparability. For Russia/Ukraine, posts between February 24 and August 24, 2022, containing the words "Russia" and "Ukraine" were examined. For Israel/Palestine, tweets between October 7, 2023, and April 7, 2024, containing the words "Palestine," "Gaza," "Palestinian," and "Israel" were analyzed.

The dataset—36 tweets for Russia/Ukraine and 18 for Israel/Palestine (54 in total)—was manually compiled and analyzed in NVivo 14, excluding retweets to focus on original messaging. The analysis produced 30 codes, capturing key thematic patterns. Notably, tweets following October 7 generated 16 codes and 58 references, while those following the Russian invasion yielded 22 codes and 198 references, pointing to a denser and more varied framing. Based on the recurring patterns identified through this coding process, seven broader trends emerged, which form the categories guiding the qualitative analysis below: number of tweets; call for aid; description of conflicts; proactive stance: sanctions; justice vs. impunity; weapons; and discourse of silence. Figure 1 maps the overall coding distribution, while Figures 2 and 3 break this down across the two cases.

The analytical framework draws on Teun Van Dijk's approach to critical discourse analysis, which connects the micro-level analysis of language and discourse to broader macro-level structures of institutions, power, and social relations.[11] As he notes, "language users engage in discourse as members of social groups, organizations, or institutions."[12] This lens is particularly apt here: as a central figure in EU politics, von der Leyen, does not speak in her personal capacity. Her discourse reflects and projects the Commission's values, priorities, and strategic positioning.

Figure 1: Number of Coding References

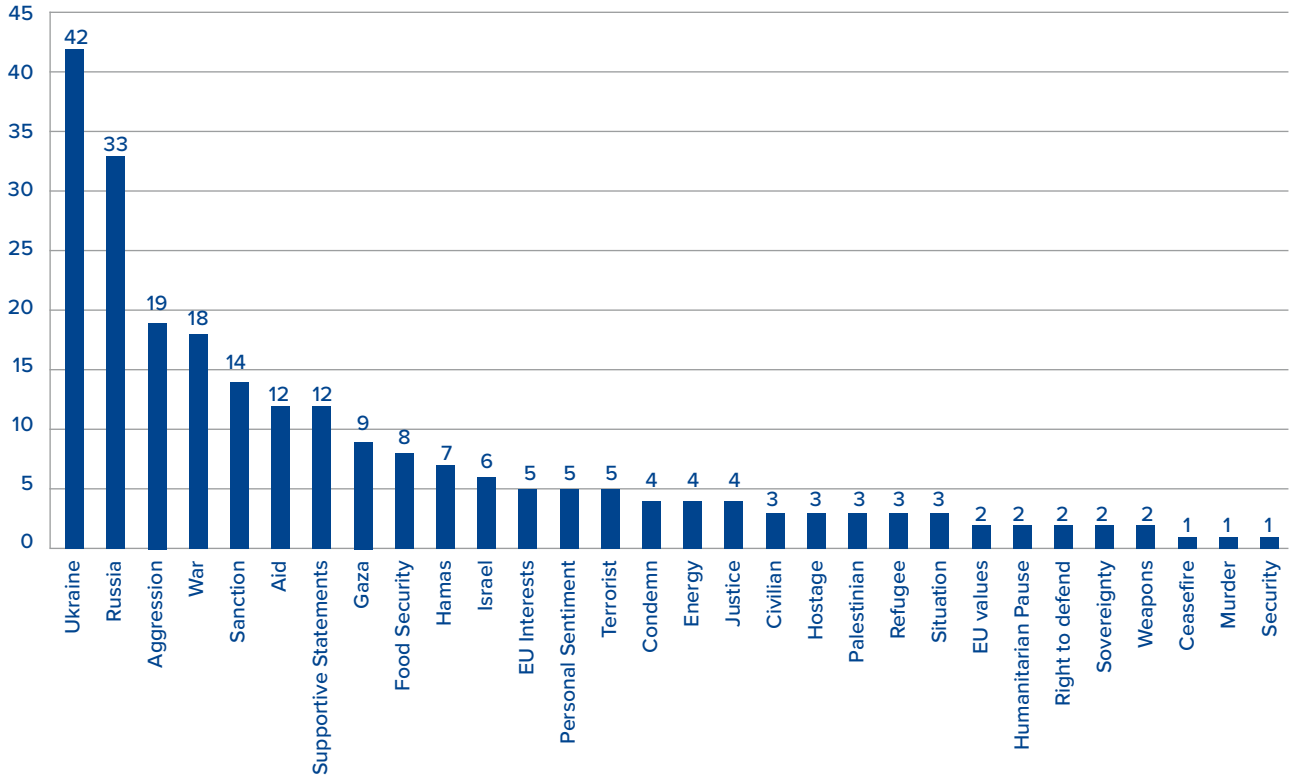


Figure 2: Number of Coding References—Israel/Palestine

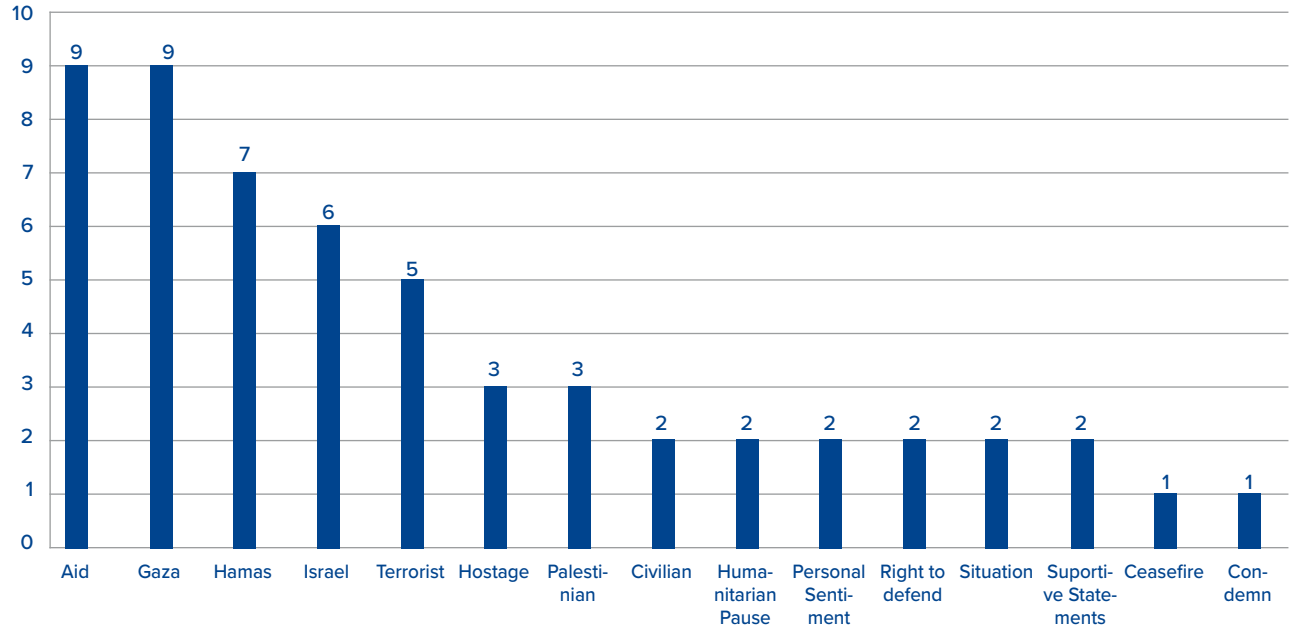
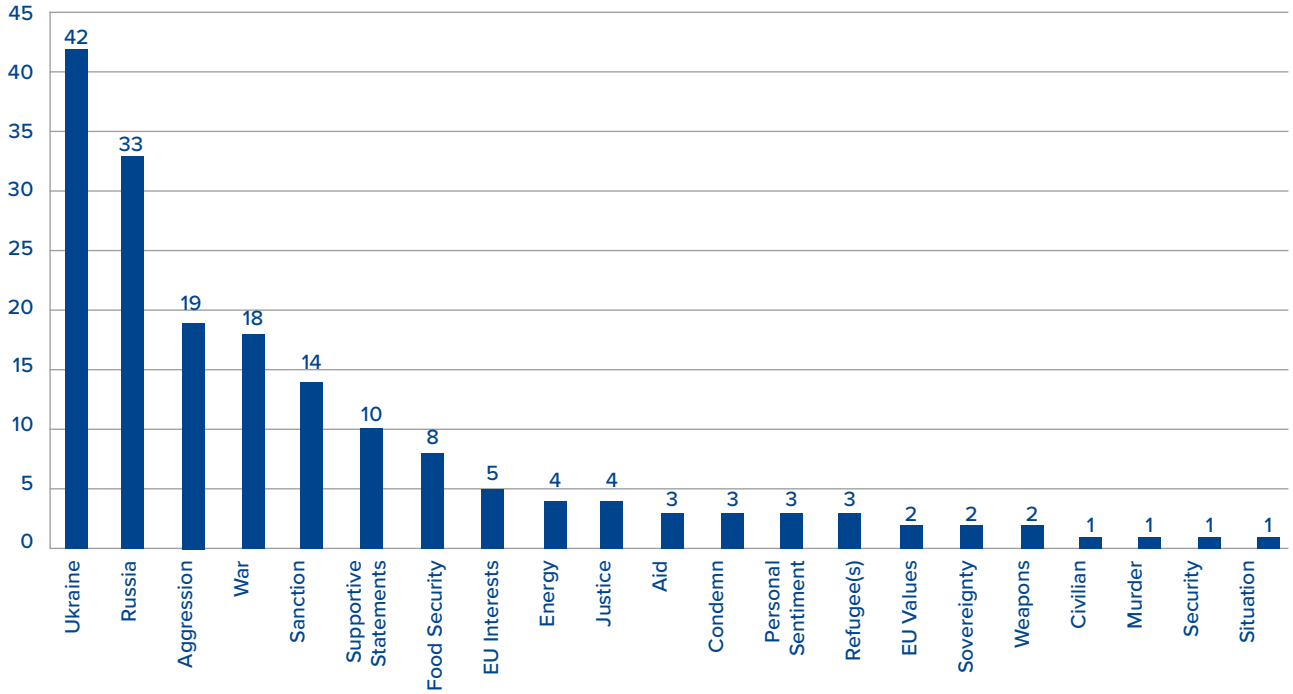


Figure 3: Number of Coding References—Russia/Ukraine



Comparing EU Discourse on Ukraine and Gaza

The comparative analysis of tweets is organized around seven analytical dimensions: tweet volume, calls for aid, descriptions of events, proactive measures, justice versus impunity, weapons, and a discourse of silence. These points were identified through a comparative reading of the tweets, focusing on recurring patterns and differences in how the two conflicts were framed. Taken together, these patterns reveal a consistent narrative: explicit and implicit support for Ukraine and Israel, respectively.

NUMBER OF TWEETS

In the six months following the Russian invasion on February 24, 2022, Ursula von der Leyen tweeted about Ukraine 36 times—exactly double her output in the six months following October 7, 2023. While tweet volume alone cannot establish the substance of the EU's position, the disparity indicates a greater level of public communication on Ukraine during the respective six-month periods.

CALL FOR AID

Von der Leyen's tweets during this period call for aid for Gaza more frequently (7) than for Ukraine (3). This greater discursive emphasis on aid, however, does not correspond to a greater material commitment by the EU. In 2024, the European Commission allocated EUR 125 million in humanitarian aid for Palestinians.[13] In contrast, figures reported by the European Commission in August 2024 indicate a considerably larger and broader package of EU assistance to Ukraine. This includes EUR 73.6 billion provided through the EU budget for humanitarian support, crisis response, budget support, early recovery, and reconstruction, alongside EUR 59.6 billion in military assistance.[14]

Table 1: Representative Examples of Aid-Related Tweets*

Tweet	Date
I spoke with @UNSG @antonioguterres following my visit & contacts with regional leaders. ***The EU will be tripling its humanitarian aid for vulnerable civilians in Gaza*** *and the wider region. We will redouble* ***efforts to ensure this support reaches*** *those who need it.*	October 14, 2023
It is heartbreaking to see the people of Ukraine leaving their whole life behind to escape from Putin's bombs. Supporting them is our moral duty. We are deploying €500 million of ***humanitarian and emergency assistance*** *and setting* ***civil protection hubs****.*	March 8, 2022

Table 2: Tweets Describing Conflicts

Tweet	Date
Russia's brutal war against Ukraine *continues unabated. Therefore we propose today to tighten our hard-hitting EU sanctions against the Kremlin, enforce them more effectively and extend them until January 2023. Moscow must continue to pay a high price for its aggression.*	July 15, 2022
100 days ago ***Russia unleashed its unjustifiable war on Ukraine****. The bravery of Ukrainians commands our respect and our admiration. The EU stands with Ukraine. Today in Paris, I will discuss with @ emmanuelmacron @Europe2022FR the EU's current & future support to the country.*	June 3, 2022
As ***Russia's ruthless invasion*** *continues, the EU and our G7 partners continue to ramp up the economic pressure on the Kremlin. Tomorrow, we will introduce a fourth package of measures to further isolate Russia and drain the resources it uses to finance this* ***barbaric war***	March 11, 2022
Good call with President @AlsisiOfficial.We discussed ***the situation*** *in the Middle East. I thanked him for Egypt's leadership on providing humanitarian aid to Gaza and on helping to get European citizens out of Gaza.*	November 5, 2022

These figures are not directly comparable as equivalent categories of humanitarian assistance. Rather, the difference in the forms of support provided is itself significant. While EU assistance to Palestinians is framed predominantly in humanitarian terms, support for Ukraine extends beyond humanitarian relief to include financial, reconstruction, and military assistance. The EU support for Gaza reflects the narrower terms through which the EU articulates its response to Palestinian suffering. While Gaza appears more frequently in von der Leyen's calls for aid, it is Ukraine that receives more comprehensive support. This reveals the distinction between alleviating suffering and enabling resistance.

DESCRIPTION OF CONFLICTS

The language used to describe the two cases reveals another clean asymmetry in the EU's discourse. Ukraine was explicitly framed as a "war" 18 times, while the term was never used for Israel/Palestine. Instead, Gaza was reduced to a vague "situation," a term used twice compared to only once for Ukraine. Notably, the word "conflict" did not appear in relation to either case. This distinction is politically significant. Calling Ukraine a "war" immediately invokes aggression, destruction, and accountability. Whereas by referring to Gaza as a mere "situation," this strips the violence in Gaza of both urgency and agency.

As the sample tweets in Table 2 demonstrate, the term "war" in the case of Ukraine was frequently paired with morally charged descriptors such as "brutal" and "barbaric." These adjectives did more than condemn violence; they reinforced a broader civilizational narrative in which Russia was positioned as an aggressor acting outside the boundaries of acceptable international behavior. The discourse surrounding Ukraine was therefore not neutral reporting but an active political framing aligned with the EU's strategic positioning.

* In Tables 1–5, some text has been bolded in order to emphasize certain words and phrases relevant to the discourse analysis.

No comparable language was used for Gaza. Instead of morally loaded descriptions, von der Leyen relied on the vague and depoliticized term "situation." The absence of descriptive language is itself revealing. By avoiding terms that would convey brutality, destruction, or aggression, the discourse simultaneously avoids assigning responsibility to Israel for the violence. This selective framing reflects the limits of the EU's normative language when strategic partnerships are at stake. Put differently, it was far easier for von der Leyen to frame Ukraine through a moral lens aligned with European political interests than to apply the same discursive clarity to Gaza.

PROACTIVE STANCE: SANCTIONS

Von der Leyen's tweets referenced sanctions against Russia 14 times. Israel, in contrast, was not mentioned once in discussions of sanctions. This brings the analysis back to the question of aid and exposes one of the clearest contradictions in the EU's discourse. If Gaza required more urgent humanitarian assistance than Ukraine in von der Leyen's rhetoric, why was there no parallel discussion of punitive measures against the actor producing that humanitarian catastrophe? In the case of Ukraine, aid and sanctions functioned together: humanitarian support was accompanied by the clear identification and punishment of the aggressor. In Gaza, however, the discourse stopped at humanitarian concern. Calls for aid existed without calls for accountability.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the humanitarian devastation that followed triggered multiple rounds of EU sanctions. Israel's assault on Gaza and the humanitarian catastrophe it produced triggered nothing. The gap between discourse and policy suggests that humanitarian responses are not applied uniformly but filtered through geopolitical alliances and ideological considerations.

JUSTICE VS. IMPUNITY

Von der Leyen repeatedly called for "justice" for Ukraine and accountability for Russia. No comparable demand appeared in relation to Palestinians in Gaza. The contrast is striking: justice was framed as necessary and urgent in one case, while entirely absent in the other. This silence matters. Calls for justice are not merely symbolic; they signal whose suffering is recognized politically and whose grievances are treated as legitimate within the international discourse. In the Ukrainian case, the language of justice reinforced the idea that crimes had been

Table 3: Tweets Mentioning Sanctions

Tweet	Date
*Thanks to the @Europe2022FR French Presidency, **another strong package of sanctions** was agreed today against Putin and the Kremlin. De facto 90% of Russian oil imports to* 🇪🇺 *will be banned by the end of 2022. This will reduce Russia's capacity to finance its war.*	June 2, 2022
*I welcome the fast adoption by EU Member States of the **4th package of sanctions** against Russia. This will further impede Putin's ability to finance this unjustified war. The EU and its partners will keep up the pressure on the Kremlin until it stops the invasion of Ukraine.*	March 15, 2022

Table 4: Tweets Calling for Justice

Tweet	Date
*#G7 leaders firmly standing **together in support of Ukraine**, taking further steps to sanction Russia. Bucha atrocities will be investigated & those responsible **brought to justice**. As war continues, Russia faces a long descent into economic, financial & technological isolation.*	April 7, 2022
*I spoke with President @ZelenskyyUa about the atrocious murder of civilians in Bucha and elsewhere in Ukraine. The EU is ready to send Joint Investigation Teams **to document war crimes** in coordination with the Ukrainian Prosecutor General. @Europol and @Eurojust will support.*	April 4, 2022

committed, responsibility could be assigned, and accountability must follow. In Gaza, the absence of such language removed the question of accountability from the conversation altogether.

The EU's divergent responses cannot be separated from the ideological and geopolitical realities shaping its foreign policy. Due to Ukraine's geographical proximity and its aspirations to join Western political institutions such as the European Union, support for Kyiv becomes both a geopolitical necessity and a normative performance. The response to Israel/Palestine, however, operates under a different set of political constraints. Applying the same moral and legal language used against Russia would risk straining the EU's strategic relationship with Israel. This helps explain the caution, ambiguity, and selective silence visible throughout von der Leyen's discourse. Calling to "document war crimes" in Gaza, for instance, would require extending normative principles to an ally rather than an adversary. The issue, then, is not whether the EU possesses a normative framework but when it chooses to apply it and against whom.

WEAPONS

Von der Leyen's tweets on Ukraine explicitly referenced the threat and use of "weapons," framing the war not only as a humanitarian disaster but as an existential danger to international security. This language amplified the urgency and gravity of the conflict while further legitimizing a strong European response against Russia. No similar rhetoric appeared for Gaza. Despite the immense scale of destruction and civilian casualties, the discourse surrounding Palestinians remained notably restrained and stripped of the security framing used for Ukraine.

Table 5: Tweets Mentioning Weapons

Tweet	Date
*The **missile attack** this morning on a train station used for evacuations of civilians in Ukraine is despicable. I am appalled by the loss of life and I will offer personally my condolences to President @ZelenskyyUa*	April 8, 2022
*Europe stands by those in need of protection. All those fleeing **Putin's bombs** are welcome in Europe. We will provide protection to those seeking shelter and we will help those looking for a safe way home. Our proposal to support people fleeing the war in Ukraine.*	March 2, 2022

Although only two tweets referenced the use of "weapons," the significance of this theme becomes clear when placed alongside the scale of destruction in both Ukraine and Gaza. During the first seven months following Russia's invasion, 27,449 civilian casualties were recorded, including 9,701 deaths.[15] In Gaza, however, more than 11,000 people were killed, over 27,000 injured, and 1.6 million displaced within little more than one month of bombardment.[16] In other words, one month of attacks on Gaza produced a death toll surpassing seven months of attacks in Ukraine. Additionally, reports published in November 2023 further estimated that the explosives dropped on Gaza were equivalent to two nuclear bombs.[17] Yet despite this level of devastation, von der Leyen's discourse avoided the security language used in the Ukrainian case. References to missiles, bombs, or existential threats that appeared in tweets about Ukraine were absent when discussing Gaza. This is not shocking considering that the EU has long maintained strategic military ties with Israel, with member states collectively exporting hundreds of millions of euros worth of arms annually.[18] Against this backdrop, discourse becomes more than rhetoric; it becomes a mechanism of political distancing.

DISCOURSE OF SILENCE

One of the clearest patterns running through the findings is the discourse of silence. Silence here does not mean the absence of language but the strategic limitation of what can and cannot be said. Discourse enables certain forms of expression while simultaneously disabling others.[19] Tweets were placed within this category when they referred to violence, civilian suffering, destruction, human rights violations, or their humanitarian consequences. The analysis then considered whether agency and responsibility were explicitly attributed by identifying the actor responsible, or whether that actor was omitted from the discourse. Drawing on Thiesmeyer's understanding of discourse as a form of social action that can both reflect and shape social structures,[20] a careful examination of von der Leyen's tweets show what is left unsaid can be as consequential as what is explicitly stated.

When von der Leyen calls for "justice" for Ukraine, demands that Russian war crimes be documented, or advocates sanctions against Moscow, her language is direct and confrontational. Russia is clearly identified as the aggressor, Ukraine as the victim, and the EU as the normative actor defending sovereignty, democracy, and international law. The repeated use of terms such as "war," alongside vivid references to bombardment and destruction, reinforces this moral framing. Through both language and interpretation, von der Leyen actively shapes public perception: Russia becomes the destabilizing threat, while the EU positions itself as standing with vulnerable but resilient Ukrainians.

The discourse surrounding Gaza functions differently. The issue is not the total absence of humanitarian concern but the selective absence of accountability. Tweets calling for aid in Gaza did not identify Israel as the actor responsible for the genocide. Unlike Russia in the Ukrainian case, Israel remained largely removed from the narrative itself. The destruction was acknowledged, the suffering was recognized, and the calls for aid were made, but the perpetrator disappeared from the discourse. Ukrainians are fleeing "Putin's bombs," but whose bombs are Gazans fleeing from? This silence is politically consequential. Omitting Israel from the narrative does not create neutrality; it produces a form of discursive protection. The significance of what remained unsaid rivals that of what was spoken.

Selective Normativity: Between Universal Values and Strategic Interests

The findings reveal that the EU's application of norms is shaped not only by values but by power and strategic interest. The discourse surrounding Ukraine and Gaza reflects a clear hierarchy within the EU's external relations. Ukraine was positioned as a political and moral priority while Palestine was largely reduced to a humanitarian issue to be managed. This asymmetry exposes the limits of the EU's claim to universality. Rather than challenging existing power relations, the discourse surrounding Israel/Palestine often reproduced them by shielding Israel from the level of scrutiny and accountability directed at Russia.

The EU's refusal to act normatively in the face of mass destruction in Gaza fundamentally weakens its claim to being a normative power. The implicit and explicit support extended to Israel stands in contradiction to the very principles of a normative Europe. Supporting a settler-colonial state accused of repeatedly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure[21] cannot easily be recon-

ciled with claims of defending peace, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Yet the EU continues to describe its relationship with Israel as one rooted in "shared values"[22]—the same values said to underpin the Union's normative identity. The selective application of the principles exposes a deeper contradiction at the heart of Normative Power Europe: norms are defended forcefully when confronting adversaries but diluted into silence when strategic allies are involved. Under these conditions, Normative Power Europe begins to resemble less a universal political reality than a delusion.

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