

# Editorial

## How to Get Rid of Vetoes in EU Foreign and Security Policy?

*This is a statement by Members of the Sounding Board of the EU ‘Group of Friends of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV)’. The Group of Friends of QMV was established in 2023 by several EU Member States to prepare proposals to overcome the requirement of unanimity in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy. Discussions take place at various levels, including that of the so-called European Correspondents at the various Ministries of Foreign Affairs. The Sounding Board consists of academics and was installed to provide advice on the various proposals. The present Statement aims to draw attention to options that are currently on the table.*

The world is changing, and the EU should equip itself with the means to respond adequately to major challenges.

Majority voting can be extended in EU foreign policy, but it is essential to ensure that Member States’ vital interests are safeguarded.

For decades, the EU has been criticized for its inaction, slow responses, and a cacophony of voices when managing global crises. At the same time, EU Member States’ views on the EU’s role as a global actor have been converging. Recognizing the EU as a ‘community of fate’ facing shared security threats has already fostered a more cohesive EU actorness. The EU should fulfil its mandate ‘to promote peace, security, and progress in Europe and the world’. Its new geopolitical awareness urges it to build up its capacity to act. Yet, at crucial moments, the requirement for all Member States to agree on every foreign policy decision has hampered the Union’s ability to act as a unified force globally. Too often, crucial and urgent decisions on foreign policy are blocked by one or two Member States, often for reasons unrelated to the issues at stake. This creates a negative system of incentives, where vetoing can be beneficial and exposes the Union to the influence of third parties aiming to divide it.

To prevent blocking behaviour and build the EU’s capacity to better respond to global challenges, Member States need to agree to depart from unanimity and use Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) more frequently. Member States can only agree to this pooling of sovereignty once they trust in effective mechanisms to protect their vital interests.

Twelve Member States (and two observers), joined in the so-called ‘Group of Friends for QMV’ launched in May 2023, have taken up this task. Its ‘Sounding Board’ consists of academics who advise on the legal and political possibilities.

The EU treaties already provide mechanisms to facilitate decision-making. First, the European Council can unanimously decide to extend the list of topics to be decided by QMV. Second, Member States can abstain from voting if they disagree with a proposal, allowing the decision to be adopted despite their objections. Third, they can use the so-called ‘emergency brake’ if a Member State must oppose a proposed decision for vital and stated reasons of national policy. In such cases, a QMV vote will not be taken. Instead, the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy (HR/VP, currently Josep Borrell) will seek a solution. If unsuccessful, Member States may involve the European Council, where unanimity remains the rule.

However, more is needed to reassure Member States that their national interests are not ignored. Only by truly understanding the reasons behind objections can the HR/VP and others find solutions that protect the concerned Member State, build its resilience, and meet the EU’s global responsibilities. This requires the objecting Member State to explain its reasons. A broader ‘safety net’ is needed to make any shift to QMV acceptable for those afraid of losing influence over EU foreign policy.

How can this be achieved? Without changing the Treaties, Member States could reach a political compromise on how a shift to QMV would occur. In conjunction with expanding QMV in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), Member States could reaffirm a procedure enabling further discussions on a matter to be voted on (similar to the Ioannina mechanism). They could also confirm that the Council always seeks consensus, even with QMV, a well-established practice of finding solutions with the widest possible support. Additionally, promoting the under-used ‘constructive abstention’ option should balance collective action and individual state concerns. Finally, Member States could work towards a political compromise to replace individual vetoes with a ‘collective veto’, which might require, for example, three Member States representing a certain population percentage.

In which areas should QMV be used? It should at least apply to situations involving norms and values shared by all EU Member States based on their membership. This means statements and declarations on human rights, democracy, and the rule of law would not be blocked. In response to international crises, the EU should act quickly. Thus, QMV should become the default voting method for certain sanctions, setting up civilian crisis management missions, and adopting measures on cybersecurity.

By carefully considering these steps and focusing on protecting vital national interests, the EU can better position itself to face not only the immediate need to overcome veto limitations but also to ensure the long-term viability and effectiveness of its global vision and actorness; something that has been broadly supported by the public over the past decades.

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