

THE EU'S COMMUNICATION FIASCO: A FAILED RESPONSE TO THE HAMAS ATTACK ON ISRAEL

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A „geopolitical European Commission“ is one of the goals Ursula von der Leyen set for herself and her colleagues as she assumed the Commission’s presidency in 2019.¹ She came back to the phrase in the latest SOTEU speech, where she claimed the Commission and the EU succeeded and had become a „geopolitical Union – supporting Ukraine, standing up to Russia's aggression, responding to an assertive China and investing in partnerships.“²

While the diplomatic activities of the EU towards other major geopolitical players have undoubtedly increased under Von Der Leyen’s Commission, debates are still being held about the European Union's fundamental role in geopolitics. The famous question raised by U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger: “Who do I call when I want to call Europe?”³ remains relevant, and the lack of unification and a need for protracted coordination of foreign policies still continues to hurt the EU. The EU’s diversity, many voices and opinions are simultaneously one of its strengths and weaknesses regarding coherent foreign policy.

There is no doubt that the response and unified stance of the EU and the global West in the matter of the Russian war on Ukraine was a great show of resilience, but that seems like a long time ago compared to the utterly botched communication in response to the current situation in the Gaza strip.

After the Hamas militant attack on Israel unfolded on the 7th of October, killing around 1,400 Israelis,⁴ the first political step for all member states to condemn the attack and offer support was quick and straightforward.

After that, Oliver Varhelyi, the Hungarian commissioner for neighbourhood and enlargement, claimed that all funding towards Palestine had been frozen, a step

¹ Ursula von der Leyen PRESIDENT (2019-2024) https://commissioners.ec.europa.eu/ursula-von-der-leyen_en

²2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_4426

³ Kissinger never wanted to dial Europe <https://www.ft.com/content/c4c1e0cd-f34a-3b49-985f-e708b247eb55>

⁴ Israel social security data reveals true picture of Oct 7 deaths <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20231215-israel-social-security-data-reveals-true-picture-of-oct-7-deaths>

he had no authorisation to take. He withdrew the statement later in the day, causing the first wave of confusion. In response, the EU's top diplomat, Josep Borell, had to explain that no such thing would occur: "The suspension of the payments — punishing all the Palestinian people — would have damaged the EU interests in the region and would have only further emboldened terrorists."⁵

Ursula Von Der Leyen visited Israel a few days later, seen visiting attacked villages close to the Gaza border alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, claiming „unconditional support“ for Israel. Quite surprisingly, Borell pushed back and stated diplomatically that Von Der Leyen's remarks did not speak for the entire EU and that the member states, rather than the Commission, determine the common foreign policy.⁶

While visiting Israel and making her remarks, she behaved much more as a CDU (Christian Democratic Union) member and a convinced supporter of Israel rather than a representative of the EU, not reflecting the stances of all 27 EU countries, which must have annoyed Catalan socialist Borrell.

Von Der Leyen also faced a mutiny in her own ranks, receiving an open letter from the EU's civil servants strongly criticising her pro-Israel rhetoric. The letter highlighted the link of hypocrisy regarding the Ukraine war and the absence of any consideration for the human rights of Palestinian civilians, who were sentenced to suffer under the Israeli retaliation. Critics claimed that the EU should put Israel under pressure to stay in line with humanitarian and international law, which was a theme absent from the Commission chief's speeches.⁷

⁵ European Union reverses earlier announcement that it was suspending development aid to Palestinians
<https://apnews.com/article/eu-palestinians-aid-israel-hamas-be4681a821bac98728e131a8c6abb552>

⁶ Von der Leyen does not speak for EU on Israel-Hamas conflict, foreign policy chief says
<https://www.irishtimes.com/world/europe/2023/10/14/von-der-leyen-does-not-speak-for-eu-on-israel-hamas-conflict-foreign-policy-chief-says/>

⁷ EU staff members express fury over von der Leyen stance on Israel-Hamas conflict
<https://www.irishtimes.com/world/middle-east/2023/10/20/eu-staff-members-express-fury-over-von-der-leyen-stance-on-israel-hamas-conflict/>

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in Gaza developed, which strengthened the stance of advocates for a more balanced position towards Israel within the EU. Trying for the third time to keep the bloc's communication together, Josep Borell announced that Brussels would triple its aid to Gaza, clearly aiming to make a statement of EU commitment to humanitarian support and human rights.⁸

Multiple factors played a role in the miscommunication of the EU as a whole. Firstly, the many voices and representatives of the EU, each with their own interpretation of the situation in Israel and the following steps the EU should take, played a significant role in making the Union's response hectic and poorly coordinated, also revealing a long-lasting divide between member states regarding the Middle East policy and the EU's limited impact in the region.⁹ There was also a need for a quick response, which gave EU representatives limited time to coordinate. Some took on the task of coming out with their own statements.

For example, French President Emmanuel Macron, on a trip to Israel after the attacks, proposed the idea that the international coalition against ISIS could potentially unite against Hamas as well.¹⁰ This idea was problematic due to the presence of multiple arab countries in the coalition currently favouring Hamas. It was also not aligned with the standard foreign policy of the EU, only supporting the divide and potentially escalating tensions in the region that they seek to prevent.

Ten days after the initial attacks, on October 17th, representatives of the 27 member states held a video conference of the European Council, aiming to unify the communication. Charles Michel, the Council president, claimed it was of

⁸ European Commission will immediately triple humanitarian assistance for Gaza to over 75 million euros https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_5001

⁹ EU leaders to focus on fallout from Hamas attack on Israel <https://www.reuters.com/world/eu-leaders-focus-fallout-hamas-attack-israel-2023-10-17/>

¹⁰ France's Macron says anti-ISIL coalition should fight Hamas <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/24/frances-macron-the-latest-western-leader-to-visit-israel>

„utmost importance that the European Council sets its common position and establishes a clear, unified course of action.“¹¹ This conference managed to create, to a certain extent, a more unified and understandable communication position.

It is evident that the initial lousy coordination of the EU stance and future actions in the matter significantly hurt the EU's validity and trustworthiness in the situation, even after a more organised communication had occurred. It exposed a massive difference between the rhetoric of EU leaders and their capabilities to act when a crisis unfolds. It is important to note that the U.S. holds a majority of the cards in the situation due to its strong bilateral relationship with Israel. Still, the EU did not play its cards right, hurting the overall image of the bloc and undermining Von Der Leyen's bold statements of increasing the importance of the Union on the international playing field.

The EU must adapt to the quickly changing geopolitical landscape and learn to effectively communicate its stance on the growing number of crises, because the question formulated by Henry Kissinger is still asked by many. After the communication fiasco regarding Gaza, we can add another question: Who should we believe when Europe speaks?

¹¹ A week into the Israel-Hamas war, the EU continues to struggle with its messaging <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/10/14/a-week-into-the-israel-hamas-war-the-eu-continues-to-struggle-with-its-messaging>