

European Union (EU) foreign policy generally has not been hailed as a great success for the integration project. On one hand, trade deals and other economic aspects of foreign policy have demonstrated EU external power and internal competence. Yet when it comes to political issues in international affairs, the EU is often unable to effectively influence situations or even vaguely behave like the major global actor which many, including EU policymakers themselves, hope and expect it to be. Outside of the wider European region and its neighbors, and on human rights issues, EU foreign policy is especially limited in both effect and effort.

However, these patterns were broken when it comes to the EU's response to the Venezuela Crisis (2017-present), a severe and explosive human rights crisis. In early 2019, the EU almost immediately recognized the democratically-elected legislature's assumption of power as the democratic interim government against the executive's de facto and previously de jure authoritarian regime. For the EU, this action and the sum of its policy toward the Venezuela Crisis since January 2019 are unprecedentedly forceful and bold. How did the EU get to this point? To answer this question, this paper examines public EU foreign policy toward Venezuela in the first two years of the crisis—2017 and 2018—leading up to this extraordinary episode. To better evaluate the EU's foreign policy toward Venezuela during this time, this paper also reviews relevant aspects of EU foreign policy, including toward Venezuela before the crisis and toward Latin America, and human rights more generally.

This paper's findings are that the EU's foreign policy toward Venezuela in 2017 and 2018 was exceptional. Given the EU's frequent failures on foreign policy and human rights, this instance of EU foreign policy is important because it demonstrates the EU has the ability right now to be a more effective global actor for its fundamental values.