

DOI: 10.24193/OJMNE.2022.39.07

STRATEGIC PROJECTS TO REVITALISE THE EUROPEAN UNION'S POWER IN GLOBAL AFFAIRS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract: *The goal of the article is to analyse key strategic projects to strengthen the European Union's capabilities and role in global affairs. The EU has lost the dynamics of its impact on world affairs due to the configuration of crises that have affected it at both an internal and external level. The sequence of events has undoubtedly weakened the EU's perception as a creator of the international order, which has been a priority since its inception in the 1960s. The power and attractiveness projected by the European Union in a variety of ways have been weakened both as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and more recent dramatic events causing threats to security and peace in Europe, the best example of which is the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, but also due to undermining its internal cohesion. At the same time, the question arises whether there is a chance to regain a good image for the EU by undertaking necessary reforms and revitalising the European project? The other research questions one then needs to answer are: What challenges will the European Union have to respond to in the nearest future? Are there any real premises for waking the European Union from its marasmus and strengthening its position in Europe? How could the European Union and its members overcome these difficulties? In order to find the answer to these questions, the analysis will cover at least three strategic projects that, in the author's opinion, may reverse the wave of estrangement from the European Union: firstly, actions that are to lead to becoming an organised strategic entity as well as the creation of integrated capabilities in the field of foreign and security policy and military crisis management, secondly, a new approach to neighbourhood policy and future EU enlargement, and finally, undermining anti-European narrative in EU and third countries.*

Keywords: The European Union, Revitalisation of the EU, Strategic projects, Management of global affairs, Military capabilities, Soft power, COVID-19, War in Ukraine.

Introduction

For a long time, the European Union was certainly one of the leading players in international relations, a model of power (mostly soft power), which means the power of attractiveness in the world, mainly in its neighbourhood, understood as the ability to persuade other states to act in a specific way. The European Union's power needs to be analysed on the

basis of its activity in the international arena, and especially the determinants of its identity in the world. The specificity of the concept of power, and especially resources defined within the framework, fit into the set of arguments determining the power of attraction of the European Union, which include Western European values considered universal for democratic states, the culture defining the rich identity of the European Union based on accepted diversity, and specific foreign policy (Nye, 2004).

In recent years, preoccupied with the debt crisis, the fragility of its financial institutions, the fight over wages for growth and against unemployment, the rise of populism, and the ongoing wave of refugees reaching European countries, military conflicts around and in Eastern Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic, the European Union (EU) has failed to strengthen, let alone increase, its influence and presence on the international stage (Landaburu, 2014).

Above all, two current crises in Europe, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, have caused new geopolitical dynamics and shown the need for a stronger, united, and more assertive EU policy. It is mainly the latter threat in the geopolitical environment that poses substantial challenges for the EU's external policies and its position in the world order.

However, the EU does not have full responsibility to act as a global player and to adjust its foreign policy in line with the fight against the military threat, nevertheless, it needs to uphold its ambition of being a 'geopolitical' actor, showing unity and assuming a leadership role in promoting its values and strategic interests, as well as offering military support, worldwide (Mc Allister, 2020). The EU needs to remain a reliable actor, creating strategic alliances with like-minded democracies while building ad hoc coalitions with other partners. The rules-based system of international cooperation remains critical for the EU's external actions; therefore, it needs to continue shaping international norms and standards in a way that reflects European values and interests.

Mainly, the invasion prompted an unprecedented mobilization of EU resources to counter Russian aggression, spanning the economic, security, energy, technology, and humanitarian sectors. Acting decisively and with the common resolve of its member states, the EU has taken huge steps forward as a geopolitical actor. But still, the question is: **Has Europe finally learned to speak “the language of power”?** Because of the war, the EU is not only addressing those

vulnerabilities to defend itself but also using them offensively to coerce and deter an aggressor intent on undermining European security. Therefore, now we can observe the birth of a geopolitical Europe and the new dimensions of European power with a focus on the tech, economic, and security terrains.

At the same time, there is the question of a chance to regain a good image for the EU by undertaking necessary reforms and revitalising the European project. And so, the other research questions one needs to answer are: What challenges will the European Union have to respond to in the nearest future? Are there any real premises for waking the European Union from its marasmus and strengthening its position in Europe? How could the European Union and its members overcome these difficulties?

In order to find the answer to these questions, this analysis will cover at least three strategic projects that, in the author's opinion, may reverse the wave of estrangement from the European Union: firstly, actions that are to lead to it becoming an organised strategic entity as well as the creation of integrated capabilities in the field of civil and military crisis management, secondly, a new approach to neighbourhood policy and future EU enlargement, and finally, undermining anti-European narrative in the EU, within European citizens and third countries.

Visions of the future of the European Union can be formulated by analysing the titles of articles and reports of leading journals and think tanks in Europe and the world. Not so long ago, ubiquitous questions such as "Does the EU have a future?" or "Quo Vadis, Europe?" (Buras, 2017), "the Contestation of the EU as an Actor in the ENP" (Niemann, and Hoffmann, 2018), "L'Europe Qui protégé?" (Leonard, 2017) predominated. First of all, the considerations focused on how to work out a strategic orientation, strengthen the legitimacy of the EU, and restore energy to the European project. However, the main goal was to define how Europe should stand up to the danger of gradual marginalisation in a world dominated by growing major players. Answers to these challenges can be found in the new narrative about Europe undertaken by experts. It is noticeable that the questions about the future of the EU prevalent in the recent discourse have slowly begun to give way to announcements of the "Renewal of the Union", "Strategic autonomy in ensuring security" or "New plans for Europe", "Renew Europe" (renew Europe., 2022).

Reinforcing responsibility for the European Union in global leadership was also a key topic of the Conference on the Future of Europe, held during the European citizens' debate on Europe's challenges and priorities¹. The coronavirus pandemic was a powerful reminder that Europe can only tackle global challenges through global cooperation by means of addressing the critical issues such as peace and security, climate change, sustainable development, and global recovery (Conference on the Future of Europe, 2021). Hence, serious consideration has been given to the revitalisation of the integration project, and at the same time, increasing the EU's ability to co-decide on global issues. Nevertheless, for the Union to regain its attractiveness, it is not necessary to reach a common agreement on the ultimate model of the final European integration project. In the current situation, any discussion on the *finalité* of the UE would be counter-productive due to the ongoing conceptual cacophony between and within the Member States. The Union should rather once again try to formulate a functional approach that provides an answer to the following question: What is the future added value of integration, making it an attractive actor again, apart from only maintaining the attainments of the past?

The answer to this question is connected with the need to state that the EU and its Member States do not exist in a vacuum but are under pressure to counter the danger of gradual marginalisation and global inadequacy. This means that the EU's strategic goal or main *leitmotiv* – the creation of “global Europe”, can be formulated as the need to enable Europeans to manage and co-determine global and regional development in a highly dynamic international environment at the level of their shared values, historical experience, and interests oriented towards strengthening the well-being of European citizens. In this situation, it is necessary for both citizens and political elites to identify with the European project in order to win over the unconvinced (Global Trends to 2030, 2015). The translation of the EU's strategic objectives into reality requires that the EU and its members define ambitious strategic priorities that can be implemented through limited projects, following the definition of detailed roadmaps with

¹ The Conference inaugurated on March 2021 is placed under the authority of the three institutions, represented by the President of the European Parliament, the President of the Council, and the President of the European Commission, acting as its **Joint Presidency**. They have committed to listen to Europeans and to follow up, within their sphere of competencies, on the recommendations made. By spring 2022, the Conference is expected to reach conclusions and provide guidance on the future of Europe. Conference on the Future of Europe: Engaging with citizens to build a more resilient Europe, Brussels, 10 March 2021, https://www.2021portugal.eu/media/wm3p11ds/210310_jointdeclarationcofe_en.pdf

specific policy measures and a clearly defined timetable for achieving them. Therefore, to restore energy to the European project in the light of political and economic challenges, the European Union must set strategic priorities – strengthening the global role of Europe and European global governance.

The European Union still tries to solidify its position in the international arena despite more than 20 years of cooperation in the field of external relations. Europe's capability to play an international role commensurate with its objective potential is still limited by different traditions, the foreign policy cultures of its members, and divergent interests defined predominantly at the national level. This dissonance of interests was especially visible during the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and now in Ukraine. The Member States also pursue different policies towards Russia, China, or the issue of EU enlargement to the countries of the Western Balkans or Turkey. It shows that in its foreign policy, the EU is still unable to do away with the capability-expectations gap, defined by Ch. Hill in 1993, or the *me-first* strategy applied by the Member States. In many situations, countries still opt for unilateral policy towards non-EU partners, aspiring to adopt an individual rather than a common European approach (the example of Nord Stream 2) (Emmanoulidis, 2012: 95).

Therefore, it is worthwhile considering how the Union and its members could overcome these difficulties. It seems that at least three strategic projects could reverse the wave of estrangement from the European Union: firstly, actions of the EU that are to lead to becoming an organised strategic entity and the creation of integrated capabilities of the EU in the field of civil and military crisis management, secondly, a new approach to neighbourhood policy and future EU enlargement, and finally, undermining anti-European narrative in EU states, their citizens and third countries.

1. Integrated strategic capabilities in the field of foreign and security matters

There is an impression that despite, or rather because of, the crises affecting the EU, the time has finally come for greater ambitions in the field of foreign and defence policy. It was realised that the EU mission to act as a global power would be impossible without having a real security and defence policy. Several processes contributed to this; firstly, the exit of the United

Kingdom from the EU which, although undoubtedly a great shock and a loss for the integration process, means the disappearance of an obstacle to closer defence cooperation, mainly due to British reluctance to create projects competing with NATO in Europe (Kuźniar, 2018: 64). Secondly, the presidency of Donald Trump during 2017-2021, who underlined a US-centric approach to security, prompted a greater mobilisation in Europe to take more responsibility for its own security. In addition, the threats appearing between 2014-2017, i.e., the increase in the inflow of migrants, the growing threats of terrorism and cyber-attacks, and the lack of diplomatic solutions to the conflict in Syria as well as military issues in Ukraine in 2014 and the spring of 2022, all of which significantly increased citizens' expectations regarding the role of the EU in the world.

Nonetheless, according to the Standard Eurobarometer survey conducted in June-July 2021, attitudes towards the EU remain positive and broadly stable. Optimism about the future of the EU has reached its highest level since 2009 and trust in the EU remains at its highest since 2008. The majority of Europeans are satisfied with the measures taken by the EU, and by national governments, against the coronavirus pandemic. Nearly two-thirds trust the EU to make the right decisions in the future to respond to the pandemic. In the case of citizens' opinions regarding whether the EU member states should have a common foreign policy, 72 % were for, and only 21% against. 46% of respondents supported the further enlargement of the EU to include other countries in future years, 71% were supportive of a common European policy on migration, and over 78% of Europeans supported the creation of a common security and defence policy (Standard Eurobarometer 95, Spring 2021).

The first step towards meeting these expectations was made by adopting the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy in June 2016 (EU Global Strategy 2016), in which it was emphasised that it was necessary to strengthen the EU's defence competencies and to act "according to the principles of pragmatism", which as suggested by Biscop, means a return to Realpolitik (Biscop, 2017). At the same time, the concept of strengthening the capacity for operational planning and conducting missions and operations in the field of CSDP was adopted (Council of the European Union, 2017). In practice, this was expressed by the establishment in the summer of 2017 of the Military Planning and Conduct

Capability (MPCC) unit in the EU military staff as the future headquarters of the operational security and defence policy.

The most important implementation document for the strategy was the Implementation Plan on Security and Defence (Council of the EU, 2016). In its framework, a new level of EU ambition in the field of security and defence was established with regard to three basic tasks: a) responding to external conflicts and crises, b) building the capacities of partners, c) protecting the EU and its citizens.

In response to these EU hard-power ambitions, in November 2017, 25 Member States decided to start, in accordance with art. 42 of the Treaty of Lisbon, closer cooperation in the field of defence in the form of PESCO, that is, permanent structured cooperation within the EU (European Commission, 2017a)². It provides the like-minded Member States with a higher level of defence cooperation and the possibility of proposing projects of more advanced collaboration. Then, in June 2017, the European Commission launched the European Defence Fund, under which, until 2020, EUR 90 million will be invested in research, and EUR 600 million per year in the development of defence industry products and technologies, followed by EUR 1.5 billion) (European Commission, 2017). Thanks to this fund, the EU budget will be used to support defence-related projects for the first time. Finally, the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD) was introduced, the task of which is to monitor expenditure on defence in individual countries and to identify the possibilities of combining resources and ensuring common capabilities (Martill and Sus, 2017; Fiott, 2017).

The development of these projects should certainly help to define the political ambitions of the EU as a global actor, and thus hope to increase the confidence of Europeans in its capability in the field of security. At the moment, however, they are not sufficient to form an attractive narrative that would make the Union a truly independent actor in the security sector. In order to achieve them, bigger ideas are needed, one of which could be the European Security Forces – as an acceptable framework for the future creation of the European army. The purpose of the structures would be to strengthen the EU's capabilities without affecting the sovereignty of the

² Only three countries did not join PESCO: Denmark (due to the opt-out procedure in the field of European security), Malta (due to a too-small army), and the United Kingdom (due to the decision to leave the EU).

Member States, while not competing with NATO in the area of territorial defence. The Union could additionally play a complementary role in the so-called soft dimensions of hard security, such as cyber-attacks, disinformation, and border protection (Pisarska, 2017: 3). Such actions could considerably strengthen the attractiveness of the EU portfolio as an entity ensuring security, in addition to having the traditional economic and soft potential.

Greater visibility of the EU in the area of security is also necessary due to three series of crises – in relations with Russia, the migration crisis, and Brexit, exacerbated by the loss of Europeans' trust in the United States after Donald Trump's former presidency. Moreover, these forces would meet the expectations of European citizens in connection with fears regarding the fight against illegal migration, protection of electoral processes against external interference, or counteracting criminal activities on the Web, while avoiding controversial operations that would put the life of European soldiers at risk. Thanks to the pan-European structure, the EU military forces could meet the needs of all Member States as a common response to European security threats – especially those that cannot be dealt with at the national level (Council of the European Union, 2017a). In addition, they would provide a framework for closer cooperation with non-EU countries, for example, members of NATO – Great Britain after Brexit, or EU neighbours, i.e., Ukraine – not excluding any of the actors playing a key role on the continent (Billon-Galland, Quencez, 2017). Thanks to political unity and defence potential, the capability to react quickly as well as the ability to use all the components of the potential means actions of this type could raise the EU's credibility and overcome the long-standing problems of defining its identity as a strategic entity.

The deterioration of the security situation on Europe's periphery in the last decade, particularly the situation of war in Ukraine in 2022, has raised expectations about the EU's contribution to crisis prevention, stabilisation, and peacebuilding. The demands on EU crisis management, both military and civilian, have constantly risen, but there is still a lack of the necessary means and political will to act collectively.

In the course of the reflection process for the EU's autonomous military capabilities, the European Union published the concept of A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade on 21 March 2021 (Council of the European Union (2022a).

The Council has formally approved the Strategic Compass, at a time when the EU is witnessing the return of war in Europe. The Compass gives the European Union an ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defence policy by 2030. Initially, fourteen EU member states proposed to establish a new joint European military force, treated as a first entry force for rapid reaction in the most severe military crises. Although this concept does not assume building a supranational European army, it can add dynamics to the debate on the EU military level of ambition. According to the document, to be able to act rapidly and robustly whenever a crisis erupts, with partners if possible, and alone when necessary, the EU will establish a strong EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5000 troops for different types of crises; be ready to deploy 200 fully equipped CSDP mission experts within 30 days, including in complex environments; conduct regular live exercises on land and at sea; enhance military mobility; reinforce the EU's civilian and military CSDP (Common Defence and Security Policy) missions and operations by promoting a rapid and more flexible decision-making process, acting more robustly, and ensuring greater financial solidarity to make full use of the European Peace Facility to support partners (Council of the European Union, 2021).

The Russia-Ukraine war dramatically changed the way Europeans think about their security. Russian President Vladimir Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has had a galvanising effect on Europeans' attitude towards defence. In doing so, countries initially focused on readiness, capability gaps, and joint equipment procurement and research (Gressels, Witney, 2022). The European Union unexpectedly decided to provide weapons to Ukraine, and, at a summit in Versailles on 10-11 March 2022, European leaders affirmed the need to "take further decisive steps towards building our European sovereignty". This will involve much more money for defence, directed towards "the capabilities necessary to conduct the full range of missions and operations". In the language of diplomacy, this means Europe's leaders have accepted that they need to be able to confront Russia and no doubt, encouraged them to think the previously unthinkable (Gressels, Witney, 2022).

In an unprecedented and unanimous reaction to the Russian war on Ukraine that began on 24 February 2022, the EU swiftly decided to provide €500 million, and then rapidly a further €500 million, from the European Peace Facility to fund and coordinate EU military assistance

and to deliver military (including lethal) equipment to Ukraine. The Council adopted two **assistance measures under the European Peace Facility (EPF)** that will allow the EU to further **support** the capabilities and resilience of the **Ukrainian Armed Forces** to defend the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the country and protect the civilian population against the ongoing Russian military aggression. The Council had already agreed to €31 million for non-lethal assistance to Ukraine on 2 December 2021. For the first time in its history, the EU is now using a dedicated, although off-budget, tool to finance – but not to deliver, with that responsibility falling on the Member States alone – lethal military equipment for a third country (Council of the European Union, 2022). The assistance measures will increase the original budget announced on 28 February 2020 with an **additional €500 million**, thereby **doubling its initial amount to €1 billion** (Bilquin and Immenkamp, 2022).

2. Enlargement and neighbourhood policy as a strategic project

The policy of enlargement of the European Union makes it attractive to other European countries having aspirations of membership. Recently, however, the policy of expanding the European Union to the Western Balkan states³, which are closest to it, has been pushed into the background due to internal problems, especially Brexit and its potential consequences for the idea of the integration of the continent. However, it cannot be concealed that other processes related to the future of the EU have clearly suffered despite the assurances of representatives of EU institutions that the process of EU enlargement into the Balkans will not slow down. As former EU Commissioner for Enlargement and Neighbourhood Policy Stefen Füle noted, if the EU ignores this region of Europe, Russia and Turkey will be eager to enter it using their historic contacts and influences (Szpala, 2010).

The progress on the path of integration is slow, but since April 2016, the countries of the region have been covered by the stabilisation and association agreements, and most of them already have the status of a candidate. Since 2007, the countries of the region have benefited from financial support under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance. The example of

³These include Serbia, Montenegro, the Republic of Macedonia – successors of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Albania.

Croatia, which, after the difficult way of joining the EU, eventually became a member on 1 July 2013, may encourage other Western Balkan countries to make further efforts.

Since 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has provided a framework for relations between the EU and its 16 geographically closest eastern and southern neighbours, affording enhanced cooperation and access to the EU market under bilateral action plans which should eventually result in association agreements. The ENP is complemented by three regional initiatives: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the Black Sea Synergy, and the Eastern Partnership. The UfM and the Eastern Partnership are multilateral and involve shared institutions (Parliamentary Assembly of the UfM, Euronest, regular summits) (Perchoc, 2016).

Until now, the European Union's policy towards its neighbours has been largely based on a reactive and defensive approach in response to calls for a membership perspective from states outside its borders and aimed at protecting the Union from unexpected turbulence on their part (Emmanouilidis and Świeboda, 2010). In the name of building peace outside of its borders, the Union promotes the idea of stability and security through democratisation, the export of European values, and economic cooperation, with 16 countries now covered by this policy, without offering them membership of the EU.

Several years after its introduction, the effectiveness of the neighbourhood policy is assessed ambivalently. Colour revolutions in the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood (in Georgia in 2008, in Ukraine in 2014) and the Arab Spring in 2011 in the countries of the Mediterranean Basin have undermined the transformation ambitions and capabilities of the European Union based on just the democratising potential. The major geopolitical upheavals brought about by the Arab Spring in the southern Mediterranean since 2011, and by the conflict in Ukraine since 2014, have prompted the EU to overhaul what it is doing in the neighbourhood. That overhaul — and action to put it into practice — must succeed if the EU is to assert itself as an international player (Perchoc, 2016).

The EU prides itself on its ability to use soft power tools such as economic enticements and the magnifying appeal of European values to influence countries in its neighbourhood. The liberal democratic model has generally been perceived as a prudent tool for enhancing security, prosperity, and resilience in the immediate neighbourhood.

Russia's military aggression, persistent economic gaps, and democratic backsliding (apparent in the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighbourhood) all bring into question the prevailing (or 'before' EU strategy) for the two regions. The EU ultimately proved to be somewhat naïve, as recently made readily apparent by Russia's geopolitical and strategic moves and its invasion of Ukraine. The Union, however, can seize this pivotal moment in history to transform itself into a true geopolitical actor. Indeed, while the EU has expressed its political commitment to Western Balkans accession (though these processes may prove thorny and lengthy), this commitment was lacking for Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine (the Trio countries) despite their recently submitted accession applications (Gubalova, 2022). On 28 February 2022, four days into the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, addressed the European Parliament to request the implementation of a fast-track procedure to join the European Union. Later that day, he officially signed Ukraine's application for membership. He was quickly followed by his Georgian and Moldovan counterparts, who submitted their countries' applications to join the bloc on 3 March 2022 (Bélangier, 2022).

In fact, there is no "fast track procedure" for joining the EU. There is no mention of it in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union which establishes how a country can join the EU. According to article 49, "Any European State which respects the values referred to in Article 2 and is committed to promoting them may apply to become a member of the Union"⁴. After the Versailles summit, members of the European Council asked the European Commission to examine the new membership applications, recognizing Ukraine's "European path" (Versailles Declaration, 2022). So far, none of this has translated into a formal commitment from EU member states to accept Ukraine as a candidate for membership. So, what are the prospects for the three countries, and what can we expect in terms of support from the EU?

Currently, EU-Ukraine relations are still regulated by an association agreement which was signed in 2014 and concluded in 2017. The agreement is the main tool for bringing Ukraine and the EU closer together, promoting deeper political ties, stronger economic links, and respect for common values. The deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) is the economic part

⁴ "The European Parliament and national Parliaments shall be notified of this application. The applicant State shall address its application to the Council, which shall act unanimously after consulting the Commission and after receiving the consent of the European Parliament, which shall act by a majority of its component members."

of the agreement. It offers a framework for modernising Ukraine's economy and trade relations. The EU has already replaced Russia as Ukraine's main trade partner (Piskorska, 2017).

In addition, a number of association agreements proposed and signed in 2013-2017 with some EU neighbours, especially in the east – with a deeper free trade zone and visa liberalisation (with three – Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia out of six Eastern Partnership countries, the others being Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus) have not brought about the expected results. The agreements introducing visa-free travel on the EU's eastern border, making citizens the biggest winners of this process, can be regarded as an exception. In truth, they are a sign of raising the level of relations between the neighbouring countries' societies and the EU, which gives hope for reversing the negative trends in its perception. S. Secrieru sees the so-called 3D effect of visa liberalisation for the Eastern Partnership countries, which consists of an increase in the EU's credibility in the region, where its commitments were often not fulfilled for political reasons; a reduction of anti-European discourse in neighbouring countries (driven both internally and externally), which emphasised the lack of the EU's care for the region (in the case of Ukraine and Moldova, the criticism was mainly related to the delay in the visa liberalisation process); an answer to Russia's strategy of exploiting neighbours' vulnerabilities in order to prevent the strengthening of their relations with the Union (by lifting visas, the EU took another step to rebuff Russia's claims to the eastern neighbourhood, constituting a manifestation of its return to hard power policy) (Secrieru, 2017: 3).

The project of cooperation with Mediterranean countries, that is, the Union for the Mediterranean covering 15 neighbours from North Africa, the Middle East, and the Western Balkans⁵, has not brought spectacular results, especially in the legal and institutional dimensions, contrary to those noticed in the Eastern Partnership, and even stagnation of its implementation is evident.

The Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy, carried out and adopted by the European Commission on 18 November 2015, was a response to events in the EU's

⁵Along with the 28 EU member states, 15 Southern Mediterranean countries are members of the UfM: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestine, Syria (suspended), Tunisia, and Turkey. Libya is an observer.

neighbourhood, especially those having consequences for European security. It assumed the building of a more effective partnership between the EU and its neighbours aimed at increasing the stability of both regions in the political, socio-economic, and security dimensions, strengthening the state and social resilience of EU partners to threats and challenges connected, among others, with migration (European Commission, 2015).

This shows that in the future, EU policy towards its neighbourhood should follow a different paradigm, consistent with the strategic goal of global Europe. Thus, the question is whether the Union, moving beyond only regional responsibility, will be able to play a stronger role in a less Eurocentric world where the old continent may no longer be the centre of attraction, but rather of the opposition to the danger of gradual marginalisation. Following this train of thought, the further enlargement process is related to the issue of future specificity and the role that the EU endeavours to play in the world, and the impact it intends to exert on countries outside its borders. In other words, by closing its door to new members, the Union will not manage to be an influential actor in international relations, to act as a regulatory global power. However, future enlargements should be a conscious choice rather than an unwanted necessity. This means that the perspective of global Europe is only possible if the European Union continues the policy of enlargement, despite sometimes unfavourable internal and external circumstances.

Nonetheless, the way to EU membership is long, and even the candidate countries in the Western Balkans do not know if and when they will be admitted to the Union. This depends on the reforms they are required to implement – especially in the areas of the rule of law, anti-corruption, and public administration – in order to meet the EU's conditions for membership (Apelblat, 2022).

3. Undermining anti-European narrative in EU states and third countries

One of the most important reasons for the decline in the attractiveness of the European Union is the way it is perceived and spoken about in the Member States, where the growth of the role of populist parties is discernible. The parliamentary and presidential elections in 2017 became a great test for the future of the EU, during which anxiety arose about the nationalisation

of European policy. A positive phenomenon was the victory of pro-European parties in the elections in Austria, France, the Netherlands, and Germany, although populism and the rise of Eurosceptic attitudes have become a visible and permanent element of the political scene (Prawda, 2018: 10).

These events have triggered a surprisingly strong mobilisation of the other side – the number of citizens supporting the European Union, afraid of losing the achievements of integration, has increased (Nancy, 2017). At the same time, we can observe a return to debates about strengthening and substantiation of the European project – its logic and legitimacy. Attempts at reversing the image of the EU as a foreign and external organisation have, however, led to disappointment with their low effectiveness and caused a mental crisis (Prawda, 2018: 11). 73% of respondents believed in 2017 that the European Union as a whole should react to such events as the instability of the Arab world, the growing importance of China and Russia, Brexit, and the former election of Donald Trump as US president (Nancy, 2017).

Therefore, 2017 resulted in an EU-wide debate on improving the image of the European Union and the implementation of a positive programme for Europe⁶. This coincided with the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome and was an important opportunity to recognise previous achievements and celebrate the values of Europeans. It was also a good time to analyse the areas requiring improvement and to look at the challenges in the context of a new chapter in EU history (Unia Europejska w 2017 r: 108). The White Paper on the Future of Europe, published in March 2017 by the European Commission, opened a discussion on further plans. The aim of civil dialogue between the public and political decision-makers of the Member States, inaugurated by the European Commission in 2017, was to amplify work on undermining the anti-European narrative, which was also appearing in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland and Hungary (Buras, 2018). In addition to the presidents and vice-presidents of the European Commission, MEPs and politicians from the Member States took part (317 dialogues took place in one year in 160 cities in 27 Member States)

⁶ Work on a positive programme for Europe that “protects, empowers and defends” was initiated by J.C. Juncker in the speech about the state of the EU delivered in 2016. Work on a positive programme was continued in 2017, resulting in the publication of the White Paper on the Future of Europe on 1 March 2017.

(Buras, 2018: 122-123)⁷. They focused in particular on the citizens' reactions to the White Paper and issues most relevant to citizens, i.e., social Europe, concerns about the threats to democracy and EU unity on the part of populists.

The unexpected coronavirus pandemic in 2019 was a powerful reminder that Europe can only tackle global challenges through global cooperation. The EU leaders very quickly found out that only “together they can address the critical issues such as peace and security, climate change, sustainable development, and the global recovery”. The EU, as a champion of multilateralism and a rules-based global order, seeks a coordinated approach to external action - from trade and international partnerships to foreign security and defence policy - that secures a stronger and more united voice for Europe in the world.

In the State of the Union address on 15 September 2021, President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, outlined flagship initiatives which the Commission plans to undertake in the coming year (European Commission, 2021a), among others, stepping up cooperation on security and defence, and deepening the EU's partnership with its closest allies, defending European values and freedoms, and protecting the rule of law and the need to provide stability in our neighbourhood and across different regions. Because the EU is connected to the world by many ties and vast land borders, it is obvious that if it doesn't deal in time with the crisis abroad, the crisis comes to its territory.

The EU also declared it would work closely with neighbouring countries, introducing a comprehensive strategy for relations with Africa and reaffirming the European perspective for the countries of the Western Balkans. Responsible global engagement also means that the EU invests in partnerships and alliances with third countries, multilateral and regional organisations, especially those with whom it shares common values but also with all those with whom it shares common global objectives such as a common global response to the COVID pandemic and global climate ambitions. The EU also has an essential role to play in enhancing overall crisis management and working within and outside EU borders to contribute to global stability

⁷ The most important of them were: dialogue with J.C. Juncker and M. Cerar, prime minister of Slovenia, organised in Ljubljana in March 2017, just after the adoption of the White Paper; dialogue with the EC Vice-President F. Timmermans in Stockholm (Sweden) in May on the occasion of the Europe Day; and dialogue with the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/European Commission Vice-President F. Mogherini and J. Muscat, Prime Minister of Malta, organised in Rome on the eve of the 60th Anniversary of the Treaty of Rome.

(European Commission, 2021a). Given the dramatic situation in Belarus, or illegal activities in Russia such as sentencing Alexei Navalny, the President of the European Commission stressed the need for a more predictable mechanism that positions the EU firmly as an active defender of human rights globally (Mc Allister, 2020).

One of the methods for undermining the anti-European narrative in EU states and third countries would have been the Conference on the Future of Europe, which entered its last phase in spring 2022, with work taking place on the final outcome (Conference Plenary)⁸. During the plenary session in Strasbourg on 11-12 March 2022, the conference parties took stock of 88 recommendations made by the European Citizens' Panels on the 'EU in the world/migration' and on 'a stronger economy, social justice and jobs/education, culture, youth and sport/digital transformation' as well as related recommendations from national Citizens' Panels. Russia's military aggression in Ukraine featured prominently in the discussions and the plenary session. Also in attendance were refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine, parliamentarians from the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, representatives of the association Promo Ukraina as well as representatives from the Western Balkans.

Participants recommended that a future 'Joint Armed Forces of the European Union' 'should predominantly be used for self-defence purposes. Aggressive military action of any kind is precluded. Within Europe, this would entail a capacity to provide support in times of crisis such as in the case of natural catastrophes. Outside European borders, this would provide the capacity to be deployed in territories in exceptional circumstances and exclusively under a respective legal mandate from the United Nations Security Council and thus in compliance with international law' (Conference on the Future of Europe, 2021). Implementation of this recommendation would allow the European Union to be perceived as a credible, responsible,

⁸ The Conference Plenary was composed of 108 representatives from the European Parliament, 54 from the Council, 3 from the European Commission, 108 from national Parliaments on an equal footing, and 108 citizens. 80 representatives from the European Citizens' Panels, 27 from national Citizens' Panels or Conference events (one per Member State) as well as the President of the European Youth Forum. 18 representatives from the Committee of the Regions and 18 from the Economic and Social Committee, 6 elected representatives from regional authorities and 6 elected representatives from local authorities, 12 representatives from the social partners and 8 from civil society also took part. The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and key stakeholders might have been invited when the international role of the EU was discussed. The meetings of the Conference Plenary were presided by the three Co-Chairs of the Executive Board and held in the European Parliament premises in Strasbourg. Conference Plenary, <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/plenary> (9.04.2022).

strong, and peaceful partner on the international stage. It would enhance the capacity to respond to critical situations both internally and externally. It is also expected that the EU protect its fundamental values.

Moreover, changes to the decision-making of the EU foreign policy were recommended, according to which all issues decided by way of unanimity are changed to be decided by way of a qualified majority. The only exceptions should be the admission of new members to the EU and changes to the fundamental principles of the EU as stated in Art. 2 of the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. This would consolidate the position of the EU in the world by presenting a united front towards third countries and make its response more agile in general and in particular in crisis situations (Conference on the Future of Europe, 2021: 10).

Member States are recommended, according to the conference plenary debate, to ‘adopt a strong vision and a common strategy in order to harmonise and consolidate the identity and unity of the EU before allowing accession to other countries. It is essential to both strengthen the EU and consolidate the relationship between Member States before considering the integration of other countries. The more states integrate into the EU, the more complicated the decision-making process will become within the EU; hence the importance of reviewing these decision-making processes that are voted through the process of unanimity’ (Conference on the Future of Europe, 2021: 11).

These recommendations, according to the participants in the debate, would help the European Union strengthen the sense of belonging to the EU, enabling citizens to better identify with the EU and transmit its values. Moreover, it may also improve transparency regarding the functioning of the EU, the benefits of being part of it, and the fight against anti-European movements.’ This should act as a deterrent to Member States leaving the EU (Conference on the Future of Europe, 2021: 10-11).

Conclusion

The European Union still has to strengthen its internal and external attractiveness if it aspires to play a leading role in the future management of global affairs. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to take a stand in the face of mounting problems and redefine strategic priorities as well as focus on the implementation of political projects.

By answering the research questions described in the introduction, the article identifies the main challenges weakening the European Union's soft power, and thus defines key priorities, the implementation of which may favourably affect the positive image of the European Union, lost as a result of various crises. Their implementation will lead to: 1) raising in citizens and elites the awareness of the future value added of deeper European cooperation, 2) adding new dynamism to the integration project, facilitating the establishment of specific and proactive political goals that both the EU and its Member States could transform into real action over a given period of time, 3) giving political elites an opportunity to present and respond to challenges within and outside Europe, which even the largest Member States cannot tackle adequately at the national level, 4) providing real reasons for getting involved in European and national debates on the future orientation of the EU – neither the EU nor national communication strategies can achieve this by means of regular information campaigns or artificially organised debates on the future of Europe, 5) providing rational justification for explaining to citizens the need for further reform of the EU institutional architecture and legal provisions – the lack of this type of narrative was the main reason for the failure to ratify the Constitutional Treaty in 2005, 6) allowing governments of the EU states to show pro-active leadership and build coalitions in specific policy areas. By committing to specific objectives and assumptions, the European Union should become a more attractive partner for other global players, so that it can not only prove its will but also the ability to become a leader, and thereby take over greater regional and global responsibility. Accomplishing these tasks requires a compromise between states in terms of strategic goals, but most of all a political desire to carry out great projects.

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