

Anti-Europeans, Populists, and EU External Relations

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Anti-European and populist political forces are getting stronger across Europe. As the authors of a recently published European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) report also underline: ‘With anti-Europeans on their way to winning more than one-third of seats in the next European Parliament, the stakes in the May 2019 elections are unusually high’ (Dennison and Zerka, 2019: 1). The present paper focusses on the impact of these dynamics on the Union’s external relations. It does not aim to discuss the full spectrum of EU external policies, but only concentrates on a few geographic and policy areas where this impact is particularly pronounced.

The EU in the world

The EU's external relations are in the forefront of European integration nowadays. While the initial central objective of achieving lasting peace through regional economic cooperation has proven to be the most important success of the community over the past almost seven decades, few would name it as the Union’s main *raison d’être* today (although it remains crucial). Certainly, the domestication of European power relations and economic and social development remain important drivers. But the key issue today is size. In our globalised world, where Europe has to interact and compete, in a complex network of interdependencies, with a number of other global players – such as the United States, China, Russia, India, or Brazil, to only name a few – size does matter. As *Jean-Claude Juncker*, the current President of the European Commission, and former Prime Minister of Luxembourg for 18 years, allegedly said once to his audience: Luxembourg, a tiny country, has a huge neighbour, Germany. As Prime Minister of his country, he was perfectly aware of the chances of Luxembourg to win a dispute against Germany in the EU arena. But, he added, reality is that the difference in size between Germany and Luxembourg within the Union is somehow similar to the difference in size between Germany, as the biggest member state, and China on a global scale. Or, as EU High Representative/Vice-President *Federica Mogherini* said in her recent speech at Princeton University: ‘As far as the European Union is concerned, I always refuse to say that we have small or big Member States – we have 28 and all of them are small in the world today’ (Mogherini, 2019b). This is what European integration is about in the 21st century.

¹ The views and comments expressed in the present paper are part of the author’s individual research and publication activities, and do not represent, in any way or to any extent, the position of the institution he is an official of.

Nathalie Tocci, Director of the *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (IAI) in Rome, and a leading expert behind the EU's 2016 Global Strategy (European Union, 2016), is on the same platform: 'The European project, from an ideal of a few, and a luxury for many, will become a necessity for all in order to navigate the complexities of the 21st century' (Tocci, 2019: 1). No doubt, the Union, as a community of 28 member states and 500 million people, does create the necessary size in the global arena. Moreover, it is composed of not only 500 million citizens but of wealthy societies in global comparison, making it a huge market, the leading international trader, and the lead donor – together with its member states – in the fields of development assistance and humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, this size only matters and can be used in an efficient way if we speak with a single voice in the Union's external relations. Otherwise, the EU remains a mere symbol of twelve stars on a blue flag. The integration project is revolving today around transforming the community into a genuine geopolitical entity and actor, which is an irreversible one-way dynamics in our globalised world. This is the challenge at stake for the Union and its member states today. And this is what is being opposed by anti-European and populist political forces in many ways.

Another trouble with the gaining ground of populist and anti-European voices is that they typically speak out against something, instead of setting positive objectives and proposing viable solutions. Even when they offer solutions, these most often prove to be oversimplified comments on complex realities, which represent no genuine policy alternatives aimed at producing tangible results. Therefore, in lack of a positive vision, they go for fighting – real or perceived, sometimes artificially fabricated – negative threats, eventually personalised in an enemy, in order to mobilise political support. However, their permanent rhetoric about threats and enemies inevitably contribute, as an intended or a side effect, to tensions and conflicts in the Union and beyond. They feed disintegrative dynamics within the EU and the risks of confrontations in the international arena, without offering an alternative vision for peace, stability, and prosperity across the globe.

Foreign policy begins at home

The most fundamental damage caused by anti-European and populist political forces in the Union's external relations is the weakening of EU structures and policies 'at home'. For the Union, as a political system and a regulatory state (Majone, 1994), legitimacy is an existential matter. It is no surprise that the weakening of the EU's output legitimacy in the eyes of the European public over the past decade – due to the financial and economic crisis, migratory flows, and Brexit in particular – has mobilised the Union to seek ways and means for investing in its input legitimacy with the aim of reducing democracy

deficit. The new Treaty wording declaring that the candidate for President of the Commission should be presented by the European Council by 'taking into account the elections to the European Parliament' (TEU Art. 7), or the European Citizens' Initiative, for instance, both introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon (2007/9), serve this very purpose. Therefore, it is no surprise either that anti-European political forces focus much on the issue of EU legitimacy in their discourse, and that they do so now. Nevertheless, by weakening popular support for European integration internally, they also undermine the Union's power of attraction externally, diminishing its potential for action and influence in the world. Thus, the warning by *Richard N. Haass*, President of the Council on Foreign Relations (New York), with regard to U.S. foreign policy in his book *Foreign Policy Begins at Home* is also valid for the EU: 'Either the United States [*European Union – the author*] will put its house in order and refocus what it does abroad, or it will increasingly find itself at the mercy of what happens beyond its borders and beyond its control' (Haass, 2013: 164).

Multilateralism

A cornerstone of EU foreign policy remains the Union's support for multilateralism. In the same Princeton speech, High Representative/Vice-President Mogherini delivered a detailed reasoning behind this choice, referring to a declining old world order without a new one emerging yet (Mogherini, 2019b). She repeated similar arguments in her speech at the United Nations (UN) Security Council on 12 March 2019, when she said that the EU's support for the UN and for multilateralism was a choice based on values, but also a very pragmatic choice: Decisions made in a multilateral context are by definition more democratic and inclusive, but also more solid and sustainable (Mogherini, 2019a). What she did not mention in these speeches was that her arguments were being challenged not only by some global actors, but also by populist political forces in Europe. These often share the same language of U.S. President *Donald Trump*, dismantling key components of multilateralism in the existing world order, and disapprove multilateralism as a strategic choice in EU foreign policy.

Relations with other global powers

The most threatening foreign policy challenge the Union is facing nowadays is the increasingly assertive attitude and actions of Russia in the EU's eastern neighbourhood and beyond. This challenge is not new. Previous crises, such as the 2008 Russian invasion in Georgia, for instance, sent alarming signals of clashing interests. However, due to domestic developments on both sides as well as new dynamics in the international arena, this challenge has achieved new levels over the past years. The facts that the illegal annexation of Crimea by Russia aims to re-draw state borders through military

action for the first time in Europe since the end of World War II, and that Russian interference in eastern Ukraine has destabilised the Union's largest eastern neighbour cannot be underestimated. All this has been coupled with increasing Russian interference within the EU, including through support for friendly proxy governments and political parties, cyberattacks, disseminating fake news, manipulating public opinion, reinforcing cleavages in European societies, and financing political allies. At the same time, EU sanctions against Russia have produced more symbolic than real practical effects. The emergence of populist and anti-European political forces creates a double danger in this field. It provides an avenue for Russian interference in domestic politics within the Union, on both member state and EU levels, while it also undermines the Union's single voice and effective EU foreign policy action vis-à-vis Russia.

Current developments in EU-U.S. relations are the most strategic challenge in the Union's foreign policy today. This challenge is being fed by a number of factors, including domestic political events in the United States, global trends, and European political dynamics alike. President Trump did not only freeze the negotiations over the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), but has also put into question very cornerstones of the transatlantic partnership, including the U.S. engagement for European security. Moreover, domestic political trends in America continue having an impact on European politics – in Central and Eastern Europe in particular – which can be observed in the discourse over Brexit, migration, or international trade, to only name a few areas. As a result, mutually reinforcing populist voices on both shores of the Atlantic have a double negative effect. They legitimise political rhetoric and actions that weaken liberal democracies, while they also create new divisions in transatlantic relations.

The relationship with China is the challenge the most difficult to read. While the competition between the U.S. and China is becoming a key issue in international politics, the EU has remained rather careful in its positions towards China so far. Economic interdependence between both sides creates converging interests. China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) – also known as 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) – has significant European implications, together with mutual investments. Nevertheless, tensions in a number of policy areas persist, and also new tensions arise. These include, for instance, the increasing rivalry between Europe and China in Africa, with access to raw materials at stake in a number of countries, highlighting again the diverging value attitudes of both sides, most importantly regarding democratic principles and human rights. The future of EU-China relations will certainly be shaped by China's evolving foreign policy identity and by the Union's foreign policy choices alike. In these relations, the EU's size and single voice are of utmost importance. Otherwise, we will increasingly face a China that 'is circumnavigating the major states and extending a hand of friendship

to smaller ones (Greece and Hungary), who complain about Brussels' demands', as described by the renowned French diplomat and geopolitics expert *Michel Foucher* (Foucher, 2018: 121).

Security and defence

The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has witnessed some important achievements over the past two decades and – despite the fact of losing a UN Security Council member and a nuclear power – may prove to be one of the policy areas where Brexit, if it happens, might generate positive dynamics. As a study authored by *Federico Santopino* on the request of European Parliament's Sub-Committee on Security and Defence (SEDE) claims: 'Brexit could end up improving Euro-British cooperation in this area ... This would allow the European to benefit from a more constructive and engaged partner – and, moreover, one that has been stripped of its veto' (Santopino, 2018: 4). Recent significant decisions in this area were the setting up of a European Defence Fund (EDF) and the launching of the first-ever permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) with 34 projects ranging from the establishment of a European Medical Command, via cyber rapid response teams and mutual assistance in cyber security, to a joint EU Intelligence School (European External Action Service, 2018). Nevertheless, no meaningful further progress in the field of CSDP is possible without solid political will and 'fresh money' from national budgets by member states. This creates a paradox in the attitude of anti-European and populist political forces towards CSDP: While they have a strongly security-oriented vision about the Union's external relations, on the one hand, they oppose a closer cooperation in the field of security and defence and are certainly not willing to invest more financial resources in CSDP, on the other.

**Key negative effects of anti-European and populist political forces in Europe
on EU external relations**

Anti-European and populist political forces

- challenge the Union's legitimacy and weaken EU structures and policies internally, diminishing its power of attraction in our immediate neighbourhood and beyond
- undermine the Union's single voice externally, limiting its potential for action and influence in the world
- tend to constantly fight a threat or an enemy in order to mobilise political support, strengthening disintegrative dynamics within the EU and creating tensions in its external relations
- challenge the Union's commitment to multilateralism as a strategic foreign policy choice
- compromise the EU's positions vis-à-vis some other global actors, in particular towards Russia
- support a security-oriented vision of the Union's external relations but oppose a closer cooperation in the field of security and defence
- criticise free trade and promote protectionism, attacking the global trade system externally and the Union's common trade policy – an exclusive EU competence – internally
- follow the 'fortress Europe' logic with regard to migratory flows and the securitisation of EU development assistance to third countries
- hinder the Union's leading international role in fighting climate change

6

Beyond CFSP

International trade

Beyond the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), a key challenge for the EU is the increasing pressure on the global trade system. The election of U.S. President Trump has proven to be a game-changer in this field. He abandoned the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) in January 2017 as one of his first decisions as newly elected leader, and forced his neighbours to re-negotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He regularly speaks out against free trade, and has opened a trade war with China, as well as trade conflicts with the EU. Talks over TTIP have been frozen since autumn 2016. In the meantime, the European appetite for deepening transatlantic trade relations has also diminished, as shown again by the recent negative vote in the European Parliament (EP) on the draft negotiating mandate for new trade talks with the U.S. in March 2019.² President Trump's

² See: *Parliament rejects opening trade talks with Trump*. Euractiv, 14 March 2019. Internet: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/parliament-rejects-opening-trade-talks-with-trump> (Downloaded: 18 March 2019); *European Parliament fails to offer direction on US trade talks*. Politico, 14 March 2019. Internet: <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-fails-to-offer-direction-on-us-trade-talks> (Downloaded: 18 March 2019)

protectionist rhetoric may mirror the *Zeitgeist* in the second decade of the 21st century, but it is also feeding it. It stimulates similar attitudes in Europe, which got vocal in the turbulences over the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada, or the debates concerning trade agreements with Japan or Singapore. Anti-European and populist political forces are very active in this field (even if some of them support, such as Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland, or at least do not oppose, such as Alternative for Germany (AfD), free trade; see more: Dennison and Zerka, 2019: 3), and not by chance. When attacking the global trade system, they also weaken fundamental principles of European integration (as an economic project based on the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital), reduce the potential and influence of EU external policies (largely based on the Union's status as a leading global trader and the first trading partner for most of the countries across the world), and undermine its common trade policy, one of the only five policy areas under exclusive EU competence.

The EU's neighbourhood

Enlargement has been one of the most successful EU policies over the past decades, which has stimulated and supported fundamental reforms contributing to stability and development in a number of southern, central, and eastern European countries. The Union remains interested in its further enlargement as much as this proves to be possible with regard to its internal functioning and a common value platform with new candidates. The fake dichotomy of visions about the EU as a global power, focussing on its relations with other global actors, or as a regional power, focussed on its neighbours, must be overcome. Effective EU policies and action in our eastern and southern neighbourhoods are a basic pre-condition of the Union's global status and influence. However, the emergence of anti-European and populist political forces in Europe and its consequences diminish the EU's power of attraction, both as a value-based community and an effective method of cooperation, in its immediate neighbourhood (and beyond). Preserving this power of attraction in the Western Balkans, but also in Turkey, is a basic EU interest in an area increasingly affected by intensified presence of other global and regional actors. Political turbulences within the EU also translate into evaporating enlargement dynamics. But protracted accession processes without tangible results may reverse positive incentives for domestic reforms into counter-productive disillusionment, undermining the credibility of the Union's enlargement policy and generating reluctant or even hostile attitudes towards the EU in the political class and the general public, resulting in political crisis and a rapid erosion of shared values in the given partner country.

The Union has to put an end also to the competition between the eastern and southern dimensions of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which often resulted in swinging attention towards both regions in the past. Anti-European and populist political forces have a negative impact on both tracks. In the east, key partners notice with increasing concern the deepening internal divisions within the community, and also the consequent lack of a unified rhetoric and actions vis-à-vis Russia. This reduces their trust in the Union as a shield against the negative influence of their huge neighbour. They also notice the diverging attitudes regarding respect for democratic values, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms among EU member states, both at home and towards their region. A prime example in this regard is Hungary's *Viktor Orbán*, who has built close relations with both *Vladimir Putin's* Russia and *Ilham Aliyev's* Azerbaijan over the past decade. A particularly troubling episode of his friendly gestures was the extradition of *Ramil Safarov* – an Azeri army lieutenant convicted for brutally murdering his fellow Armenian army lieutenant *Gurgen Margaryan* during a NATO-sponsored training in Budapest – to his home country in 2012, where Safarov was greeted as a national hero, pardoned, and promoted.

In the Union's southern neighbourhood, both sides continue having and expressing diverging expectations: While the EU aims to achieve security through stability and prosperity in the region, its southern partners seek access to Europe in terms of movement of people and goods with the aim of easing internal pressures within their societies. The 'fortress Europe' attitude of populist political forces in Europe goes against this ambition. This is often coupled with vocal Islamophobia, directed both at the Muslim population living in Europe and at Muslim countries in North Africa and the Middle East, and beyond – combined with ethnic racism against Arabs in Europe and the Arab world at large. Moreover, their discourse about the agonising West and 'illiberal democracy' being the recipe for success in the 21st century further undermines the credibility of the Union in the eyes of those combating authoritarianism in our southern neighbourhood. This goes against not only basic EU values and the lessons learned from the (failed) Arab Spring, but also Europe's fundamental interests in the region, where spreading democratic principles and the rule of the law is the only viable way for achieving lasting stability and development.

Global challenges

Migration has become a hot topic high on the European political agenda over the past years. In the context of the Union's external relations, this often leads to competition between short-term security-oriented and long-term development-oriented reactions and policies. Although these two aspects are inevitably and closely interrelated, security-oriented attitudes tend to prevail. This has led to various

attempts to re-allocate development cooperation budget resources to security-related operations, and to make development assistance conditional on effective cooperation in migration management. All this against the background of the vast majority of EU member states still failing to fulfil their almost twenty-year-old pledge to spend 0.7 per cent of their GNI as official development assistance (ODA) in the framework of development policy aimed at fighting poverty across the world, which promise has simply been renewed – but at least it has been renewed – in the revised European Consensus for Development in 2017 (European Union, 2017: paragraph 103). Populist political forces further intensify the security-oriented logic in EU external relations, with a negative impact on the Union's strategic interests, scope of action, and influence in the global arena.

This happens in a period when this influence is not only much needed, but also has space to grow through filling in vacuums in key global issues. Probably the most important of them is climate change. With a sceptical U.S. President, an emerging middle-class in China, current economic and social dynamics in India, an African population projected to double in the coming three decades, and a number of developing countries entering a new stage in their economic and social development across the world, it would be difficult to imagine another global actor better placed to lead the fight against climate change than the EU. Nevertheless, we hear several populist and anti-European parties – in Denmark, Estonia, or France, for instance – opposing and speaking out against this role. Therefore, it is no surprise that ECFR also included 'Hampering global efforts to curb climate change' on its list 'The anti-Europeans' manifesto: top threats to Europe's open society and its role as a global actor' (Dennison and Zerka, 2019: 9).

The institutional system

Last but not least, anti-European and populist political forces also hinder institutional evolution in the area of EU external policies. This is an obstacle to the further development of CFSP in particular, which – in contrast to the Union's trade and development policies – remains a fundamentally intergovernmental business with member states strongly protecting their sovereignty and prerogatives. This is why a single, or only a few member states can veto the adoption of EU positions on major international events – as Italy vetoed the draft EU statement on Venezuela in the midst of domestic political turbulences in February 2019, or as the Czech Republic and Hungary vetoed the EU statement on the U.S. decision to move the American embassy to Jerusalem in Israel back in December 2017. Should anti-European political forces win around one-third of the seats in the European Parliament in May 2019, this would give them considerable influence over the assembly's political agenda. Although the role of Parliament remains secondary in the context of CFSP, its own-initiative

reports and other resolutions are taken into serious consideration by Council, the EEAS, and the Commission, and shape therefore the Union's international action. Moreover, EP has two certainly important powers in the field of external policies, and it is using both of them in an increasingly efficient way. Notably its budgetary power, and its power of consent over almost all of the EU's international agreements following the Treaty of Lisbon. This has proven to be a game-changer in trade policy, where Parliament insisted on conditionality (human rights, child labour, labour rights, trade union rights, etc.) regarding trade agreements with third countries on several occasions. This has also changed the negotiating attitude of the Commission, and forces the Council to pay more attention to democracy, rule of law, and human rights connections of trade deals concluded in the name of the Union. Nevertheless, these positive trends are often criticized and opposed by anti-European and populist political forces in the name of policy efficiency and due to other political motives.

Prospects

The EU's external relations have sailed yet again in troubled waters over the past years. Nevertheless, turbulences in the global arena and in the Union's direct neighbourhood have created not only challenges but also new opportunities. The aggression of Russia against Ukraine reminded European politicians of our vulnerabilities in the east. The election of U.S. President *Donald Trump* and his policies make us re-think transatlantic relations. Attacks on global multilateralism and the existing international trade system highlight the value of investment in these areas in the past decades, and have mobilised Europe in their defence. The financial and economic crisis sent the same message to European decision-makers as *Richard N. Haass* did to American ones a couple of years ago: Foreign policy begins at home. Migratory flows stimulated a revision of EU development policy and of EU-Africa relations. Finally, even Brexit has initiated new dynamics in some policy areas, such as CSDP, for instance. In the same period, EU foreign policy also produced some important achievements, including the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement with Iran on a global scale, or the recent name deal between Greece and North Macedonia in our immediate neighbourhood, to only name these two. However, the biggest threat and obstacles to successful EU external policies in the coming period seem to come from internal sources, notably from anti-European and populist political forces within the Union itself.

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