Anti-Europeans, Populists, and EU External Relations

Zoltán Simon, Ph.D.[1]

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 underlined: '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 have come to the forefront of European integration. While the initial central objective of achieving lasting peace through regional economic cooperation across (the Western part of) the continent 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 as well as economic and social development remain important drivers. But another key matter 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*, former Prime Minister of Luxembourg for 18 years, once allegedly said 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, the difference in size between Germany and Luxembourg within the Union is somehow comparable to the difference in size between Germany, as the biggest member state, and China on a global scale.

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[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.

High Representative/Vice-President *Federica Mogherini* made a similar comment 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). *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 more than 500 million people, does create the necessary size and opportunity for being an influential actor in the global arena. Moreover, it is composed of not only half-a-billion 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, humanitarian aid, or climate action.

Nevertheless, this size only matters and can be used efficiently if the EU speaks with a single voice in its external relations. Otherwise, the Union remains a mere symbol of twelve stars on a blue flag. Therefore, a key challenge the integration project is facing nowadays is to transform the community into a genuine geopolitical entity and actor, an irreversible one-way dynamics in our globalised world. This is at stake for the EU and its member states today. And this is what is being opposed by anti-European and populist political forces in many ways.

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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 offering viable solutions to meaningful problems. And even when they propose solutions, these most often prove to be oversimplified comments on complex realities, which represent no genuine policy alternatives aimed at producing tangible results. Therefore, lacking a positive vision, they tend to fight – real or perceived, sometimes artificially fabricated – negative threats, eventually personalised in an enemy, in order to mobilise political support. But 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 in Europe and across the globe.

Foreign policy begins at home

The most fundamental damage created by anti-European and populist political forces in the Union's external relations is the weakening of EU values, 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 its real or perceived 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 of their attention on the issue of EU legitimacy, and that they do so now. Nevertheless, through 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).

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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 some detailed reasoning behind this choice, referring to a declining old world order without a new one emerging yet (Mogherini, 2019b). She made similar remarks in her speech at the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 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 within 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 that the Union is facing today is the increasingly assertive attitude and actions of Russia in the EU's eastern neighbourhood and beyond, including within the EU itself. This challenge is not new. Previous crises, such as the 2008 Russian invasion in Georgia, for instance, have warned 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 force 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, the dissemination of fake news, the manipulation of public opinion, reinforcing cleavages in European societies, and illegal funding to political allies. At the same time, EU sanctions against Russia have rather produced symbolic than real effects. The emergence of populist and anti-European political forces creates a double danger in this field. It opens an avenue for Russian interference in domestic politics within the Union, on both EU and member state levels, while it also undermines the Union's single voice externally and the prospects of effective action vis-à-vis Russia.

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Ongoing 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 some very cornerstones of the transatlantic partnership, including the U.S. engagement for Europe's security. Moreover, domestic political trends in America continue having an impact on European politics – in Central and Eastern Europe in particular – including with regard to Brexit, migration, or international trade, to only name these 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 democracy, while they also create new cleavages in transatlantic relations.

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Relations with China are the challenge the most difficult to read. While disputes and tensions between the U.S. and China are 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, against the backdrop of a considerable amount of already existing mutual investments. Nevertheless, tensions in a number of policy areas persist, and also new tensions arise. These include, for instance, the increasing competition between Europe and China in Africa, with access to raw materials and investment opportunities at stake in several countries, highlighting again the diverging value attitudes of both sides, most importantly with regard to democratic principles and human rights. The future of EU-China relations will certainly be shaped by both China's evolving foreign policy identity and the Union's foreign policy choices alike. In these relations, the EU's size and single voice are again 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', warns the renowned French diplomat and geopolitics expert *Michel Foucher* (Foucher, 2018: 121).

Security and defence

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The Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) has witnessed some important achievements over the past two decades and – despite the loss of a UN Security Council member and a nuclear power – may prove to be one of those policy areas where Brexit, if it happens, might even 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-Europeans and populists towards CSDP: While they have a strongly security-oriented vision of the Union's external relations, they oppose a closer cooperation in the field of security and defence, and they are certainly not willing to contribute more from national budgets to EU action in this area.

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**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 values, 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
• promote 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
• promote 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

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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 the TTIP have been frozen since autumn 2016. In the meantime, European appetite for deepening transatlantic trade relations has also diminished, as demonstrated 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]

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[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)

President Trump's protectionist rhetoric may mirror the *Zeitgest* in the second decade of the 21st century, but it is also feeding it. It stimulates similar voices in Europe, which got vocal in the turbulences over the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) with Canada, or the debates related to 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 compatible with its internal functioning and common value platform. The fake dichotomy of visions of the EU as a global power, focussing on its relations with other global actors, or as a regional power, investing in 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 power status and influence.

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However, the emergence of anti-European and populist political forces in Europe and its consequences diminish the Union's power of attraction, both as a value-based community and an effective method of regional cooperation, in these regions (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 the intensified presence of other global and regional players. Political turbulences within the EU also contribute to evaporating enlargement dynamics. 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 reluctance, or even hostile attitudes, towards the EU in the political class and public opinion of candidate and potential candidate countries, resulting in political crisis and a rapid erosion of shared values.

The Union also has to put an end to the competition between the eastern and southern dimensions of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which has often resulted in swinging attention towards both regions. 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 EU, and also the consequent lack of consistent rhetoric and action 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 divergent attitudes within the EU regarding democratic values, the rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, both at home and in 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 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 different 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 in order to ease internal pressure within their societies. The 'fortress Europe' mentality 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 southern neighbour countries. 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 strengthening the rule of the law is the only viable way for achieving long-term stability and development.

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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 views and policies. Although these two dimensions are inevitably interrelated, security-oriented attitudes seem to increasingly prevail. This has also led to proposals 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 backdrop 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 eradicating (reducing) 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 strengthen 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.

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This happens in a period when this influence has space to grow through filling in vacuums in key global issues. The most important of them probably is climate change. With a sceptical U.S. President, an emerging middle-class in China, economic and social dynamics in India, the 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 to be better placed for leading international action 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 has 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 innovation in the area of EU external policies. This is an obstacle to the further evolution of CFSP in particular, which – in contrast to the Union's trade and development policies – remains a fundamentally intergovernmental business with the member states protecting their sovereignty and prerogatives. Even a single member state can veto the adoption of EU position on a major international event, as Italy vetoed the draft EU statement on Venezuela in February 2019, for instance. Therefore, the proposal to introduce qualified majority voting also in CFSP – which was specifically mentioned by *Ursula von der Leyen* in her speech at the European Parliament in July 2019: 'I believe Europe should have a stronger and more united voice in the world – and it needs to act fast. This is why we must have the courage to take foreign policy decisions by qualified majority. And to stand united behind them' (European Commission, 2019) – will be another major battlefield between pro- and anti-European forces.

In the European Parliament, anti-European and populist forces have increasing influence over the assembly's political agenda. Although the role of Parliament remains limited in the area of CFSP, its own-initiative reports and other resolutions are taken into serious consideration by the Council, EEAS, and 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 to almost all of the EU's international agreements since the Treaty of Lisbon. This proves to be a game-changer in trade policy, where Parliament has insisted on conditionality (human rights, child labour, labour rights, trade union rights, etc.) regarding trade agreements with third countries. This has also changed the negotiating attitude of the Commission, and forces the Council to pay more attention to the democracy, rule of law, and human rights dimensions 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 ambitions.

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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 by Russia against (Georgia and) Ukraine has 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 over the past decades, and have mobilised the EU in their defence. The financial and economic crisis sent the same message to European decision-makers as *Richard N. Haass* did to their American counterparts a couple of years ago: Foreign policy begins at home. Migratory flows have stimulated a revision of EU development policy and EU-Africa relations. Finally, even Brexit has contributed to new dynamics in certain areas, such as CSDP, for instance. In the same period, EU foreign policy 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 actors within the Union itself.

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