European Structural Power on the Wane? EU Foreign Policy between External and Internal Challenges

David Cadier[1]
Centre de Recherches Internationales
CERI - Sciences Po, Paris

The European Union's (EU) foreign policy software needs updating: it appears to be increasingly out of sync with the operating system of international politics. At the turn of the millennium, many had hoped that the EU's internal model and institutional nature – as a transnational multilateral governance platform based on international law and soft power – would make it well prepared for, and even a potential leader in, the world to come (Howorth, 2010). Yet, post-modern Europe has not seen the advent of the kind of post-Westphalian international system it had hoped for. Instead, the EU finds itself rather ill-equipped in the new era of great-power competition. Its distinctive approach to foreign policy, which has mainly consisted in the export of democratic governance and economic standards, is increasingly under strain at a time where it is both tested externally and contested internally.

This adaptation challenge is indeed made pressing by the evolving international context, as the EU and its Member States need not only to develop the means to pursue their interests globally, but also to push back against the growing tendency of world powers to encroach on Europe's sovereignty (Leonard and Shapiro, 2019). Russia has taken the conflict over the geopolitical and geo-economic orientation of countries of the post-Soviet space from the Donbas to EU Member States' domestic politics and informational spheres. China has invested in strategic chunks of European economies and has acquired, as such, significant political leverage. The United States is exploiting its position as Europe's vital security provider to advance its economic and energy interests on the continent and beyond. More profoundly, under the Trump Administration, the US has increasingly brought into question some of the core principles of the international liberal order, of which it had been the main guarantor and which the EU still regards as the legitimate architecture of world politics.

The erosion of the ruled-based order and the pressure applied by external powers on Europe's sovereignty constrains its ability to tackle the many security crises and risks present in its neighbourhood, from Ukraine to Syria and from Iran to Bosnia.

The EU's capacity to face off these mounting external challenges, resist geopolitical pressures and foster peace and security in its neighbourhood will, indeed, largely be mediated by its internal cohesion and resilience. Several recent internal developments are undermining both these aspects. In addition to potentially depriving the bloc of some of the UK's strategic assets, Brexit is reverting the basis of what had been the vector of the EU's transformative power, namely enlargement or enlargement-lite. The refugee crisis showcased and deepened Europe's internal divisions and some of the policy responses (or lack thereof) cast a shadow on its soft power. The rise of populist political forces, who have made it to power in several EU Member States, has led to an over-prioritization of domestic politics over European compromise-building, as well as, in some instants, an erosion of the very rule of law norms and standards that the EU purports to promote abroad. All of

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these internal developments tend to put pressure on what had been the EU's core, structural power strategy in external relations.

EU Foreign Policy and Its Limits in the New World (Dis)order

The EU disposes of a wide array of foreign policy tools, from military missions and economic sanctions to trade instruments, development aid and visa-free regimes. These tools can be put to use to handle relations with other international actors or to manage crises, but EU foreign policy is more profoundly about shaping (or attempting to shape) the political, economic, social and legal structures in which states and societies evolve and interact – to the extent that some authors have talked of "structural foreign policy" or of the EU as a "structural power" (Keukeleire and Delreux, 2014). To protect and advance the interests, security and prosperity of its Member States and their citizens, and to influence actors and outcomes in its region and beyond, the EU seeks to promote certain norms, standards and organizing principles. In other words, EU foreign policy is largely about exporting the EU's internal model to its external environment and, especially, its immediate neighbourhood. It is about shaping the structures of regional and international politics in the sense of its own constituting principles of multilateral legal order, democratic governance and free market economy.

In that sense, speaking of the EU as a "normative power" does not refer to it taking principled positions or "doing good," but rather to its tendency to rely on norms as a currency of foreign policy. Promoting and exporting legal, political, economic and administrative norms to its neighbourhood through institution-building or institutional support is not just the vector of EU structural power, it is also a default solution for the EU, as adherence to these norms and principles is what unites and reunites Member States, while interests tend to be more specific and national. Put bluntly, rule of law principles are what EU Member States agree on and can rally around, much more than threat perceptions or economic interests. The EU remains, above all, a multi-level governance structure, meant to foster compromise and generate consensus among its Member States, and its foreign policy is not discharged of this task. As such, generating consensus among Member States represents both a condition for, and a goal of, EU foreign policy making. This has sometimes led the process of collective action to be regarded as being more important than actual outcome and impact.

To promote or support norms, organizing principles and institutions, the EU's most comprehensive instrument has been the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). The two regions generally designated as the eastern and southern neighbourhood have, indeed, been the most important for EU structural power objectives and in terms of EU foreign policy priorities.[2] The ENP aims to foster political, economic and administrative reforms in the countries bordering the EU by offering a series of financial, trade and mobility incentives. It largely relies on the evaluation tools, conditionality logic and even personnel of the enlargement policy, yet without offering the main and crucial incentive of EU membership. In that sense, the ENP not only incarnates the spearhead of EU foreign policy, it also incarnates some of its structural flaws, namely institutional path-dependency and an inability to go beyond the enlargement template.

The basis and patterns of EU foreign policy described above increasingly find themselves challenged in the emerging international context. This was maybe most evident in Ukraine, where Russia heavily pushed back against EU structural power by using economic coercion to deter Kiev from signing a free trade agreement with Brussels (Cadier, 2014). Vladimir Putin is, rather paradoxically, one of the few world leaders to have explicitly referred to the EU's "normative power," but to describe it as it as a threat. In the face of the uncertainties surrounding Ukraine's geopolitical orientation brought upon by the fall of the Yanukovych regime, Russia eventually annexed Crimea and fostered armed rebellion in Eastern Ukraine. Thus, the EU went from negotiating a free trade agreement with Ukraine to "sleepwalking" into a geopolitical conflict with Russia, failing to read regional dynamics or anticipate Russia's reaction by relying

[2] The 16 countries included in the ENP are: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Moldova, Morocco, Syria, Palestine, Tunisia and Ukraine.

on an overly technical, institutional and inward-looking approach (Haukkala, 2016).

The EU's structural foreign policy has hit walls in other regions as well. In the southern neighbourhood, state and non-state actors have sought to circumvent EU normative power or have challenged the political and economic systems in place, including those built around the organizing principles supported by the EU. More profoundly, the EU's structural foreign policy reaches its limit when confronted with "areas of limited statehood," that is, to zones where there is no central authority able to control the monopoly of violence, deliver public goods and implement or enforce the governance norms that the EU seeks to export (Börzel and Risse, 2018). At the global level, by pulling out of non-proliferation and the global commons framework, such as the Iran deal or the Paris climate deal, and by contesting the legitimacy of international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization or UNESCO, the US feeds into this trend of contesting established rule-based orders.

In the southern neighbourhood, state and non-state actors have sought to circumvent EU normative power

The growing proclivity of Russia, China and the US to put their geopolitical weight behind contesting the norms, principles and institutions that the EU had sought to promote in its neighbourhood and, to a lesser extent, across the globe places important constraints on its structural foreign policy. This approach is, in addition, undermined by several internal developments.

Brexit and the Spectre of Dis-enlargement

It seems hard to gauge the potential effects of Brexit on EU foreign policy as the process is still ongoing and the concrete outcome still unknown. Referring to other policy areas and to the UK's lukewarm engagement and numerous opt-outs, some have suggested that the consequences of seeing the UK leave the Union might, in fact, be limited. This may be most eloquently incarnated by the *bon mot* of former MEP Jean-Louis Bourlanges, who quipped that, before Brexit, the UK had one foot in and one foot out of the Union while, after Brexit, it will be the other way around. Things are, however, set to look somehow different for foreign policy.

The UK has undeniably been one of the Union's foreign policy heavyweights: its departure will deprive the bloc of its diplomatic, economic and military resources and this is bound to undermine the EU's international clout (Hill, 2019). London has one of the broadest diplomatic networks in the world, holds a permanent seat at the UN Security Council and retains privileged strategic ties in the Commonwealth and with the US. The UK has been the second biggest economy in the EU, the fourth largest contributor to the EU's budget and a key purveyor of development aid around the globe. Lastly, the UK is, along with France, one of only two powers in the EU capable of rapidly and consequentially projecting military force and holding a nuclear deterrent.

Interestingly though, several analysts argue that the UK's formal departure might not overly affect the outputs of EU security and defence policy and, maybe, not even London's contribution to this policy. They notably anticipate that, since "Global Britain" is more a rhetorical device than a feasible strategy and as London will seek to overcome its damaged credibility and make up for lost institutional ties, the UK will retain major incentives to continue collaborating with – and maintaining its commitments to – other European countries in the fields of defence and security (Martill and Sus, 2018). If anything, one of the concrete impacts of Brexit has been, not the demise, but the acceleration of EU defence integration (albeit modest), notably through initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) or the European Defence Fund. In addition, with Brexit, London has set a precedent but not an example. Contrary to what many had feared, there seems to be no "domino effect." Seeing the UK leaving the EU has not led other governments or political forces to follow or advocate the same path for their country. On the contrary, in the recent campaign for the European parliamentary elections many populist parties actually amended their rhetoric and political strategy from leaving to transforming the EU from within.

Brexit risks, however, constraining the EU's structural foreign policy and diminishing its structural power.

Notably with reference to the waves of 2004 and 2007, enlargement is generally dubbed the EU's "greatest foreign policy success." Yet, except maybe for the Western Balkans and only in the medium to long-term, the EU's enlargement policy has stalled, or is perhaps even dead. Some of the negative externalities of the recent waves of enlargement have already cast a shadow on the policy: the accession of Cyprus led to a paralysis of EU-NATO cooperation, the European Commission had to suspend EU funding to Bulgaria as reforms were incomplete, and there is, more generally, a realization, in the face of recent rule of law violations by Hungary or Poland, that EU institutions are rather helpless when a Member State that has already joined decides to do away with the EU's core principles. Brexit seems bound to be yet another nail in the coffin of the EU's enlargement policy: not only was the UK the Member State most supportive of the process, but Brexit signals more profoundly a reversal of what had been the EU's main foreign policy dynamic. This dynamic had run its course by many accounts, but there is nevertheless a strong symbol in seeing the EU, for the first time, not enlarge but shrink.

The Refugee Crisis and Europe's Normative Fracture

In 2015, the number of migrants – whether refugees fleeing wars, economic migrants or asylum seekers – reached unprecedented proportions, nearing 1.3 million. While such influx, displacements and relocation of populations certainly comes with complex human, logistical and societal issues, it is also the lack or uncoordinated nature of policy responses that contributed to turning the refugee crisis into an EU crisis. As emphasized by Anne-Marie Le Gloannec, this crisis has "demonstrated the paralysis of EU institutions and national governments, undermined solidarity between Member States and gnawed at the democratic fabric of Europe" (Le Gloannec, 2018). The Bulgarian political analyst Ivan Krastev went as far as labelling it "Europe's 9/11."

Some of the root causes of the EU's failures in handling the refugee influx originate in foreign policy shortcomings. The EU and its Member States had largely sought to delegate the management of the bloc's external borders to neighbouring countries. As such, their migration policies often found themselves at the mercy of the whims and deficits of unstable governments or authoritarian regimes. More profoundly, the political crisis around migration revealed and deepened fractures in and between European states and societies. It crystallized certain divisions into entrenched polarizations, between South and North (along lines already drawn by the euro crisis), and more acutely between East and West.

While it has failed to maintain cohesion and have a decisive imprint at the EU level on foreign policy dossiers of importance to central Europe (such as Russia or energy security), the Visegrad Group found its unity and negatively emerged as a political force in Europe around the rejection of refugee relocation schemes, which they saw as being forced upon them by western Europe (Kazharski, 2018). The migrant crisis has, indeed, "laid bare a widespread perception across central and eastern Europe that western Europe (and hence the EU) is trying to force on them a multicultural model of society which in their eyes has 'entirely failed'" (Rupnik, 2016). A concrete political consequence of the crisis has been that populations in the region now place more faith in their national governments than in the EU, while the opposite was true before 2015 (Krastev, 2017).

The crisis did not only bring a fragmentation of – and fractures in – European polities and societies, but also led to a growing contestation of the model underpinning the EU's normative power and, thereby, to its weakening. Essentially, national governments found themselves torn between, on the one hand, international norms and obligations and, on the other hand, national conditions, historical experiences, economic resources and societal resilience (Le Gloannec, 2018)- and they clearly prioritized the latter. The albeit temporary reinstatement of borders among Schengen countries cast a shadow on the free movement of persons, one of the EU's core founding principles. The refugee crisis and its mishandling also created a political climate detrimental to any form of population mobility coming from outside the EU, and yet such mobility is one of the main vectors of the EU's structural power in its neighbourhood, as testified by the leverage gained through the granting of visa-free regimes. More profoundly, many saw the migrant crisis and its consequences as a manifestation that the West's (and Europe's) "ambition to export its values and institutions has resulted in a

profound identity crisis in Western societies" (Krastev, 2017). Populist parties have been feeding off this identity crisis.

The Rise of Populism and Contradictions of Illiberal Foreign Policy

In recent years, the rise of populism has moved from being, simply, a trend in domestic and electoral politics, to becoming, in addition, a foreign policy matter. Populist parties have indeed risen to power in several EU Member States – such as Hungary, Austria, Poland or Italy – and thus hold the reins of their countries' European and foreign policies. This is to such an extent that, in the face of this trend, analysts are endeavouring to picture how an "illiberal Europe" might (or might not) work (Grabbe and Lehne, 2018). To anticipate the concrete implications that the advent of populist governments might have on EU foreign policy, there is no need to engage in scenario-building or prospective analysis, however. It is sufficient to consider how those already in office have handled national foreign policy making.

Contrary to how sensationalist (or partisan) claims might have it, populist governments do not adopt reckless, devil-may-care attitudes in international affairs, nor necessarily bring about revolutionary changes in foreign policy. In spite of their radical political rhetoric at home, Hungary's Viktor Orban and Italy's Matteo Salvini have not fundamentally altered their countries' positions in NATO or towards Russia. In addition, populists do not adopt distinctive or common ideas when it comes to foreign policy.[3] Populist parties from the far left and the far right tend, for instance, to disagree on migration or military operations abroad, but they respectively share some views on these dossiers with various mainstream parties. Similarly, several populist parties display pro-Russian preferences, although this is not the case of Poland's Law and Justice party, which, on the contrary, is one of the most confrontational towards Moscow. The fact that populist parties do not appear overly committed to certain ideas in foreign affairs is exemplified by their readiness to strike rather improbable diplomatic alliances – such as between Orban and Salvini on migration – or to adopt temporary stances which contradict their long-standing positions – such as when the former Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski threatened to veto Ukraine's (future and hypothetical) accession to the EU.

More than their ideas, what is distinctive of populists in foreign policy is their style (Cadier, 2019). Whether understood as an ideology, a discourse or a strategy, populism can be understood as a political logic that sees society as being fundamentally structured by an opposition between a "pure people" and a "corrupt elite." This translates into anti-pluralist and anti-elitist postures, as well as into a tendency to perceive policy making as a common-sense application of common will (Müeller, 2016). This political practice spills over into foreign policy in several ways.

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First, populists' anti-pluralism often leads them to regard foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics by other means, that is as a way either to attack their current political opposition or to distinguish themselves from the previous government. Not only did Poland's Law and Justice make the country the only Member State that opposed Donald Tusk's re-election as President of the European Council, its Foreign Minister went as far as denouncing the election as being "rigged."[4] Second, populists' distinctive communication style, their anti-elitism and claim to conduct foreign policy in the name of "the people," often leads them to disregard diplomatic codes and norms and to overlook diplomatic expertise. Matteo Salvini's diplomacy is, in this regard, a case in point. Third, to elude the contradiction of becoming themselves the "elites" by acceding to power, populists claim that old or foreign elites are (still) active behind the scene, which leads them to indulge in conspiracy theories. For instance, in the summer of 2017, the former Polish Defence Minister Antoni Macierewicz described the student protests against his govern-

[3] See: Verbeek and Zaslove, 2015; Dennison and Pardijs, 2016.

[4] "Poland fumes at 'cheating' EU for keeping Donald Tusk in top post," *The Guardian*, 13 March 2017.

ment's reform of the justice system as a "hybrid war" being waged against his country.

This peculiar populist style in foreign policy making could have implications both for the process and the substance of EU foreign policy (Cadier, 2019). On the one hand, by over-prioritizing domestic politics and by showing a proclivity for "undiplomatic" diplomacy and conspiracy theories, governing populist parties risk further complicating consensus-seeking and compromise-building at the EU level. Yet, EU Member States' ability to act collectively – and the mere possibility of an EU foreign policy – depends precisely on this process. On the other hand, the fact that some EU Member States bring into question some of the rule of law standards and norms of democratic governance at home risks weakening the EU's legitimacy in exporting them. As such, maybe even more than Brexit or the refugee crisis, the rise of populism is likely to cast a shadow on the EU's structural power.

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