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Vasko Naumovski  
Milena Apostolovska-Stepanoska  
Leposava Ognjanovska

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# DEFINING THE ROLE OF THE EU AS A GLOBAL ACTOR: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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POLITICAL THOUGHT

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## Introduction

The role and position of the European Union as a global actor on the international stage was based on the thesis that the creation of the Union is aimed at ending geopolitics, the usual notion of which builds on the understanding of dynamic power in international relations. The EU promotes a new security concept based on interdependence and transferred sovereignty to jointly established institutions. Maintaining peace on European soil was intended to take place through the economic cooperation of the member states, which would further lead to their mutual solidarity, as envisaged in the Schuman Declaration of 1950. The post-World War II liberal world order is based on multilateralism, as a foreign policy practiced by many actors on the international stage through voluntary and (essentially) institutionalized cooperation governed by norms and principles that apply (largely) equally to all countries - participants, in order to jointly face the shared problems and challenges.<sup>1</sup> As a product of multilateralism, the EU has for decades ignored the "politics of power" and focused on economic integration<sup>2</sup>, although the reasons for the formation of this sui generis construct of international law are primarily of a security and safety nature. In foreign relations, the EU is perceived as a "soft power" that promotes democracy and fundamental rights by relying on the instruments of "soft power", as an effective substitute for military power, i.e. the security and defense policy in which member states rely on US leadership within the Transatlantic Alliance. With the Lisbon Treaty, the EU acquired international legal personality so that it could exercise foreign policy powers, including participation in the work of international organizations, within the limits of the powers conferred on it by the member states.

However, in recent years there has been intense talk of a "return to geopolitics"<sup>3</sup>, thus the new composition of the European Commission was presented with unprecedented rhetoric - President Ursula von der Leyen announcing "a geopolitical commission that Europe urgently needs"<sup>4</sup>. This statement, which revealed a strategic change in the EU approach, followed an earlier statement by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell, who said that "the world has changed for the worse" and that "the EU must learn the language of power"<sup>5</sup>. This approach, announced by

1 Elena Lazarou, *The future of multilateralism Crisis or opportunity?* (Brussels: EPRS Briefing, May 2017), 2, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603922/EPRS\\_BRI\(2017\)603922\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2017/603922/EPRS_BRI(2017)603922_EN.pdf).

2 Stefan Lehne, *How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age* (Brussels: Carnegie Europe, 2020), 1, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-24\\_Lehne-EU\\_Geopolitics.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/2-24_Lehne-EU_Geopolitics.pdf).

3 See Albert J. Bergesen & Christian Suter, *The Return of Geopolitics* (Zurich: LIT Verlag Münster, 2018).

4 European Commission, "Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the occasion of the presentation of her College of Commissioners and their programme", 27.11.2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech\\_19\\_6408](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/es/speech_19_6408).

5 European Parliament, "Hearing with High Representative/Vice President-designate Josep Borrell, European Parliament", 7.10.2019, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190926IPR62260/hearing-with-high-representative-vice-president-designate-josep-borrell>.

the representatives of the supranational actors in the Union, is a logical consequence of several signals sent by European leaders about the need to build the EU into a strategically autonomous player<sup>6</sup>, as well as of the process that began with the adoption of the joint communication of the Commission led by Juncker and the HREU Mogherini, presenting the strategic view of the growing economic power and political influence of China<sup>7</sup>, setting itself up as a competitor and potential partner, which in turn inspired the European Council to take a more coherent approach to international change. The focus of this new language of power is not only on the common trade policy as a foreign policy tool, but also implies that the EU must begin to act as a strategic power and strengthen its role in creating global security.

At the same time, in recent years there have been several initiatives to build the security capacity of the EU, strengthen the defense cooperation and improve the EU's response to global crises.<sup>8</sup> The security aspect, as a strategic priority, is linked to the one on energy, or rather the EU action in the field of environmental protection, through the ambitious package of public policies called "European Green Agreement"<sup>9</sup> which aims to achieve greater environmental sustainability of the EU economy, but also contains geopolitical repercussions. The promises to strengthen the role of the EU as a global actor are, in fact, a response to the crisis of multilateralism, the growing competition between the United States and China, the polarization on the international stage, the aftermath of Brexit, and numerous crisis areas in the EU neighborhood. The pursuit of a stronger EU worldwide is intended to contribute to a "closer/more united Union" within its internal borders.

From the very beginning of its activities the new "geopolitical commission" was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, which nullified the positive effects of the multi-year integration process, such as the internal market and the Schengen area, and led to further division within the EU.<sup>10</sup> The coronavirus disrupted the European Commission's newly adopted agenda, paralyzing governments and international institutions, including the EU's decision-making body in Brussels. The aim of this paper is to study the perspectives for the development of the EU's global role in the current environment, taking into account the aspirations for strategically increased influence on international trends. The main argument of the research is that the EU should use the available instruments to

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6 Emmanuel Macron, "NATO is becoming brain-dead", *The Economist*, 7 November 2017, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>; Angela Merkel, "Europe 'can no longer rely on allies' after Trump and Brexit", *BBC*, 28 May 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40078183>.

7 European Commission, "EU-China Strategic Outlook: Commission and HR/VP contribution to the European Council (21-22 March 2019)", 12 March 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_19\\_1605](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_19_1605).

8 See more kaj Vasko Naumovski, Milena Apostolovska-Stepanoska, Leptosava Ognjanoska, "European Army: Reality or Fiction?", *Iustitianaus Primus Law Review* 11, Issue 1 (2020).

9 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en).

10 See Anja Ettl and Holger Zschäpitz, "This slump throws Italy back into the pre-euro era", *Welt*, 31.07.2020, <https://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/article212619879/BIP-Dieser-Einbruch-wirftItalien-in-die-Vor-Euro-Aera-zurueck.html>.

strengthen its role, while working to strengthen its position as a strategic autonomous actor, i.e. to combine the instruments of soft and hard power. Finally, in order to achieve such a “mission”, the EU should recognize the Western Balkans as its strategic ally, i.e. a region in which it can, with its actions, make the most significant change.

The role of the EU on the international stage: From soft power to geopolitical actor

A review of European and international literature indicates that there is a widely accepted position on the four basic attributes of the EU in foreign relations - civil, soft, economic and normative power, which indicates that it is undoubtedly a global actor, but with contradictory characteristics.<sup>11</sup> The EU's geopolitical agenda is primarily focused on finding modalities for advancing EU foreign policy and sharing unifying values as a cornerstone of integration.

The civil power was affirmed after the Second World War, as an acceptance of the need for cooperation with other actors in achieving international goals; concentration of non-military, primarily economic means to achieve common goals, while the military power as a separate instrument primarily serves to protect other means of international interaction; and, readiness to develop supranational structures to address critical issues of international management.<sup>12</sup> Within the EU, there has always been tension between advocates of the thesis that integration would be incomplete without the defense dimension and proponents of the commitment that the EU should be recognized as a “civilian power” for ideological reasons, but also because of the existence of NATO.<sup>13</sup> As a result of the dominance of the “civilian group”, the EU has developed a civilian international identity, backed by supranational actors - the European Commission, the European Parliament and certain Member States - who emphasized that the EU was created to eliminate the threat of war in Europe by transforming anarchic international relations between sovereign states in a legal and institutional framework of internal policy and consequently, this idea and experience should also be reflected in a civilian foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of civil power is followed by soft power as a power of attraction instead of coercion, the confirmation of which is seen not in the resources, but in the ability to change the behavior of states.<sup>15</sup> The soft power of the EU is seen in climate diplomacy as a “global pioneer” in the field of environmental protection, which has traditionally played a leading role in climate activities and encouraging cooperation in this area through various instruments such as organizing bilateral and multilateral summits and dialogue

<sup>11</sup> Konstantinos Papanikolaou, “What Kind of Power? How the Covid-19 Crisis Affects the Orientation of the EU as A Global Actor”, in *Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?* (Brussels: Institute of European Democrats, 2020), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Hanns Maull, “Germany and Japan: The New Civilian Powers”, *Foreign Affairs* 69, no.5 (1990): 91-92.

<sup>13</sup> Karen E. Smith, “Beyond the Civilian Power EU Debate”, *Politique européenne* 3, no. 17 (2005): 70.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, “Beyond the Civilian Power”, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Nye, “Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy* (1990): 155.

on public policies and the creation of transnational networks.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the Paris Agreement was a significant achievement for the EU climate diplomacy, whereby, with the launch of the European Green Deal, the Union expressed its desire to be “the first climate-neutral continent” and reaffirmed its ambition to be a world leader in climate change.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of normative power, in turn, is used to describe the characteristic ideological influence of the EU on other members in international relations. This concept combines civilian power and soft power to show that the EU, unlike other great powers, shapes the international system with the appeal of the values and standards on which the European integration process is based, as a counterweight to the hard power (military power or economic sanctions).<sup>18</sup> These norms include peace, freedom, democracy, supranational rule of law and human rights, solidarity and good governance, all manifestations of EU identity and shared values, but are far more than mere rhetoric, thus their legal nature forcing the Union to act in a normative way.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, economic power is the EU's strongest “weapon”, which ranks it among the world's three economic powers,<sup>20</sup> as the largest exporter and provider of development aid, while the euro is the second most powerful currency in the global monetary system. With the help of the external normative power, the EU has largely established the regulatory framework for global economic governance. The EU's external economic representation has largely been the result of an inadvertent overflow of internal competencies for integration on the international stage, with which the European bloc began to use its vast “arsenal” of economic instruments to achieve geostrategic goals - by concluding trade agreements, investments in regions of EU interest and sophisticated use of restrictive measures and economic sanctions. Thus, the main tools used by the EU in the process of defending democracy in North Africa, such as the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, were in fact of a financial nature. In contrast to the geopolitical action, in this context we are talking about geo-economic policies.

Unlike other major powers (US, China, Russia), the EU is not a typical military power, i.e. the absence of a stronger common defense policy and the divergence of member states' national interests are the main factors suggesting that the Union is not a single military power. The EU's common defense policy is enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty (Article 42 (2) TEU), but the importance of a national defense policy, including NATO membership or a neutral position, is also clearly stated. On the other hand, some EU member states are considered large and medium-sized military powers - an indicator of potential European

<sup>16</sup> See Camilla Adelle, Katja Biedenkopf & Diarmuid Torney, *European Union External Environmental Policy*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> European Commission. “Speech by President von der Leyen in the Plenary of the European Parliament at the debate on the European Green Deal”, 11.12.2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech\\_19\\_6751](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6751).

<sup>18</sup> Ian Manners, “Normative Power Europe a Contradiction in Terms?”, *Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2, (2002): 239.

<sup>19</sup> Manners, “Normative Power”, 240.

<sup>20</sup> According to the ranking of The Economist: <https://worldinfigures.com/rankings/topic/8>.

defense capabilities is the fact that the defense budget of all 27 member states is the second largest defense budget globally, smaller only than that of the United States.<sup>21</sup>

However, dealing with global security crises in recent years has shown that the absence of the security and defense attribute of power does not allow the EU to be an equally great power in all dimensions of international politics. At the same time, these “crisis times” have prompted the development of several new instruments of EU security and defense policy, including the establishment of a European Defense Fund<sup>22</sup> and the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)<sup>23</sup> process, with European leaders expressing increased support for a stronger common security and defense policy, recognizing that no EU member state can deal with modern security threats in isolation.<sup>24</sup> Some theorists hailed the EU’s defense efforts<sup>25</sup>, arguing that the EU was finally strengthening its role in international relations, namely that “surrounded (EU) by security crises, it is difficult to think of anything more important than collective action in order to overcome the storm”<sup>26</sup>, narratives that are reflected in the EU Global Strategy for 2016 entitled “Shared Vision, Joint Action: A Stronger Europe”<sup>27</sup>. The strengthening of the common security and defense policy is in line with the demands of EU citizens who expect the EU to guarantee security and peace - in 2017 75% of citizens voted in this direction, while the majority (55%) approved the creation of the EU army.<sup>28</sup> But unlike the EU’s instruments of economic power, which are well developed to pursue strategic interests, the instruments of a common security and defense policy are still in their nascence.

## COVID 19 as a test for the balance of powers: perspectives of the EU

However, the COVID-19 virus pandemic brought with it many other repercussions that completely changed the world in the full sense of the word, and also affected the EU’s orientation as a global actor and the international balance of power. Although it is a threat that knows no borders, the major powers, however, did not choose to cooperate through existing international mechanisms, but turned to a unilateral policy that reached

21 Papanikolaou, “What Kind of Power?”, 7.

22 More in [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/defence/european-defence-fund\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/defence/european-defence-fund_en).

23 More in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) – Factsheet: [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/34226/permanent-structured-cooperation-pesco-factsheet\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/34226/permanent-structured-cooperation-pesco-factsheet_en).

24 Angela Merkel, “Nationalism and egoism must never have a chance again in Europe”, Address to the European Parliament, 13.11.2018, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20181106IPR18316/merkel-nationalism-and-egoism-must-never-have-a-chance-again-in-europe>; Elysee, “President Macron gives speech on new initiative for Europe”, 26.9.2017, [https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe\\_en](https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe_en).

25 Antonio Missiroli, “Foreword”, in *Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO): What’s in a Name?*, ed. Daniel Fiott, Antonio Missiroli and Thierry Tardy (Paris: Chaillot Papers, 2017), 5–6.

26 Hilke Dijkstra, “Introduction: One-and-a-Half Cheers for the EU Global Strategy”, *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no 3, (2016): 369.

27 Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign And Security Policy, June 2016, [https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top\\_stories/pdf/eugs\\_review\\_web.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf).

28 According to results of the special Eurobarometer dedicated to security and defense, conducted in 2017: <https://ec.europa.eu/comfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/search/defence/surveyKy/2173>.

its peak with the “vaccine race”. In the first months the virus “attacked” precisely the fundamental values of the European integration, as the principle of “solidarity” was severely violated and even absent, given that several member states closed their national borders and refused mutual coordination in dealing with it, and some even stopped the export of urgently needed medical equipment to their EU partners, severely disrupting the internal market, the leader of European integration.

In addition to the health and humanitarian crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an economic crisis and has had some negative impact on European economic power and the EU's role in the global economy. Thus, the economic consequences of the crisis felt in the second quarter of 2020 indicate a serious deterioration in the public finances of the member states and a decline in trade and investment performance<sup>29</sup>, but already in the third quarter of 2021 the EU has seen improvement<sup>30</sup>. On the other hand, the eurozone seems to have been more resilient than the US economy during the first months of the pandemic - in the second quarter of 2020, the US economy shrank by almost 30%, while in the same period the eurozone economy shrank by 10%, and the stability of the euro was maintained.<sup>31</sup> It is also positive that the unemployment rates did not reach a drastic increase, i.e. in the third quarter of 2020 they even experienced a slight decline.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the COVID-19 crisis served as a double catalyst - testing the resilience of the EU and its member states, but also the balance of power between the three global economic powers.<sup>33</sup>

At the beginning of the pandemic, the behavior of the EU did not differ from the other great powers, but the EU still managed to activate its “machinery” and formulate a collective response to the economic and health crisis, sending a strong message of unity and solidarity.<sup>34</sup> On the international stage, the Union played an important role in boosting and enhancing international cooperation to deal with the virus and its effects and to fill the vacuum created by the US-China rivalry.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the EU's success in this regard has been manifested through the resumption of international cooperation within

29 According to Eurostat data for the second quarter of 2020: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/10545332/2-14082020-AP-EN.pdf/7f30c3cf-b2c9-98ad-3451-17fed0230b57>.

30 According to Eurostat data for the third quarter of 2020: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Quarterly\\_national\\_accounts\\_-\\_GDP\\_and\\_employment](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Quarterly_national_accounts_-_GDP_and_employment).

31 Papanikolaou, “What Kind of Power?”, 10.

32 According to data of Eurostat for the third quarter of 2020: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Quarterly\\_national\\_accounts\\_-\\_GDP\\_and\\_employment](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Quarterly_national_accounts_-_GDP_and_employment).

33 Thomas Gomart & Éric-André Martin, *L'Europe face à la rivalité sino-américaine-Le coronavirus comme catalyseur* (Paris: Etudes d'Ifr, 2020).

34 Dawid A. Fusiek, “Towards Normative Power Europe - The EU as a standard-bearer of multilateralism and the role of European norms and values in the post-pandemic geopolitical order”, in *Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?* (Brussels: Institute of European Democrats, 2020), 7.

35 WHO, “WHO speaks at the European Parliament on the COVID-19 response”, 30.6.2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/30-06-2020-who-speaks-at-the-europeanparliament-on-the-covid-19-response>.

the WHO<sup>36</sup>, as well as the funding of several global initiatives and financial assistance to regional partners in the context of the EU's global response. Through the EU Global Response to the Pandemic Program and the Team Europe package, EU institutions and Member States agreed on € 15.6 billion in financial support to "address the short-term needs [of their partners] as well as the long-term structural impacts on societies and the economy"<sup>37</sup>, while the latest published data indicate that the package reached a total value of 38.5 billion euros<sup>38</sup>. The EU provided, through Horizon 2020, support for vaccine development, and is also the largest donor to the COVAX vaccine delivery mechanism for low- and middle-income countries. This contribution makes the European Union as a whole the largest donor to COVAX. Internally, the EU has used existing instruments strengthened by creating a special set of measures for a common European response, which provides mechanisms for vaccine supply and management of the vaccination process, economic measures with a budget of 1.8 trillion Euros, measures to promote public health, border management and mobility, as well as the fight against misinformation.<sup>39</sup> With this multidimensional answer, all the above attributes of the EU as a global actor come to the fore, with the EU showing that when faced with a global problem, it formulates the solution in a multilateral and collective way and restores citizens' trust in the European project.<sup>40</sup> Hence, the EU's civilian and normative power in global governance has so far not been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing multilateral strategic assistance helps build a safer, more peaceful, and more secure world and creates moral authority.<sup>41</sup>

However, it should be borne in mind that the crisis is still ongoing and is likely to be longer-term, so these claims are based on past experience and it is too early to determine the consequences in terms of the EU's international influence. One of the risks that are already emerging is the procurement of vaccines, which has already been criticized as inefficient, as well as the (unfair) distribution, due to which the member states have started their own procurement and redistribution. These are public policies in which further failure of the EU is not allowed, because they are directly related to the fundamental values on which it is built, as the Union of faith and hope, and at the same time to maintain its civil, soft and normative power on the international stage.

36 WHO, "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the Standing Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)", 26.6.2020, [https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-opening-remarks-at-the-standing-committee-of-the-parliamentary-assembly-of-the-council-of-europe-\(pace\)--26-june-2020](https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-opening-remarks-at-the-standing-committee-of-the-parliamentary-assembly-of-the-council-of-europe-(pace)--26-june-2020).

37 European Commission, "Coronavirus: EU global response to fight the pandemic", 8.4.2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_604](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/press-corner/detail/en/ip_20_604); European Commission, "Coronavirus Global Response: €7.4 billion raised for universal access to vaccines", 4.5.2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_797](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_797).

38 [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76341/coronavirus-news-eu-action-team-europe-support-disinformation-repatriation-and-solidarity\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76341/coronavirus-news-eu-action-team-europe-support-disinformation-repatriation-and-solidarity_en).

39 European Commission, "Overview of the Commission's response", [https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/overview-commissions-response\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/overview-commissions-response_en).

40 See Ivan Krastev & Mark Leonard, *Europe's pandemic politics: How the virus has changed the public's worldview* (Brussels: ECFR Policy Brief, 2020).

41 Clair Apodaca, "Foreign Aid as Foreign Policy Tool", *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2016).



In addition to COVID-19, environmental protection and climate change are among the greatest geopolitical threats in the modern world, and this is where EU green diplomacy comes into play, which should turn its leading climate agenda into foreign policy - by deploying the financial, market and diplomatic tools at its disposal to lead the rest of the world towards a more sustainable future, as envisaged by the Paris Climate Agreement.<sup>42</sup> The European Green Agreement is the basis of the efforts to transform the European economy and the European energy patterns, but it also entails a fundamental change in the energy system that will change the EU's relations with its neighbors and other powers, i.e. redefine global policy priorities and as such is in fact an instrument of foreign policy with profound geopolitical influence.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, dependence on energy imports remains one of the EU's key external weaknesses and an opportunity for other international actors to assert their geopolitical power. For example, Europe's primary concern for energy security lies in its dependence on Russian natural gas, but following the gas crises of recent years, the EU has implemented an infrastructure diversification strategy (liquefied natural gas terminals in Poland and the Baltic; the Southern Gas Corridor), as well as legislative regulation (EU regulations on security of gas supply and risk preparedness in the energy sector). These efforts have significantly boosted natural gas supplies, but by reducing imports between 2030 and 2050, as envisaged by the European Green Agreement, oil and gas security concerns in Europe will definitely be addressed and the bill for imports estimated at 296 billion euros in 2018 will be decreased.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, the growth of renewable energy sources and the development of regional energy infrastructures enable a geopolitical and more cooperative international framework for the development of energy relations.<sup>45</sup> The EU's green agenda can have a dual purpose: combating climate change and protecting the environment, but also reducing geopolitical tensions.

This agenda is in part compatible with the pursuit of a more pronounced security and defense policy. The security risks of the COVID-19 crisis were related to dealing with disinformation and new hybrid cyber security threats, as well as the traditional threats from organized crime. The new era of geopolitical competition is also perceived in the ability to develop digital capabilities. The growing risks of social media disinformation campaigns and cyber-attacks require further regulation and serious investment in all areas of cyber security. A decisive step in this direction is the General Data Protection Directive.

<sup>42</sup> Josep Borrell & Werner Hoyer, "Europe Must Become a Global Climate Power", *Project Syndicate*, Jan 22, 2021, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/eu-climate-policy-is-foreign-policy-by-josep-borrell-and-werner-hoyer-2021-01?barrier=accesspaylog>.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Leonard, Jean Pisani-Ferry, Jeremy Shapiro, Simone Tagliapietra & Guntram Wolff, "The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal" (Brussels: ECFR Policy Brief, 2021), 2.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Leonard et al, "The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal", 11.

<sup>45</sup> Bovienzo Domenico, "COVID-19 and the Future of Multilateralism: A European Challenge", in *Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?* (Brussels: Institute of European Democrats, 2020), 9.

Therefore, in order to achieve its geopolitical agenda in the context of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the EU should work on using the instruments of soft power and developing those of hard power, and then turning them into “smart power”<sup>46</sup> as an evolutionary concept - the ability to combine soft and hard power into effective strategies. It goes without saying that in this endeavor the EU should build its relations with other global actors, but needs to gain its strategic autonomy.

## The geopolitics of the enlargement process: The Western Balkans as a strategic ally of the EU

With the accession of Eastern European countries to the EU, enlargement policy has been hailed as the most important tool of EU foreign policy<sup>47</sup>, with the EU strengthening its potential influence on the international stage, inter alia through greater power in the decision-making bodies of international organizations due to the increased number of members<sup>48</sup>. Enlargement policy is seen as a tool for consolidating the democratic transition process, fostering complex reforms, strengthening fundamental human rights and freedoms, and thus ensuring the continent's stability, especially after the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is through the enlargement, based on a policy of conditionality that has led to profound reforms related to democracy, market economy and good governance, that the EU's normative power has come to the fore, and it has acquired the attribute of “transformative power”<sup>49</sup>. If the definition of soft power is taken into account, as having a certain culture as a set of values and legal-institutional structure that encourages other countries to join in accordance with the rules for such cooperation<sup>50</sup>, where the development of norms is a universal instrument of soft power, in the process of Eastern enlargement, the values of the EU related to democracy and human rights were emphasized, so it can be concluded that the Union in this process used and strengthened its soft power.

With the establishment of the regional approach to enlargement in the period 1996-1997, the EU introduced the term “Western Balkans” and gradually separated enlargement with these countries from the Eastern enlargement, as well as from the overall European good neighborly policy. But the instruments of Europeanization that the EU has developed in the Eastern Enlargement negotiation process, such as the policy of conditionality, have

46 Joseph S. Nye, “Hard, Soft, and Smart Power”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, eds. Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine, and Ramesh Thakur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

47 Ollie Rehn, “What's the Future for EU Enlargement?”, Speech 07/185, September 25, 2007, [www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/es/article\\_7355\\_es.htm](http://www.eu-un.europa.eu/articles/es/article_7355_es.htm).

48 Daniel Finke, “EU enlargement and foreign policy coordination: more powerful, but less cohesive?”, *The Review of International Organizations* 15, no.1, (2020): 189.

49 Heather Grabbe, *The Constellations of Europe: How Enlargement Will Transform the EU* (London: Center for European Reform, 2004).

50 Joseph Nye, “Soft Power”, *Foreign Policy* (1990): 155, 166-167.

become the foundation of the soft and normative power that is further developed in the process of accession of the Western Balkan countries. The reasons for greater EU interest in the Balkans were primarily in the field of security - the instability of the region, most pronounced through the war in Kosovo. The Stabilization and Association Process was a key element of the European Commission's strategy for future enlargement, including five countries in the region - Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and our country - which at the time were still under the coinage of "Southeast Europe" or "Central and Eastern Europe", which followed the conclusions of the European Council held in Helsinki in December 1999. The legal instrument for the implementation of this process consists of the Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAAs), concluded with each country separately. They are the central aspect of the SAP, establishing contractual relations and regulating mutual rights and obligations, also providing other instruments such as financial assistance and autonomous trade measures. These Association or Strategic Partnership Agreements are important channels of the European normative power because states on the other side must adhere to binding clauses on respect for human rights and the promotion of democracy.<sup>51</sup> This instrument is followed by other development aids of a financial nature, still linked to a commitment to certain values by which the EU is recognized. Thus, the EU achieves the diffusion of its norms through trade and technical assistance, i.e. it can transfer its norms voluntarily and efficiently to a number of countries and thus project its normative power supported by economic power.

However, just as the formation of the EU has primarily a security and defense background, so are the reasons for the strategic commitment to chart the enlargement process with the Western Balkan countries related to stability. The Thessaloniki Summit in June 2003<sup>52</sup> reiterated its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan (WB) countries, i.e. "the future of the Balkans lies in the European Union". This decision came at a time when Eastern enlargement was becoming certain, so there was a need to find a framework for the regulation of the relations with the WB. As a region surrounded by EU borders, there are fears that the Western Balkans will turn into an "enclave" of Europe, so the only logical solution is to offer a European perspective to create conditions for its European integration over time.<sup>53</sup> The European perspective of the WB also finds support in the founding treaties of the Union, with the legally binding article of the primary law as a basis for accession to the EU, stipulating an obligation for the country to be *European* (to be located on the European continent). Thus, the legal basis itself has a certain geopolitical "DNA". Later on, the Lisbon Treaty in Article 49 of the TEU provided for another formal condition for accession, stipulating that the candidate country respects the principles of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and

<sup>51</sup> Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe a Contradiction in Terms?", 254.

<sup>52</sup> European Council. "Presidency Conclusions", Thessaloniki, 19.06.2003.

<sup>53</sup> Stefan Lehne, *Geopolitics, the EU and the Western Balkans* (Skopje: Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis", 2020), 7.

the rule of law, as principles common to member states. The policy of conditionality introduced as a novelty in the framework of the Eastern Enlargement based on the Copenhagen criteria, and strengthened in the process towards the Western Balkans, is due to the different political and economic system to which these countries belonged, but also the readiness of both sides expressed as absorption capacity. However, the process of enlargement with the WB, which is still ongoing, has faced many blockages and delays on many occasions - which is why in addition to the conditionality the principle of differentiation was introduced. All this had an impact on both sides of the process - the delivery of results from the social transformation of the aspirant/candidate countries for membership, which at some point was marked as reversibility of the process, but also the credibility of the EU and the transformative power. Truth be told, some of these conditions are in fact a consequence of the time factor and the lessons learned from the Eastern enlargement, which again points to the geostrategic component of the enlargement. This also highlights the limitations of the exercise of EU's purely normative power.

The refugee-migrant crisis, particularly pronounced in 2015, triggered by the situation in Syria and the global power struggle, highlighted security issues in international relations and the EU's capacity as a global actor, as well as the Western Balkans' strategic importance for stability and security of the EU. If the region was previously seen as a potential threat to EU stability due to the internal situation and the potential for escalation within the borders of these countries, with this crisis it became clear that the EU and the WB have shared security risks. The decisive stance of the WB in tackling the migration and refugee crisis has made the region an active player in European geopolitics, leading to full integration into specific EU policies in this area, with the signing of the FRONTEX agreements.<sup>54</sup> This brought the Western Balkans region back to the EU political map and the need to adopt a more credible enlargement perspective became clear. The new methodology for accession negotiations recognizes the geopolitical aspects of the process - the Commission calls the prospect of membership a "geostrategic investment" and underlines the importance of the enlargement process "especially in times of increased geopolitical competition".<sup>55</sup> Western Balkans is an important EU trading partner and ally in energy projects.<sup>56</sup> The enlargement process has always had a strong economic and investment component, given that some of the instruments in the process - such as the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance - are of a financial nature, and at the same time this instrument is used to encourage the most difficult

54 European Council, "Infographic: Border management: agreements with non-EU countries", <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/border-management/agreements-third-countries/>; See: Marie Jelenka Kirchner & Zoran Nechev, *The EU's strategic interest in the Western Balkans: Stimulating EU's Strategic Autonomy through cross-border cooperation* (Skopje: IDSCS, 2020), 7.

55 European Commission, "Remarks by Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi at the press conference on the revised enlargement methodology", Brussels, 5 February 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-presentation-revised-enlargement-methodology-committee-foreign\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/varhelyi/announcements/remarks-commissioner-oliver-varhelyi-presentation-revised-enlargement-methodology-committee-foreign_en).

56 European Commission, "Western Balkans: An Economic and Investment Plan to support the economic recovery and convergence", Brussels, 6 October 2020, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_20\\_1811](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_1811).

reforms. With the introduction of the new approach in the negotiation process, access to EU funds is conditional on the implementation of reforms in the priority areas of democracy, rule of law and human rights, and can also be used as an instrument to sanction non-delivery of results and lagging behind in the process. The convergence of EU and WB policies needs to continue in other areas. Thereto, it should be borne in mind that trading democracy for stability is not a viable option because these two issues are not mutually exclusive - there is a strong link between security and rule of law areas such as the fight against corruption and organized crime, perceived through the structure of Chapters 23 and 24 of the Union *acquis*, which, by the way, are grouped in the first cluster - *Foundations*. In addition to traditional threats, both the EU and the WB are equally exposed to new hybrid threats, including disinformation and fake news. These issues became particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, so although the EU provided the greatest financial assistance to deal with the effects of the pandemic, this information remained unrecognized and unacknowledged in the public discourse of the WB countries, as opposed to the narrative that “the EU has abandoned the Balkans”.<sup>57</sup> This view has been further exacerbated by the (hitherto) failure to supply vaccines as the most effective weapon in the “virus war”, which has apparently taken on a full geopolitical connotation, while at the same time leaving room for the influence of other powerful geopolitical actors. The EU aspiration to strengthen its geopolitical influence and strategic autonomy as a global actor can be achieved most strongly and only in cooperation with the countries of the Western Balkans. To achieve this, the EU must prove the seriousness of its intentions in the enlargement process.

## Conclusion

The international geopolitical environment has changed significantly since the foundation of the EU to date, with the EU resorting to a strengthened geopolitical vocabulary, which has yet to be realized at the level of external action. The COVID-19 crisis has further accelerated this development and once again demonstrated that crises are a systemic product of modern global society, and that global actors, including the EU, are at the forefront of dealing with the consequences. Therefore, the need to define the role of the EU-led Europe on the international stage is more important than ever. No country on the continent has enough power and resources to deal with a crisis on its own, the potential of the EU as a union of more than 500 million citizens is incomparably greater, but it seems to be underused or not properly established. On the other hand, European citizens expect Europe to take greater responsibility as a global actor and guarantor of stability.

<sup>57</sup> See Ana Cojocaru, “Disinformation-19: Challenges to the EU’s Influence in the Western Balkans”, in *Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?* (Brussels: Institute of European Democrats, 2020).

The Union's internal cohesion is key to the effectiveness of European responses and dealing with global crises. The EU institutions and the member states must establish a common vision that would be realized through strong coordination structures for harmonization of action and adoption of appropriate measures for increased visibility in the modern international system. The concept of the EU as a global actor that relies primarily on its soft power is a concept that belongs to the past, as it cannot provide a sufficient international presence in proportion to the size of the Union. The EU as a global power with combined power characteristics is a more appropriate concept to achieve the ambitions for influence on the international scene. The COVID-19 crisis has confirmed the thesis that the EU needs "strategic autonomy" to be able to reduce its dependence on other global actors in its foreign relations, so that it can make more autonomous decisions to promote its interests. There are several areas in which the EU has already developed appropriate instruments and initiatives to assert its authority, such as the protection of the environment and climate change, energy and transport, the digitalization process and finance, and needs to work harder to strengthen its position on dealing with modern security and defense threats. In all these areas, the EU's normative power as a promoter of certain values is the strongest attribute it should use to maintain multilateralism through more visible participation in international organizations.

The current crisis brings with it great uncertainty and unpredictability, but what is quite certain is that the map of Europe will not change. Therefore, the EU should recognize the Western Balkans as its ally and partner in the process of the continent's unification and strengthening. Therefore, the EU should approach the region as an equal actor and include it in its foreign policy initiatives to increase continental integrity and promote common European values.

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