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Ana Bojinović Fenko[*]

Julija Brsakoska Bazerkoska[**]

The EU as a Global Actor: The Significance of Changes in the World Order From 2004 to 2024 as Regards EU Actorness

Abstract

Contrary to the prevalent focus on the EU's capabilities, this article analyses the implications for the EU's global actorness stemming from changes in the world order. These changes are elaborated upon according to Hettne's (2005) three-dimensional analysis of the world order, namely, its structure, mode of governance, and form of legitimisation from 2004 when the CEE countries became EU members, to 20 years into their membership in 2024. The main changes of the world order are identified as: the evolving multipolar international system; a transition from multilateralism towards plurilateralism; and the sporadic unilateral actions and delegitimisation of liberal world order alongside instances of the major powers' disregard of international law. The article then elucidates the impact of these changes on EU actorness via illustrative case studies of issues dealt within the UN system and the WTO, namely, international trade, sustainable development, climate change, and international peace and security. Findings show that firstly, in an evolving multipolar international system, the EU aligns strongly with the US which maintains central power in security issues. Secondly, all case studies prove that the EU remains committed to transparent multilateralism. Thirdly, despite instances of increasing state-level disrespect of international law by the US, Russia, and China, the EU's resolve and advocacy for international norms remains stable. The EU has managed to leverage its economic and normative

[*] **Ana Bojinović Fenko** – University of Ljubljana,
e-mail: Ana.Bojinovic@fdv.uni-lj.si, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1896-9269.
[**] **Julija Brsakoska Bazerkoska** – Ss. Cyril and Methodius University, Skopje,
e-mail: j.brsakoskabazerkoska@pf.ukim.edu.mk, ORCID ID: 0000-0003-3700-3355.

capabilities along with its positive presence to exert legitimate leadership in, for example, digital trade agenda, the green transition, and artificial intelligence, but not in enlargement policy. And yet, the war in Ukraine has prompted the Union to bolster its military capability and upgrade its geopolitical strategy towards its neighbours. The authors conclude that the potential development of the EU's defensive security capability – provided it is developed complementary to its unique market and normative power – offers an opportunity for the EU to reduce its capabilities/expectations gap and enhance its global actorness.

Keywords: European Union, International Order, International Trade, Sustainable Development, Climate Change, International Security

Introduction

Studies of EU as a global actor have mainly focused on the EU's external action, of which describing, defining, and analysing EU capability as the agency property in the EU actorness prevails. Overviewing the literature on the concept, the authors' estimation is that the amount of research performed as regards the EU's actorness capabilities far outweighs the focus on structural elements as conditions enabling or preventing the EU's external action. Such research focus is understandable due to the dynamic development of the EU's actorness capabilities in terms of decision-making, goals, and instruments. Namely, since the entry into force of the Rome Treaty in 1958, the European Economic Community has forged hugely successful external relations, enacted external dimensions of domestic policies and, also, since the 1993 Treaty of Maastricht, its very own foreign policy. After the enforcement of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, the EU adapted decision-making procedures and policy goals along with strategic outlines and respective policy instruments, especially the European External Action Service as its now-major formal capability next to its economic tools. The major structural transformation the EU had faced was, therefore, the change of the international system brought about by the end of the Cold War. This period represented an opportunity for the EU which it successfully seized, and went on to establish a hegemonic position in Europe *and* in some of the international regimes and areas of global governance such as trade, development, human rights, climate change, humanitarian aid, and democratisation. In short, the EU became a relevant player far beyond international trade even if judged to be an "economic giant, political dwarf" (Medrano, 1999, pp. 155–177). The EU held a hegemonic position in the international liberal order, right

next to the US, and became a normative power, a market power, a civilian power, and an environmental hegemon. The overarching settings of world politics on these issues have been the United Nations (UN) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the EU has strengthened its actorness with regard to both. However, the structural conditions for EU external action in the 21st century have changed dramatically several times. The first of a number of such structurally-driven challenges for the EU's external action was brought about in the case of the USA-lead invasion of Iraq in 2003. Keukeleire and Delereux (2008) identify "Atlantic solidarity vs. European integration" as one of the four tensions in EU foreign policy but pursue this challenge from the viewpoint of the EU's foreign policy consistency in its capability rather than the nature of the change in the international order. The consistency problem related especially to the Central and East European (CEE) states' interpretation of the EU's positioning in the international system. In this article, the authors refer to CEE countries as eight formerly communist countries that became EU Member States in 2004, namely, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

During the 1990s, ten Central and Eastern European states, many of which were newly established, aligned with EU foreign policy positions on conflict management. However, their interpretation of the trade-off between normative principles of international law and leadership privileges in the international system has since revealed a divergence. The EU has had to adapt to several changes in the international community; the global financial crisis of 2007–2009, the activation of BRICS in the international trade and financial regime, the rise of the economic, political, and military power of China and Russia, its side-lining in global climate change regime at COP15 in 2009, political instability in its neighbourhood – specifically the interpretation of European perspective of Eastern Partnership, the Arab Spring, and the non-linear progress of Western Balkan states in the accession process. On the other hand, a major success for the EU was its newly-gained observer status in the General Assembly of the UN in 2011 and formal status in several other international organisations and global Treaties, most notably in FAO, CoE, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO), the Codex Alimentarius Commission, and in UNFCCC. In this regard, the implementation of Brexit in 2020 necessitated the development of a functional relationship between the EU and its now-former member the United Kingdom, resulting in a significant repositioning of the EU's status within the UN and the WTO. Finally, two of the most pressing challenges to international peace and security, namely, Russia's aggression on Ukraine and a military conflict between

Israel and Hamas are taking place in the EU's vicinity, and are immediate challenges to its actorness.

In this context, this article brings to the fore the structural element of the EU's global actorness and aims to analyse the implications of the changes in the world order that took effect between 2004 and 2024 for the EU's actorness. The authors analyse these changes according to Hettne's (2005) three-dimensional analysis of the world order, namely its structure, mode of governance, and form of legitimisation, and apply this concept to create an analytical model for assessing conditions for EU actorness in the world order based from around the time of 2004 when the CEE countries became EU members, to 2024, which marks 20 years of their membership. In a brief historical developmental analysis, the authors identify the most significant changes in the world order to be as follows: 1) the United States' (US) unilateralism and its occasional shifts from hegemony to dominance in the liberal international order; 2) the emergence of a new multipolarity wherein China and Russia favour plurilateralism over multilateralism and prioritise dominance over hegemony; and 3) the growing depreciation of the rule of international law. Applying a content analysis of primary and secondary sources, the authors then illustrate the impact of these changes on EU actorness in the most pressing issues of the 21st century addressed in the UN and WTO, including international trade, sustainable development and climate change, and international security via case studies of Brexit, COVID-19, and Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Analysing EU Actorness Within the World Order

Studies of EU as a global actor mainly focus on the EU's external action. This is a concept invented by the Lisbon version of the Treaty on EU, corresponding to the particularities of the EU's activity for wielding influence outside its borders compared to a more settled term for such activity of states, i.e., foreign policy. In comparison to studying states' foreign policy within the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) sub-discipline in International Relations – inasmuch that the EU can be compared to states as autonomous actors with the capability and willingness to influence the international affairs – this is very much in line with the FPA tradition which mostly focuses on the so-called "opening of the black box". In effect, conceptualisations and analyses of the EU's foreign policy have predominantly aimed at taking a hold on the specificities of the EU as an amalgamation of an international governmental organisation (Smith, 2003) and a political system (Peterson, Sjursen, 1999), developing into an active,

international region with regional actorship (Hettne, 1999, pp. 21–23; Hettne, Söderbaum, 2005, pp. 535–552; Hettne, 2011, pp. 28–36).

The conceptual grasping of the EU's activity outside its borders, be it EEC external relations, the external dimension of EU domestic policies or EU foreign policy, has had a common denominator; the invention of the concept of EU actorness. Drieskens (2021, pp. 27–39) identifies a "tentative theory of actorness" developed by Cosgrove and Twitchet's (1970) edited book and then offers a developmental analysis of authors who further worked on defining the EU's actorness via capabilities for action and structural conditions/opportunity and presence as a relational outcome of the EU's existence. Scholarly efforts produced results mostly on the capability element of EU actorness, specifically policy coherence (e.g., Bretherton, Vogler, 1999; Vogler, Bretherton, 2006) and actors' consistency (Smith, 2003). This understanding can be complemented by two additional factors. Firstly, the dynamically-evolving legal framework of the European Economic Community (EEC) facilitated the acceleration of EU capabilities. Secondly, the world order exhibited a relatively stable structure until the late 1980s. Despite the significant structural changes brought about by the end of the Cold War, impacting both international and regional European relations which coincided with the establishment of the EU in 1992, academic attention remained surprisingly focused on EU capabilities. This concentration is often encapsulated by the concept of the capabilities/expectations gap (Hill, 1993). Most conceptual innovations on EU actorness have thus been related to the element of capability: actor capability (Sjösted, 1977); authority, autonomy, and cohesion (Jupille, Caporaso, 1998, pp. 213–229); capability in terms of policy instruments and ability to use them (Bretherton, Vogler, 1999) with particular focus on three-dimensional coherence (see Portela, 2021, pp. 87–101); and on the EU's institutionalisation and identity (Smith, 2004; Wunderlich, Bailey, 2011). In this article, however, the authors position the explanadum within the EU's structural context – the world order – and try to understand the implications of its changes on EU actorness. Thus, they adopt a non-normative (political) definition of the world order by Hettne (2005) constituted by three dimensions: structure; mode of governance; and form of legitimisation. "Structure is the way the units of the system are related, that is, different forms of polarity determined by the distribution of power and resources; mode of governance refers to avenues of influence on decision making and policy making; legitimisation is the basis on which the system is made acceptable to the constituent units" (Hettne, 2005, p. 560).

Table 1. Analytical Elements of World Order

STRUCTURE	Area of GOVERNANCE	Mode of LEGITIMATION
unipolar	unilateral	rule of international law
bipolar	plurilateral	hegemony
multipolar	multilateral	dominance

Source: Hettne (2005).

These three categories of analytical elements are further defined with phenomenological examples of their effectuation. The structure of the world order can have one, two, or even several centres of power (unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar). Areas of governance of the world order can be uni-, pluri- or multilateral. Finally, the mode of legitimation spans from the most legitimate, such as the rule of international law, to the least legitimate, namely, dominance, with hegemony representing an accepted form of dominance in between (Table 1).

Applying the conceptual outline of the EU's actorness to this scheme, one can readily identify the nature of the EU order as that of being multipolar, multilateral, and grounded in the principles of international and, more specifically, EU law. Certainly, in everyday politics, clusters of states often engage in plurilateral cooperation around regional powers, and these powers frequently establish bilateral leadership arrangements that often manifest as hegemonic, yet one can agree that the EU positively values the inclusion of all Member States (although weighted by size of population) and avoids dominance or unilateralism. The EU would prefer such principles of international relations be in its external action also. However, from a world-order perspective, the EU itself is an exclusive plurilateral area of governance while being a regional organisation. Still, the EU pursues inter-regionalism as complementary to inclusive and universal UN-based multilateralism rather than as an alternative mode of global governance. The least favourable area of governance for the EU is thus unilateralism because it "undermines collective arrangements and may even be a path towards imperialism (...) relying on unilateral decision making (...) which means prioritising the national interest over collective security" (Hettne, 2005, p. 560). The EU thus favours a well-functioning, multilateral world order, which requires "a certain degree of institutionalisation that counters unilateral action, limited bilateral solutions, or ill-considered political or military reactions which aggravate sensitive security situations" (Hettne, 2005, p. 560). This points to an intermediate finding that, considering its capability, the EU in the world order much prefers a multilateral mode of governance based on the rule

of international law. It is not ill at ease with plurilateral agreements either *if* they are consistent with UN principles. As for the structure of the world order, the EEC has proven capable of functioning in a bipolar system quite well. That is, however, only in the fields of functional cooperation (predominantly trade and development) (see Table 2). As for the unipolar system, one can argue that from the 1990s until the world economic crisis in 2007, the US was the only central military and political power in the system, but ever since then, China and Russia have been effectively asserting a power position for themselves, thus contributing to a rapidly evolving multipolar world order. The EU can itself be considered as one of the progressive powers in the world order; stronger in economic, developmental, and environmental governance compared, for example, to security governance. Finally, assessing the mode of legitimation of the world order, the authors identify that this element witnessed the biggest change within the span of 20 years, dating from 2004 to 2024. This is firstly due to the US' unilateralism and move away from hegemony towards dominance since the attack on Iraq in 2003. Secondly, the newly-forming multipolarity has come to the fore in the 2020s and proves to be a challenge for universal principles of global governance, as China and Russia prefer plurilateralism and dominance in their perceived (regional) spheres of influence. Consequently, the international community has witnessed a growing erosion of the value attributed to the rule of international law.

Table 2. Identified Changes in the World Order: 2004 vs. 2024

World order element	In the year 2004	In the year 2024
STRUCTURE	unipolar (US)	multipolar (US, China Russia, EU)
Area of GOVERNANCE	multilateral	unilateral, plurilateral
Mode of LEGITIMATION	hegemony & rule of international law	hegemony & dominance

Source: Hettne (2005).

In the following two parts, the authors will illustrate the effect of these changes on EU actorness in the most pressing issues of the 21st century addressed in the UN and WTO, namely dealing with a) international trade, b) sustainable development and climate change, and c) security.

The end of the Cold War heralded the defeat of totalitarianism and the triumph of democracy, particularly in Europe. In the newly

established unipolar international system led by the US, which promoted the values of multilateralism and the rule of law, the EU's role on the international stage was strengthened and primarily associated with promoting its core values connected to respect for human rights, human dignity, freedom, the rule of law, and the advancement of democracy and open markets, especially through its enlargement policy. At the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the further enlargement of the European Communities with the countries of the CEE was strongly supported and seen as a mechanism for influencing the world stage. The CEE countries were welcomed into the single market and into the democratic embrace of Western Europe. By responding favourably to applications for EU accession from the countries of the CEE, the EU, together with Malta and Cyprus, wanted to put an end to the post WWII division of Europe (Grabbe, Hughes, 1998; Mannin, 1999). 2004's so-called "Big Bang" enlargement of the EU was widely regarded as the greatest success of the EU's foreign policy at the time, with the EU accession process being generally perceived as one of the most powerful EU tools for the international promotion of democracy and the rule of law (Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2004). In the CEE, EU enlargement has been closely associated with the region's rapid movement towards stable democratic institutions, the reduction of corruption, an increase in protection for minorities, and other political reforms (Bojinović Fenko, Kočan, 2023, pp. 241–267).

The first major challenge for the EU's enlargement was the US' "Coalition of the Willing" attack on Iraq in March 2003. While the Treaty of Accession was signed with 10 acceding states in April 2003, there was huge division within the EU considering Member State support for the US, which was mainly based on the EU's support for the rule of international law. When the US took a dominant position in the international system, insisting on its right to self-defense, France and Germany were opposed to Spain, the UK, and Poland supporting and participating in the US' plurilateral Coalition of the Willing. The acceding CEE states mainly stated their agreement with the US in a letter from the Vilnius group, leading to an inconsistent EU foreign policy at the time (Peterson, 2004) along with political divisions among the so-called "old" and "new" Europe.

2004's enlargement brought the EU geographically and politically closer to the troubled areas on its external borders and was the main driving force behind the drawing up of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to attain the objective of security in the region (Van Vooren, 2011). The Union aimed to promote a ring of well-governed countries

to the East and South with whom it could enjoy close and cooperative relations. The approach set out to that end was to "extend the benefits of economic and political cooperation to the neighbors (...) while tackling political problems there" (European Council, 2003). At that point in time, Russia refused to participate in the ENP, which led to a Summit in St Petersburg in May 2003 and the announcement of the Strategic Partnership between the EU and Russia on the bases of common values and reciprocal agreements between the two partners (Van Vooren, Wessel, 2018). These developments during the Big Bang enlargement led the EU to have a hegemonic position in the international liberal order, immediately alongside the US, by exporting its economic power and its basic values of democracy, respect for human rights, and rule of law. The enlargement has given the Union a larger number of voices within the UN General Assembly (UNGA), which led to greater level of EU involvement in the following years. The EU's position in the UN Security Council (UNSC) was presented by its two Member States that were permanent members of the UNSC at that time – France and the UK.

The UN system is one of the main stages on the international scene where the EU has positioned itself as a leader on the issues connected with international trade, climate change, and the protection of human rights. The EU made use of the multilateral international order at the beginning of the XXI century to promote its sustainable development agenda, and is still committed to the sustainable development policy through its worldwide environmental protection and its combating of climate change by means of multilateral cooperation. To contribute to these overarching objectives, the EU and its Member States have been committed to the UN Environment Programme since 1972 and to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change since 1992. The year 1992 marked a shift in substantive and institutional influences and, from that year on, the EU had more influence over international institutions and even gained an international leadership position. The EU went on to become a global environmental leader, whereas the US started to oppose binding multilateral agreements (Vogler, Bretherton, 2006; Kelemen, 2010). Indeed, the EU traded places with the US in terms of its support for binding international environmental agreements. This change of leadership became vividly apparent when the US renounced its signature of the Kyoto Protocol in 2001 (Kamphof, 2019), after which the EU took the opportunity to assure entry into force of the agreement by persuading Russia into ratification in October 2004 in exchange for the support of Russia's WTO membership (Crnčec et al., 2024, pp. 143–161).

The EU's growing economic and market power was manifested mainly throughout its WTO membership. A state's WTO membership is seen as a necessary form of recognition by the international community of the reliability of that state's trade policy, and, in the case of the EU, the reliability of its own trade policy. The EC became an original member of the WTO in 1994 and, due to its extensive and exclusive competences on trade policy issues, membership came as a continuation of the practice of the EC's *de facto* membership in the GATT. As the Member States have competence on some of the WTO issues, they are also WTO members. After the establishment of the WTO, the EU took over leadership in the negotiation process and put forward a new agenda, the so-called "trade and (...) agenda" (Mortensen, 2009). Under the leadership of the EU, labour standards, exceptions for better environmental protection, procurement liberalisation, and global competition rules were put on the agenda. In 2001, the EU was the main instigator of the Doha Development Agenda. After eight rounds of trade negotiations having been initiated by the US, the ninth in Doha was initiated by the EU after five years (1996–2001) of campaigning. According to Ahnlid (2005), the EU met with a fair degree of success in its quest for a new round despite the persistent protectionist nature of the Common Agricultural Policy and the new demands emanating from civil society on the trade policy in areas such as the environment, labour rights, and global justice. He argues that the ability of the European Commission to form appropriate strategies depends on the EU's willingness and ability to exert leadership on the international scene (Ahnlid, 2005). The process of strengthening the institutional framework of the dispute settlement system within the WTO has enabled the Commission to play an important role in finding solutions to disputes regarding new trade issues. Within the WTO, the EU was a strong supporter of China's accession to the organisation (achieved in December 2001), and aimed at promoting multilateral trade cooperation throughout established international organisations.

European Union Actorness in the World Order of 2004

The international system has undergone significant changes over the past two decades at the time of this writing, spanning from 2004 to 2024. The numerous structural changes throughout the years have affected the EU's position but did not redefine its ultimate goal to promote effective multilateralism and a rules-based international system. One of the main internal changes came with the Lisbon Treaty, in the sense that the EU entered a new phase in which the world was no longer confronted with

both the EC and the EU as actors on the international stage. This duality ended in 2009, and it has since been the EU that has the legal personality and can thus be represented internationally. This came with additional institutional improvements in the area of EU foreign affairs – the European External Action Service, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. These internal changes led to a more unified EU voice on the international stage. With regards to foreign policy capabilities, the EU has come very far from *contrôleurs techniques* to having its own fully-fledged diplomats (Pajtinka, 2020). However, numerous external challenges defied the EU's position in world politics.

International Trade

The first major setback came with the global financial crisis of 2007–2009, which severely affected the EU economy as a whole and set shockwaves through its Member States. The economic hurdles of different EU Member States gradually contributed towards them moving in the economic embrace of a rising China. China's rising economic and political influence along with the country's promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) affected the EU's position in the global economy. One factor that can be observed in the last decade is the fact that the duty of sincere cooperation within trade and foreign policy issues has been more frequently disrespected by the EU Member States in their relationship with China. The EU has traditionally been a close ally of the US, but after the Trump administration's challenge to global trade and its decision to revert to "aggressive unilateralism" (Kerr, 2020), and pursue a protectionist trade policy, this position has been challenged. In this context, trade has become a much higher profile policy area for the EU and a core dimension of the rising concern regarding the competitive implications of China's industrial policies. The EU uses the WTO Dispute Settlement Mechanism to project its view on international trade issues. At present, the EU has 10 ongoing disputes with China and 35 ongoing disputes with the US, while it is represented as a third party in 217 cases – which gives the European Commission a stage to articulate EU perspectives on issues pertaining to international trade (WTO, 2024). While the EU's approach in international trade is grounded in multilateralism, it seems that the BRI projects which are financed and carried out by Chinese companies continue to be based on regionalism and flexible legal instruments that tend to avoid multilateral treaties and institutions (see Vangeli, 2020, particularly for BRI effects on countries of Central-, East-, and Southeast Europe). Even though the BRI is an inclusive project, its ambiguous

institutional and constitutional design creates rule-of-law gaps much to the disadvantage of international trade. The EU needs to design appropriate responses to international trade conflicts and tensions, a task which is further complicated by the increasing complexity of the trade and external policy agendas given that these policies increasingly include dimensions of security (Fahey, Brsakoska Bazerkoska, 2022).

The EU faces numerous significant challenges within the framework of the WTO as well. These challenges include several new developments which merit an examination of both the EU and its Member States' formal status in the WTO and their substantive engagement in this organisation. These new developments include the EU's negotiation of trade agreements with third countries, and Brexit. Yet, both the EU and the WTO need to reposition themselves specifically with regards to new structural conditions of global trade, specifically rapid technological changes and the growth of the digital economy, climate change, and the universal values on human rights. The WTO was not designed to address trade issues in a world of a digital economy. It was intended to be the global forum where countries agree on rules of the game for trade policies and resolve trade disputes mainly as regards goods. It seems that the WTO failed in that task too, and there has been an ongoing crisis within the organisation. Just in the past several years, it has been faced with the demise of the appellate body, trade disputes, and the COVID crisis. These developments challenge the rules-based global trading system and raise questions regarding the relevance of multilateral institutions in the current geopolitical environment (Fahey, Brsakoska Bazerkoska, 2022). In this instance, the role of the EU, as a longstanding proponent of multilateralism, offers leadership in both strengthening existing alliances and forging new ones that will bolster the defense of the rules-based multilateral trading system. The EU has successfully grasped the regulation of the digital aspect of the market and an assurance of human rights. It endorsed the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018 and is the first political community to have produced regulation with regard to artificial intelligence (the EU AI Act, 2024). This gives the EU a strong capability to pursue leadership on the question of global governance as regards digital-market and artificial-intelligence issues and also boosts its positive presence as element of actorness.

Sustainable Development and Climate Change

The multipolar international system redefined the EU's approach on the international stage regarding issues of sustainable development

and climate change. The year 2009 marked a turning point in the EU's engagement with the UNEP and UNFCCC. The inability to agree upon a universal climate framework at Copenhagen during 2009's COP15 was the greatest failure of EU climate diplomacy; the EU was too ambitious and too strict in its mandate to interact with other major emitters of pollution. COP15 changed the EU's climate and environmental diplomacy in a direction more oriented towards universal membership. The EU still has the most far-reaching environmental and climate legislation and policies but is now more open and cooperative to less-ambitious countries and regional blocs and more oriented on cooperation with developing countries (Kamphof, 2019). This change in attitude contributed to the successes of the year 2015, represented by the conclusion of two landmark international agreements – the Paris Climate Agreement and United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The "Team EU" coalition, formed during COP21, contributed significantly to the result of the 2015 Paris Agreement, and the EU's leadership status in global environmental governance was highlighted. Despite the announcement of the USA's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement by Donald Trump during his term in office, the EU remained committed to its implementation. Presently, the EU continues to exert leadership on climate change matters within the UN system driven by its Green Deal agenda (see Dyrhauge, Kurze, 2024).

The structural changes on the world stage, together with the loss of value for the rule of international law, redefined the EU's position in the UN. The EU's relationship with the UN represents both possibilities and constraints for the EU. The UN offers a platform to promote key EU interests in multilateral global diplomacy and, thus, over the years, most UN fields of action have come to be covered by the EU and not just its Member States. Therefore, it was imperative to find ways for the EU to participate in the different bodies of the UN system. In 2011, the EU sought the right to speak at the UNGA, which represented a big step forward for the EU's external action (Participation of the European Union in the work of the United Nations, 2011). This development is important even though the EU representative will not have the right to vote, co-sponsor draft resolutions or decisions, or put forward candidates. As to the forms of participation and representation in the UNSC, the EU relies largely on its Member States to deliver its messages (Jørgensen, Wessel, 2011, pp. 261–287). With the exit of the UK from the EU, there is only one EU Member State, namely, France, that has a permanent member seat at the UNSC and an opportunity to present the EU's position in that body at any time. The continuation of UK relationship with the EU in

the UN and WTO was defined with the "Political declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom" (Political Declaration, 2019). The Declaration provides that both the UK and the EU will support ambitious, close, and lasting cooperation on external action to protect citizens from external threats, including any emerging threats, along with ensuring the prevention of conflicts, strengthening international peace and security, and that they will champion a rules-based international order and project their common values worldwide.

Structural sustainable development challenges arose especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 vaccines and their global distribution became a matter of high interest in world politics. This was mainly due to the fact that in 2021, a huge so-called "vaccination gap" emerged and vaccination inequality became evident. The EU was in the middle of the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic and, at the beginning, it showed a lack of capacities and resources, insufficient backing by EU Member States, and a lack of coordination. Moreover, the Union's vaccination distribution caused turbulence in the international system, as it had made a joint purchase of several types of vaccines, securing them for its Member States. On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that the EU was also involved with donations to third countries and global solidarity efforts through the COVAX facility (Bergner, 2023). In hindsight, the EU can now be perceived as an actor that stood strong on justice and solidarity when dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, even if at first it was mainly concerned for its own Member States' interests. Once the EU consolidated its response in coordination with the WHO, it continued pursuing multilateralism and multilateral responses, rather than closing internally – as was the case of the US. The COVID-19 crisis did not lead to an institutional repositioning of the EU within the WHO – the EU was and still is an observer in this international organisation. However, it led to greater concern on the EU's side as regards the health issues which are inevitable parts of sustainable development, and greater cooperation with the WHO – eventually marking the EU as one of the top 5 WHO contributors.

Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Finally, the greatest challenge to the contemporary international system was the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The invasion exposed the limits of the EU's soft power which was projected via the European Neighbourhood Policy towards the countries of the Eastern

Partnership. The 2008 conflict in Georgia was a signal of the rise of Russian influence on the international stage, which was not taken by the EU and its Member States with a proper understanding of Russia's interpretation of international legal principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ismayilov, 2021, p. 142). Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its brutal war against Ukraine have shaped the redefinition of the international system that has made Europe influential. At present, it is the bold displays of power in world politics that replace open channels and multilateral relations. The challenge of the Russian invasion, which takes place against the return of hard geopolitics and the weakening of multilateral institutions, puts additional pressure on the EU's actorness. The question of the EU's strategic autonomy has overwhelmed its policy action agenda.

Nevertheless, what can be observed is that now, unlike its response to the US' invasion of Iraq in 2003, the EU has a unified stance. It has remained true to the value of an ever-closer union of European peoples and amended its enlargement policy outreach to Eastern European Countries that wish to align with EU values. This includes Ukraine, Moldova, and membership potential has been offered to Georgia. Judging from the results of the Western Balkans states' accession process, where favouring stability over transition reforms brought about a complete stagnation of EU enlargement, the EU will most certainly have to alter this policy, especially the delivery of conditionality and its own decision-making on enlargement to render them more effective. Whether this entails "differentiated integration" (Schimmelfennig, Winzen, 2017) or another "Big Bang" is the political question of the time. Furthermore, the EU stepped in quickly and efficiently with regard to Ukrainian refugees, something that was not the case during the 2015 refugee crisis. The EU is using the sanctions to deal with Russia's aggression, and it provides Ukraine with regular and predictable financial support. It is thus once again that its economic power and enlargement policy represent the EU's uniquely important external action tools.

And yet, as far as world-order elements are concerned, the war in Ukraine has immensely affected the US' and China's stance towards the EU. There is "a high degree of strategic reconciliation between the USA and Europe" (Kozyrev, 2024, p. 25). However, China's "pro-Russian neutrality" has significantly complicated Europe's strategic choice *vis-à-vis* the USA and China. Western experts have begun discussing a new division of labour in transatlantic cooperation between Europe and the USA, requiring Europe to establish more autonomous military capabilities (Kozyrev, 2024, p. 25). Zhao (2024, pp. 45–59) even argues that "Europe should reconsider the

construction of a pan-European security order and develop institutional arrangements that involve Russia. Additionally, Europe should exhibit strategic autonomy by mediating the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as France and Germany did 9 years ago when they established the diplomatic platform of the Normandy Format".

Conclusions

This article has elaborated on the changes in the world order that took effect between 2004 and 2024 and how, in this context, the most pressing issues of the 21st century affect the EU's actorness. The analysis of three dimensions of the world order – its structure, mode of global governance, and form of legitimisation – reveals that the nature of the world order in 2024 differs significantly from that of 2004. In terms of structure, one can observe an evolving multipolar international system in economic issues wherein, as far as security issues are concerned, the US remains the centre of power. In this context, the EU stands out as a strong ally of one of the power centres, namely, the US. However, due to the war in Ukraine, the EU is being challenged to strengthen its actorness in defending European security; it is prompted to step from market and normative power to that of more concrete military capability. Currently, it seems unlikely to imagine Russia abandoning its military efforts in Ukraine and joining the European order, or to imagine China giving up being a neutral observer and allying itself towards either the Russian or American poles.

As for the mode of governance, the world order of 2024 has definitely moved from multilateralism towards the tendencies of the major powers to work within plurilateral interest-based groups of states. There have even been sporadic instances of unilateralism, particularly as regards the permanent members of the UNSC, such as the US and Russia, in international security and, recently, with regard to the US and China in international trade and development. To the contrary, the EU remains steadfast in its commitment to transparent multilateralism which it has confirmed within the UNGA, WTO, and WHO, and particularly when itself challenged with direct crises, e.g., Brexit, the migration crisis, and Russian aggression. The issue where the EU's multilateralism has failed is, notably, its enlargement policy. However, the EU has reacted to this challenge with decisive steps in 2022 especially due to the Ukraine war.

In terms of the third world-order element, the authors have observed a delegitimisation of the liberal world order in the last 20 years. This is mostly due to de-democratisation in the liberal hegemons, the US, and

even the EU itself, and is also due to actions undertaken by the USA which disregarded international law in 2003. Even if the US remains a hegemonic power in international security especially with regard to the NATO alliance, its behaviour has led to a propensity among various major powers (namely, Russia and China) to increasingly disregard international law, count on their (regional) hegemony or simply enforce dominance. The EU has clearly remained a steadfast advocate of the legitimacy of international law. In this regard, it is one of the most vocal global actors striving for its own legitimate leadership based on particular democratic values and universal norms. In essence, the EU continues to embody *the* normative power in the world order. As a normative power, it has seized new opportunities for leveraging its economic capabilities, especially within the WTO, regarding the definition of digital trade regulations and providing human rights-informed solutions to sustainable development and transition to greener economies. Consequently, the EU also has the potential to remain a strong market power, especially with regard to digital trade agendas and artificial intelligence.

Finally, the prediction of a rather long-term playout of the war in Ukraine calls for the EU's actorness to advance its security-assuring capability. As international actors evidently expect the EU to play a more active role in addressing military challenges to international peace and security, a hard-power buildup signals a potential narrowing of the EU's capabilities/expectations gap. However, military power might confront the EU's market and normative power actorness. If anything, the 20-year changes in the world order have come to underscore the imperative for the EU to nurture its unique capabilities as both a market and normative power, especially via the enlargement policy. The authors thus conclude that a potential development of the EU's security capability needs to be in coordination with and complementary to its market capabilities and liberal international norms, e.g., with a focus on the strong attributes of the civilian role of the military and serve only defensive purposes. Should the EU be able and willing to capitalise on this opportunity, the EU capabilities/expectations gap could shrink further, bringing highly positive effects to its global actorness.

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