International Relations and Diplomacy, June 2021, Vol. 9, No. 06, 232-243
doi: 10.17265/2328-2134/2021.06.003

The Evolution of the EU's Security Model Through the Lenses of the Balkans

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As the world stage evolves, the EU has faced multiple security challenges in terms of instability and geostrategic competition starting in its back yard. Since the end of the Cold War, the security model of Europe has been evolving as a response to internal as well as to external challenges. The Balkans has since played a key role in the European security system and governance. However, the Western Balkans remains fragile, and the external pressures and internal divisions could deliver fresh instability to the region. Thus, this scenario forms a fit-for-purpose case study to test the EU's future security model. It can be argued that the EU has the power of adaptation and growth, although its internal malfunctions have scrutinised its influence in the region and beyond, while other great powers urge to fill the power vacuum. As a result, a quantum leap forward in EU leadership appears to be critical. This article first outlines the EU's deepening and widening security sector. Second, it examines the weaknesses and strengths of the EU's current security model. It then observes the role and perspectives of the region's key strategic allies and competitors: the United States, Russia, and China. Finally, it discusses the EU's future model.

Keywords: European Union, Western Balkans, security, unity, power, world order

Introduction

The polycrisis which the European Union (EU) has been facing in the last decade(s) has generated an intense debate on the bloc's relevance and power as a regional, as well as a global player. For its critics, the EU has been viewed as a less credible actor, incapable of decisively responding to key international challenges. On the other hand, advocates of the Union defend that it remains relevant, despite its multi-dimensional crisis, especially due to its economic weight and humanitarian role in the world scene.

Key scholars have defined and discussed various concepts of "power" for the European Union. In particular, the EU has been examined, essentially but not exclusively, as a "soft" (Nye, 2004), "humanitarian" (Sjursen, 2006), particularly "normative" (Manners, 2002; 2009), "transformative" power (Grabbe, 2006), as well as a "superpower" (McCormick, 2007).

In this study, power is observed in a holistic manner, in all these dimensions, as an "ability" and a "strength"[1], for the purpose of validating the European project's transformation and its shifting role in the new world order.

The Western Balkans forms a credibility test for the EU's regional and global actorness. The Western Balkans is part of Europe, constituting a significant historical, geographical and cultural part of it. Indeed, as

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[1] See power defintion and meaning in Cambridge Dictionary online: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/power.

stated by the European Commission, the "prospect of full EU membership for the Western Balkans is in the Union's very own political, security and economic interest" […] "Maintaining and enhancing this policy is thus indispensable for the EU's credibility, for the EU' success and for the EU's influence in the region and beyond—especially at times of heightened geopolitical competition" (COM(2020) 57 Final, p. 1).

Howorth (2016) also claimed that the "world is entering a period of power transition, at the outcome of which some new form of global order (or disorder) is likely to emerge". Thus, the Western Balkans forms not only an enlargement test but also a geopolitical one.

In reality, the EU's internal constraints have so far scrutinised its global image and range in the region, while other major powers rush to fill the gap. Indeed, Russia has managed to exercise an increased influence on countries, such as Serbia and Montenegro, while successfully encouraging resistance to an increased North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion. Unlike Russia, China has no ethnonationalist links with the region to build on. Nevertheless, it does have the economic weight and political ambition to further enlarge its involvement in the region (Larsen, 2020). Furthermore, the United States' (US) shift of geostrategic focus in the last years has increasingly facilitated those trends. The US and the EU have shared the same values and interests in the Balkans, yet they are far from setting a clear and common strategy.

In this context, a series of key questions arise:

1. What has been the security transformation mode of the EU in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War?

2. What have been its main fragilities and potentialities so far?

3. To what extent does the involvement of major powers in the region pose a challenge to existing structures of world order?

4. What are the lessons to be drawn for the EU's future global model?

In order to answer these questions, the current work employs a qualitative analysis, mainly based on document-based research. The documents collected, studied and used herewith are directly related to the subject of the research.

As a means of testing the EU's regional and global power and its future model, a case study research design has been employed, namely focusing on the changing security role of the EU in the Western Balkans.

The article focuses on the security transformation of the EU and its relevance and power as a regional, as well as a global player, taking three steps into account. First, the article observes the changing dynamics in the world order in the post-Cold War period and evaluates the EU's changing security responses, through the lenses of the Western Balkans. Subsequently, it explores the challenges within the European project itself, as well as in relation to the role and perceptions of its main strategic partners and competitors in the region: the US, Russia, and China. Ultimately, it reflects on the future scenarios of the EU's model.

In reality, this article argues that the EU is in a constant security transformation mode. However, its internal constraints have put its influence in the region and beyond to the test, while other major powers rush to fill the power gap. Consequently, a quantum leadership leap forward for the EU seems crucial.

The European Union in a Constant Security Transformation

During the Cold War, the world seemed well defined and easier to be explained. It was a bipolar world, mainly divided between two great powers, the Soviet Union and the United States and their spheres of influence and domain. Europe was also divided between East and West, besides being also "comfortably" and

respectively protected by those two superpowers. With the end of the Cold War, hopes for the birth of a new era of prosperity and peace arose. This peace dismantled swiftly, as the world, and particularly Europe, came under pressure due to a dramatic crisis in its backyard—Yugoslavia. The rapid escalation of the war and the atrocities that accompanied the struggle involved most international players, bewildering the entire European continent.

However, it was the United States and NATO that (re)acted, firstly militarily intervening in Bosnia in 1995 and then in Kosovo in 1999. On the other hand, the EU failed to speak with one voice and undertake responsibility for the security of its own continent, revealing the weaknesses of the European security architecture, besides the urgent need to develop a reformed and stronger one (Bradford, 2000; Gross, 2007; Stavridis, 1994; 2001; Howorth, 2014; Becker, 2017).

The beginning of the new century was marked by the war on terror. The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, and particularly the Iraq War, intensified academic concerns over terrorism, religious fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, failed states, as well as an increasing American unilateralist approach towards world politics (Kagan, 2004; 2008). Similarly, the rise of the powerful and influential alliance of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), as well as an upward "middle power" activism seriously undermined the post-war liberal world order (Cooper & Shaw, 2009; Gowan, 2012; Cooper, 2016).

Since 2011, this uncertainty has been deepened by the Arab Spring and the war in Syria, the rise of the Islamic State and the terrorist attacks in the heart of Europe, besides the refugee crisis and the aggressive policy of Russia in Ukraine and beyond. As Emmanouilidis (2012) pointed out, "[t]he world is in the midst of a major transformative moment and the European Union and its members are under pressure to respond to the fundamental changes and challenges 'out there'" (p. 83).

In this scenario of constant security transformations and challenges, the EU has managed to adapt and reform, especially if one considers the novelty of the European construction in itself. However, in such a highly unstable global system, the EU still lacks the power—and the will—to speak with one voice and adequately respond to the pressures beforehand.

In terms of political and institutional powers, the EU has evolved as a "surrealistic" creature rather than a conventional structure. The Union is a *sui generis* international organisation that combines both intergovernmental and federal characteristics. The Maastricht Treaty (1992) instituted a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), opening the road for a series of developments to unravel, thus enhancing the Union's objectives, instruments and achievements in the field. The Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2001) Treaties came to pursue, though timidly, a more efficient decision-making process.

However, it was only with the Treaty of Lisbon (2007) that the Union was provided with a legal personality and an institutional structure for its external services. The Lisbon Treaty came to enhance the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice President of the Commission, establishing a range of new actors and institutions, as the new permanent President of the European Council and the European External Action Service (EEAS). It also upgraded the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)—being now an integral part of the CFSP.

In reality, the EU can act as a sole power on a variety of external policies areas, such as signing international treaties alongside sovereign states and acting as the world's largest contributor of foreign development aid. The EU is the third largest economy in the world, after China and the US (Eurostat 84/2020).

Yet, the EU is not a nation-state but an international organisation. It is an edifice in constant construction. Thus, it seems to be in a permanent evolutionary process. This reality has marked and dictated the European responses to its regional as well as international tests.

By analysing the EU's role in the 21st century, Emmanouilidis identifies a lack of strategic orientation in dealing with these quests, a gap in the EU's legitimacy and a stagnation in the European project itself. Hence, the revitalisation of the integration project and the EU's ability to influence regional and global developments are key steps to better respond to the challenges ahead.

Malfunctions' Diagnosis in the Process

In practice, the EU has a complex political and institutional modus operandi that has long hampered its ability to cope with geopolitical challenges in its neighbourhood and in the world (Vimont, 2015; Riddervold, Trondal, & Newsome, 2021). It could be argued that the EU faces three main malfunctions.

First of all, the Union copes with a series of leadership gap issues. According to the Lisbon Treaty, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has the main jurisdiction over the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Nevertheless, the Permanent President of the European Council and the six-month rotating Council President and the President of the Commission also represent the EU in the world stage. The foreign policy and diplomatic efforts of Member States operate in a parallel way, making this picture even blurrier. Secondly, the decision-making process is essentially an intergovernmental model of governance. Therefore, unanimity is the general rule for decision-making in the CFSP's and CSDP's frameworks. The foreign strategic orientation of the EU is delineated by the European Council, composed by the heads of state or governments of its Member States.

In the Council, there are only a few cases which qualify a majority voting (QMV). According to Article 31 of the TEU, there can only be four exceptions where

> the Council shall act by qualified majority:
>
> 1. When adopting a decision defining a Union action or position on the basis of a decision of the European Council relating to the Union's strategic interests and objectives, as referred to in Article 22(1),
>
> 2. When adopting a decision defining a Union action or position, on a proposal which the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy has presented following a specific request from the European Council, made on its own initiative or that of the High Representative,
>
> 3. When adopting any decision implementing a decision defining a Union action or position,
>
> 4. When appointing a special representative in accordance with Article 33.
>
> […]
>
> The European Council may unanimously adopt a decision stipulating that the Council shall act by a qualified majority in cases other than those referred to in paragraph 2. (known as the "passerelle" clause).

Although the Treaty has provided some ways to sidestep unanimity and help drive CFSP's action, as those above-mentioned, Member States have favoured the political consensus reached through unanimity.

In reality, the EU looks like an institutional and political "Lernaean Hydra"[2], with a growing number of actors and processes in different aspects of its foreign policy.

The European Union has been in constant transformation, troubled by what Howorth also calls the "myth

[2] According to the Greek mythology, Lernaean Hydra was gigantic multi-headed water-serpent. For each of her heads that would be decapitated, two more were sprung forth.

of a European security autonomy". Indeed, a third constraint of the European Union as a regional and global player is its actual level of autonomy (independence) *vis a vis* the American power. Since its genesis, the European project has sought to overpass the zero-sum game logic of security that had led to two World Wars. Therefore, European integration was idealised as a collective peace and stability project. In practical terms, specific endogenous and exogenous factors determined that endeavour. On the one hand, the need to commit Germany not to use its future power to pursue military ends in Europe, and on the other hand, the US statesmanship, namely the Marshall Aid and the creation of a transatlantic alliance to better counterbalance the Soviet threat (Howorth, 2014; Renard & Biscop 2012; Biscop, 2021).

The Balkans Test—Enlargement and Geopolitics

NATO and the US have figured as the main security providers for most European Member States since the genesis of the European Community at the time. Nevertheless, efforts at the European level to expand European integration in the area of defence have utterly failed, as have the proposals for the creation of a European Defence Community. Some steps in that direction were taken in the 1970s, through the new European Political Cooperation, which allowed the development of a genuine system of cooperation in the field of foreign policy, opening the road to the CFSP under the Maastricht Treaty and later to the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) that was the result of the Treaty of Amsterdam, currently the CSDP. However, in practice, the Union's internal constrains determined a narrow view of its power and relevance in the regional and international scene. This was mainly understood as a civilian power, mostly based on a politico-military intergovernmental cooperation. The CFSP was an attempt to strengthen the EU's political power and influence in order to match its economic weight, as expected for its Member States and partners (Renard & Biscop, 2012). Nonetheless, this effort was still not proven to be enough to break the EU's significant dependence on the US and NATO.

As previously mentioned, this dependence on the US was dramatically revealed in the case of the Balkan wars of the 1990s. In the summer of 1995, after three years of massacres of hundreds of thousands of civilians in Bosnia, the US took on the leadership role to end the civil war. In 1998-1999, NATO and the UN intervened to end the crisis in Kosovo, while the EU appeared weak, far from the image envisaged in the Maastricht Treaty. Ever since, the US has expanded its political presence in the Balkans through bilateral political and security relations, as well as through NATO's membership. This premise was not necessarily antagonic to the EU's strategy. Indeed, the collapse of the Soviet Union allowed plans to extend the stability and security zone created and promoted by NATO to build a new Europe, which has been described as "undivided, peaceful, and democratic" by Bill Clinton (Daalder & Hanlon, 2000). Such Europe is more likely to be a partner of the US in meeting the many challenges of the global age, and much less likely to pose a threat to the US' interests.

Daalder and Hanlon (2000) claimed that "[i]f one looks at the economic and military contribution that the United States and Europe have made to peace and stability in the Balkans over the last decade, it is evident that Europe has carried much of the load" (p. 166). Europe has spent in non-military assistance three times more than the United States (nearly $17 billion vs. $5.5 billion). In reality, humanitarian and development assistance were feasible priorities for the EU.

The fall of the Soviet Union, and particularly the Yugoslav wars, placed Europe in a position of undelayable decisions. The need for a decisive momentum to reinforce its civilian and military capacities

seemed more urgent than ever before. Simultaneously, the EU's inability to speak with one voice further revealed its weaknesses and formed an important test for its credibility. In the beginning of the conflict, while Germany supported Slovenia's and Croatia's right to self-determination during the war in Yugoslavia, other Member States, such as the United Kingdom, France and Greece resisted the German policy stance.

The EU's inability to formulate an appropriate response to the conflicts gave to a large extent a decisive impetus to create the ESDP. Under the umbrella of ESDP, the EU made some notable advances in its regional presence in the Western Balkans, mainly as a post-conflict stabilisation actor, contributing to security transition and reconstruction operations. A series of missions were launched with that purpose: first of all, the takeover mission from NATO's Operation Allied Harmony, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM/CONCORDIA), known as Operation Concordia, on 31 March 2003. This was followed by the EU Police Mission (EUPOL) Proxima, on 15 December 2003, which in turn led to the launch of an EU Police Advisory Team (EUPAT), on 15 December 2005. As for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), it has hosted two missions: the EU Police Mission (EUPM) launched on 1 January 2003 and a military operation EUFOR Althea, launched on 2 December 2004. Both missions are respectively takeover missions from the UN's International Police Task Force (IPTF) and NATO's Stabilisation Force (SFOR).

The largest civilian mission so far under the CSDP has been the launch of EULEX Kosovo in 2008, aimed at assisting the local authorities in establishing sustainable and independent rule of law institutions. EULEX Kosovo and EUFOR Althea are two institutions still running CSDP operations in the Balkans. That makes EUFOR Althea not only the largest, with some 7,000 troops at the outset, but also the longest EU military operation. (Major & Mölling, 2020).

The EU's approach was not only a post-conflict stabilisation approach, focused on security, but also an enlargement approach, envisioning a further integrated Europe. As early as 1999, a Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) was launched as the framework for the preparation of the Western Balkan countries for their future EU accession. In the same year, a Stability Pact was setup as a broader initiative involving all key international players. The Copenhagen European Council in December 2002 and the European Council in March 2003 stressed that the future of the Western Balkans is within the European Union. In order to further strengthen the relations between the EU and the Western Balkans, the conclusions of the Council of 16 June of the same year included an annex entitled "The Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans: moving towards European integration" (10369/03 Presse 166). The Council clearly stated that "[t]he Western Balkans and support to their preparation for future integration into European structures and ultimate membership into the Union is a high priority for the EU" (ibid, p. 11), while also emphasising that the peace and success of such endeavour depend on their own efforts. "The EU stresses that the pace of further movement of the Western Balkan countries towards the EU lies in their own hands and will depend on each country's performance in implementing reforms […]" (ibid, p. 12).

The 2003 European Council in Thessaloniki reiterated that all SAP countries were potential candidates for EU membership[3]. In June 2003, European Member States, together with the leaders of the Western Balkan countries, reached an agreement on the Thessaloniki Declaration, releasing a joint statement once again confirming the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries (Prifti, 2013, Munter, 2021/EP).

[3] The SAP was replaced by the Regional Cooperation Council in 2008.

Since then, the region has become closer to a full EU membership. In 2004, Slovenia became a member of the EU alongside other nine countries from Central and Eastern Europe, and three years later, Romania and Bulgaria joined. In 2013, Croatia also joined the EU. However, the other Western Balkans countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (European Commission. (2020), despite having requested their accession to the EU between 2008 and 2009, remained far from achieving their objectives. The EU has kept the process open, yet there has been a stalemate in the European project of enlargement in the last decade. As Balfour and Stratulat (2015) pointed out, "[t]he shorthand for capturing the impact of these developments on the Balkans is 'enlargement fatigue', although symptoms and consequences run deeper" (p. 19). The tools and methods of the enlargement process have been improving, although the transition to an open market economy and multiparty democracy has been challenging. Between 2001 and 2008, notable growth was achieved, although mostly based on a rapid market opening and economic integration with the EU. European capitals mainly fostered domestic consumption rather than structural reforms and job creation, which consequently led to the rise of public and private debts rather than development and reform (Bonomi & Reljić, 2017; Bonomi, 2020; Plakoudas, 2020).

Since the 2008 financial crisis, the perspectives on the process of economic convergence of Western Balkans countries towards the EU27 has been discouraging. Although economic ties remain key to the common present and future—the EU was the main partner of the Western Balkans, for both exports (69%) and imports (54%) in 2019 and in 2020, with manufactured goods making up 77% of EU exports to and 80% of EU imports from the Western Balkans (Eurostat April 2021)—the six countries remain among the poorest in Europe. The average GDP per capita for the six countries is half that of Central European countries and only one quarter of that of Western Europe. Remarkably, the European Economic and Social Committee indicated that "[i]t is estimated that full convergence with EU living standards could take as long as 40 years" (Press Release No. 19/2018).

At the same time, corruption and organised crime are some of the main problems that the Western Balkan countries still face. Serbia and Montenegro have inclined to authoritarianism and declined in civil liberties over the last years (CSS Analyses in Security Policy 2020). In this context, the enforcement of the rule of law, state-building and better governance emerge as priority concerns in the region. Additionally, the last decade has coincided with the beginning of a polycrisis era for the European Union itself. The Union has been at the epicentre of a series of challenges, including the refugee crisis, the disintegration threat of Brexit and the current global health crisis, with a still unknown duration, scale and impact on the European integration model itself.

As far as Europe's security strategy is concerned, it has been driven by a reactive rather than a proactive mode. Indeed, the first security strategy of the EU entitled "A Safe Europe in a Better World" was adopted in 2003 (15895/03) (Council of the European Union, 2003). This document was established in a period marked by the beginning of the war against terrorism, following the devasted terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Those events brought terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and failed states, regional conflicts as the most urgent issues of the agenda of the 21st century. The new 2008 version came to add cybercrime as well as climate change to the long list of 21st century security perils.

The following years, a series of events—such as the Arab Spring and the unrest in the North of Africa and

Middle East, including the war in Syria and the refugee crisis it provoked, as well as the annexation of Crimea by Russia—all further underscored the sad realisation that "peace and stability in Europe are not a given". Hence, because of and due to its own existential crisis—accompanied by a crisis of credibility towards the European project itself—the EU has shown some paralysis, not having to exhibit great milestones in the security and defence field. A new security strategy came only 13 years after the first document was published. The "A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy" published in 2016 came to bring some dynamic to the EU's political direction and priorities in this new area (European Union, 2016). The Global Strategy, a document of a "principles-based pragmatism", envisions a more secure Europe build on a credible, reactive and cohesive union.[4]

In line with this "fresh" start, the EU adopted a new enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans countries in 2018. The strengthening of the rule of law, fighting corruption and organised crime, are the cornerstones of the EU-Western Balkans strategy of 2018 and the new accession talks framework of 2020. It offered a schedule for Serbia and Montenegro to potentially join the Union by 2025, having also outlined the next steps for accession for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia. In March 2020, the European Council gave the green light to open accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, besides also introducing a new reformed "accession talks" framework. Yet, Bulgaria still maintains its veto on Skopje starting accession talks over bilateral green zones of disaccord.

Given the geostrategic contiguity of the EU with such a "patchwork of nations" and "ethnicities that overlap with territorial borders", the significance of NATO's integration for stability has also been a key stabilisation factor. Serbia and BiH are the only States that have not yet joined. The United States has maintained a stronghold in the region since the end of the Cold War, especially as a means of countering Russian influence, particularly Serbia that has traditional and close ties with Russia (Bagheri, 2020).

Larsen claims that "[t]oday, it is a region in which NATO and the EU compete for influence alongside Russia and China" (Larsen, 2020, p. 1). Russia indeed has a strong presence in the Western Balkans—namely in strategic sectors, such as energy, heavy industry, and banking—that offers an alternative to the European way. The Balkan countries, such as Serbia, also receive Russian military equipment. The West's efforts to bring the Balkan states into NATO and the EU have been calculated and dealt by Moscow as a plan to counterbalance and control Russia's power projection in the region.

Russia's strategy is not based on the promotion of the rule of law, human and democratic values in the region. It uses the card of identity politics, based on its historical and cultural links with some countries, as is the common religious link with Serbia (Larsen, 2020; Bagheri, 2020). China has also stepped in with an undeniable economic and investment potential that further complicates the geo-economic landscape and undermines the EU's relevance as a key provider of economic growth and stability. Indeed, since the launch of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has financed several prominent projects in the Western Balkans, from bridge construction to energy infrastructure. In diplomatic terms, the 17 + 1 (China and Central and Eastern Europe Countries) initiative has expanded cooperation between Beijing and the CEE member countries, including the Balkans. This expansion also has political and security implications.

[4] It is important to note that the same threats are mentioned later in the internal security strategic documents of the European Union. The first "European Agenda on Security", adopted in 2015, prioritised interconnected and with a strong cross-border dimension threats, such as terrorism, organised crime and cybercrime (COM(2015) 185 Final, p. 2). In the same line of reasoning, five years later, the Commission launched a new EU Security Strategy "EU Security Union Strategy" (COM(2020) 605 Final).

Undeniably, the Chinese alternative does not require the fulfilment of any comprehensive reforms from those states. Adversely, respect for democracy, rule of law and human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities are essential for eventual EU accession to the EU.

However, all these are the challenges that eventually urge Europe to think about its future model more than ever before and determine the mould inside which it will be evolving in the future.

Scenarios for the Future

> The Union's unique power and influence in a wider European region is based on both material and non-material elements. The combination of different types of resources and power means that the EU is undoubtedly the agent that is best equipped for promoting the wellbeing of Europeans. (Raik, 2006, p. 79)

A debate based on the White paper on the future of Europe: Five scenarios (COM(2017) 2025 Final) started in 2017. The document offered a picture of the state of the Union, depending on one of the following five choices Europe can make in the future: to carry on, focusing on delivering a positive reform agenda; to do nothing but the Single Market; willing Member States to do more together and only in specific areas; to do less more efficiently; to do much more together (European Commission, 2017). The debate ended with the elections of the European Parliament of 2019. However, the same questions still remain today.

Indeed, a Conference on the Future of Europe started in 2021, aiming at offering citizens a chance to shape how the European Union will look in five, 10, or 20 years from now (European Union, 2021).

The Commission has drawn a relatively picture pessimistic.

> In 1900, Europe accounted for around 25% of global population. By 2060, it will account for less than 5%. […] Europe's economic power is also expected to wane in relative terms, accounting for much less than 20% of the world's GDP in 2030, down from around 22% today. (COM(2017) 2025 Final, p. 8)

In addition, Europe is ageing fast, and life expectancy is reaching unprecedented levels. With a median age of 45, Europe will be the "oldest" region in the world by 2030 (ibid, p. 10).

Instability in the EU's neighbourhood, increasing militarisation around the world, terrorism, large-scale cyberattacks are some vivid illustrations of the common global threats and challenges the Union faces. At the same time, although NATO continues to provide hard security for most EU countries, this is not a given for the future.

Although a future model of the European Union is difficult to be drawn, it seems clear that the EU needs to continue doing more and to do it together. "Soft", "hard", and "transformational" security power will need to go hand in hand in the future.

Final Remarks

Europe's future model is in the making. Nevertheless, there are some important lessons to be drawn given its current power projection, prospects in the Balkans and competition with major regional and global power in the region and in the world.

In order to determine the EU's responsibility towards its neighbourhood, one needs to understand the nature of the EU's capacity and power in the region. Hence, the primary European challenge in the Balkans is the European Union's model itself. The EU is a project in the making which has been mainly built on its own failures. Every brick leaders have been putting on the European construction that has been the result of a new

"emergency" situation. Yet, the EU needs to come to terms with some of its most high-pitched fragilities: a rigid basically technocratic structure that lacks clear governance and democratic recognition. Thus, it lacks a common voice and subsequently acknowledgement and relevance in the world stage.

Under this prism, the road ahead needs to begin by (re)thinking the future power of the Union. The EU has the economic as well as the military potential to take that decisive step forward, from a successful "soft" power as it is today, to a future credible power capable of assuming first and foremost the security responsibility for its own citizens. The future of the Western Balkans will be revealing the Union's ultimate successes and failures in that endeavour. The EU has engaged with the region since the end of the Cold War, in the framework of stabilisation and security policies, as well as accession policies. However, the multi-crisis state of the Union, besides the backward steps taken by those countries in the last years, has resulted in a "fatigue" that posed on hold the overall development of the region.

Given the changing dynamic of the existing structures of the world order, including the US's shifting interests, Eastern power's geopolitical affirmations and the multiple security threats that accompany that process, the Western Balkans' integration into the EU remains a top priority for Europe's stability.

Nonetheless, the nature of the transformation of the region will strongly depend on the efforts taken by the Western Balkan countries themselves. Undoubtedly, the EU's ability to accurately understand the interests and role of external players, as well as its own urgent renovation needs, will determine its capacity to turn down barriers and reach its true potentialities, in the Balkans and beyond.

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