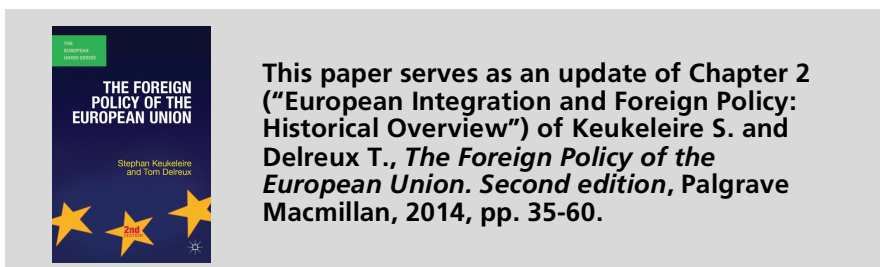# EU Foreign Policy in Times of Existential Crises:
Instability in the Neighbourhood, Brexit, Trump, and beyond

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'New challenges: withering Europe, withering West?' – this was the title of the concluding section of the chapter with the historical overview in our 2014 book. In that section, we sketched a rather gloomy picture of the developments in the EU, Europe and the West in the period 2010-2014 (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014: 58-60). Merely three years later, the evolution proves to have been even more problematic and unpredictable than we could foresee in 2014. This conclusion also appears in the very first sentences of the EU's new 'Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy' (EUGS), presented by HR/VP Mogherini in 2016: 'We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned' (EUGS 2016: 13). Internally, the sovereign debt crisis was followed by the refugee crises, a growing terrorist threat, the rise of anti-EU sentiments and parties in various member states, and the UK's decision to leave the EU. Externally, the EU was unable to control the escalation of crises, wars and instability in its southern and eastern neighbourhood, and the presidency of Donald Trump in the United States is likely to be another turning point that potentially undermines some long-standing paradigms in the EU's international and transatlantic relations. The following sections first examine the developments in the EU's neighbourhood, then discuss the new EU Global Strategy and finally zoom in to a number of existential crises the EU is facing today.

The EU's neighbourhood: from 'ring of friends' to 'arc of instability'

As HR/VP Mogherini observed in her policy paper in preparation of the EUGS, the EU saw itself increasingly surrounded by an 'arc of instability' within a broader context of an increasingly 'connected, contested and complex world' (2015: 123-137). Instead of a ring of friends and well-governed countries, as initially envisaged in the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the EU became encircled by an 'arc of fire' as both the Arab revolts and the Maidan revolution in Ukraine turned out differently than initially thought. Indeed, the developments in the east and in the south have in common that, at the outset, they gave the impression to move into a direction of liberal democratization supported by the EU, yet ultimately resulted in a situation that was even more opposed to the values and objectives promoted by the EU than before. Moreover, instead of contributing to stability and peace, interventions and actions by various European players may have contributed to the instability in the region.

In the Eastern neighbourhood, the EU's foreign policy initially seemed to be rather successful. Negotiations on Association Agreements (AAs) with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia were progressing well, and the protests on Maidan Square in Kiev and the ousting of the pro-Russia Ukrainian president Yanukovych in early 2014 pointed to the EU's increasing influence and force of attraction. However, less than one year later the situation was completely reversed. The EU was taken by surprise by the abrupt Russian reaction on what was perceived as the EU's incremental geopolitical move to the East (see Cross and Karolewski 2017). The covert Russian military intervention in Crimea resulted in the formal annexation of Ukrainian peninsula by Russia. Ukraine was further destabilised through the outright war in the Donbass region in the east of the country. The conflict resulted in thousands of casualties, including nearly 300 casualties after the downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 between Amsterdam and Kuala Lumpur. And also beyond its 'near abroad', Russia presented itself more and more as an assertive competing power, particularly in Syria.

Whereas Germany and France initially managed to broker a ceasefire agreement for the Donbass region with Russia and Ukraine (in the framework of the so-called 'Normandy format'), this 'Minsk II' agreement was not fully implemented. EU member states were able to overcome their differences, inspired by their different geopolitical situation and trade interests in relationship to Russia, and agreed on a range of sanctions against Russia. However, the crisis ultimately seems to have turned out very negatively for the EU. On the one hand, it led to a serious aggravation of relations with Russia, with questions being raised on how long the EU would be able to keep its unified position towards Russia (Forsberg and Haukkala 2016). On the other hand, the EU's position in the Eastern neighbourhood and its structural foreign policy towards that region is considerably weakened, with the

upgraded ENP being of little avail (Bouris and Schumacher 2016; Gstöhl and Schunz 2017) (see also Chapters 11 and 12).

The EU did not fare any better in the Southern neighbourhood. The Arab revolutions and uprising in 2011 initially led to the removal of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen and to prudent reforms in various other countries. However, the EU did not manage to present itself as a credible and relevant actor to the population and elites in the Arab world. Partially due to the financial crisis in the EU itself, the EU was not able to substantially support the political, societal and economic structural reforms, as was also reflected in the very cautious adaptation of the ENP. The popularity of Islamic parties in the first democratic elections in the region and, more in general, the strengthened position of a wide range of Islamic actors demonstrated that Europe was not the role model for the region, but that competing political and societal models were gaining strength in the EU's southern neighbourhood.

Moreover, whereas the UK and France had taken the lead in the military intervention which ousted the Libyan dictator Gaddafi, the Europeans were not able to contribute to stability and security in the aftermath of this intervention. They could neither formulate an adequate answer to the rise of Daesh nor to Iraq and Syria slipping into chaos, civil war, humanitarian disasters and a territory for a proxy war with the US, the Gulf states, Iran, Turkey and Russia as the main actors. And although the EU could claim a diplomatic success in negotiations with Iran on the Iranian nuclear programme, the wider picture in the Southern Neighbourhood remains predominantly negative (Bouris and Schumacher 2016; Horst, Jünemann and Rothe 2013) (see also Chapters 11 and 12).

The 2016 EU Global Strategy

The radical changes in its strategic environment compelled the EU to rethink the strategic vision behind its foreign policy. HR/VP Mogherini was invited to provide an answer to the changed strategic environment. In June 2016, she presented the 'Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy' (EUGS), which aims to replace the 2003 'European Security Strategy' as the main document outlining the EU's overall foreign policy approach.

Compared to the 2003 European Security Strategy (see Chapter 2), the EUGS was rather well received (e.g. Biscop 2016; Dijkstra 2016). The document reflects the changing reality and mood in Europe and the world, resulting in more modesty and realism. The emphasis on "principled pragmatism" – i.e. 'a foreign policy that is based both on realistic assessment and idealistic aspiration' (Cross 2016) – not only points to a less idealistic and more realistic approach than in 2003, but also to the EU's struggle in reconciling values and interests.

The more realistic assessment of the EU's strategic environment is also mirrored in the priorities defined in the EUGS. Interestingly (yet probably also illustrative for EU foreign policy that this is remarkable), the first priority outlined in the Global Strategy is the security of the EU itself: Europeans must take greater responsibility for their own security (in complementarity and cooperation with NATO), strengthen defence cooperation, create a solid European defence industry, and deal with the new security threats (terrorism, cyber security and energy security). Investing in state and societal resilience in third countries and regions through more tailor-made policies is the second priority. The new focus on individuals and societies reflects an awareness that individuals and societies were indeed often neglected in the EU's traditionally state-focused policies (see also Box 1.1 in Keukeleire and Delreux 2014). A third priority is strengthening an integrated approach to conflicts and crises, which is a further expansion of the EU's 'comprehensive approach' (see also Chapter 6) and which also emphasizes more human security and inclusive governance. The two last priorities reflect two of the EU's long-lasting policies: fostering cooperative regional orders in other parts of the world and the need to strengthen and transform the global governance system.

Existential crises: the refugee crisis, Brexit and Trump

Refugee crisis

The crises in the Southern neighbourhood resulted in millions of refugees in the region, which had internal consequences for the EU. Having failed to contribute to a solution for the millions of refugees in the Middle East and the Mediterranean area, the European countries were from 2014 on directly confronted with the fall-out of the various crises. In 2015 around a million people crossed the Mediterranean, with the majority aiming for asylum in Western European countries such as Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK. A lack of EU unity and effectiveness in dealing with this situation coincided with an inability to address the sources and causes of the refugee crisis, with humanitarian catastrophes at both sides of the EU's borders, putting the Schengen zone into question, and strong societal polarization in individual EU member states (putting strong pressure on traditional parties). This cocktail led to existential debates about the nature of 'Europe'.

Two key moments defined the EU's approach towards the refugee crises. The first one was German Chancellor Merkel's 'Wir schaffen dass' statement of mid-2015 and the German decision to open the borders for the hundreds of thousands of refugees who were literally walking in the direction of Germany. Merkel's decision was praised by some for providing a moral compass to Europe, yet condemned by others for endangering European societies and values or being another example of a German dictate. The dividing impact of the refugee crisis appeared in the strong opposition of several Eastern European countries, which were outvoted in the Council, to a Commission proposal on a mandatory reallocation of asylum seekers between the member states. The second key moment was

the controversial March 2016 EU-Turkey deal, which was driven by the mounting internal political pressure in several EU member states and which aimed at curbing the influx of refugees and stopping the people smuggling in the Mediterranean waters between Turkey and the EU border (see also Chapter 10). That the EU had to rely on Turkey for tackling the refugee crisis – despite the growing antagonism and complexity in EU-Turkey relations (Aydin-Düzgit and Tocci 2015) – is another example of the connected, contested and complex environment in which the EU has to conduct its foreign policy.

Brexit

Together with the earlier financial crisis and sovereign debt crisis which had already undermined the legitimacy and credibility of the EU, the refugee crisis contributed to the further rise of Euroscepticism and anti-EU parties in various member states. The resulting existential crisis about the EU in its current shape was reinforced by the decision of the UK to leave the EU after the June 2016 Brexit referendum.

The victory of the 'Leave'-camp in the referendum and the subsequent choice of the new UK government for a 'hard Brexit' resulted in a major shock wave in the EU, as this implies that the UK in principle will leave the EU in 2019. Brexit will considerably weaken the EU as an international actor, as it not only further undermines the EU's internal and external credibility and legitimacy, but it also means the exit of one of the EU's most powerful member states, in terms of economic weight, military power, and diplomatic reach (see also Chapter 5). The EU will indeed lose important assets that the UK previously contributed to the EU's foreign policy and the EU's credibility as international actor: its special diplomatic relationships with certain third countries (particularly the US and the Commonwealth countries); its considerable defense capabilities and the willingness to employ them; its influential position in a number of international organizations (with Brexit for instance implying a halving of EU member states in the permanent members of the UN Security Council); its role in the Franco-British engine that has allowed the EU in the past to make progress in the field of security and defense; or the attractiveness of the UK's market as part of the EU's trade policies. However, the impact on the EU's foreign policy will be very uneven, as, on the one hand, the UK has played a crucial role in for instance the CSDP's naval operation Atalanta in the Horn of Africa or in diplomatic negotiations with Iran, but on the other hand the UK has been a lukewarm and selective supporter of the EU's foreign policy, remaining for instance largely absent in many other CSPD missions or in the mediations efforts during the Ukraine crisis.

The actual impact of Brexit will depend on various factors, including the formal arrangements that will be made between the UK and the EU (particularly regarding trade policy and diplomatic cooperation); the extent to which the UK and the EU will continue cooperation in a pragmatic way in

cases of clear shared interests; the extent to which the UK will choose to prioritise economic and diplomatic relations and cooperation with the US and other powers and region in the world (and manage to gain advantageous deals through these 'special relations'). Another major question is whether Brexit will only be the start of a process of disengagement of other EU member states from the EU's foreign policy or, even more fundamentally, of a further disintegration of the EU; or whether Brexit will stimulate the other EU member states to strengthen the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, for instance through Permanent Structured Cooperation (Arts. 42(6) and 46 TEU) or other formulas to go forward with a core group of member states.

Trump

The election of Donald Trump as new American president in November 2016 meant another shock wave reaching the EU, with potentially far-reaching effects for the EU's foreign policy. Although it is not yet clear how the 'America first' policy of the Trump Administration will unfold in the longer term, several of his declared foreign policy objectives go counter the foreign policy goals and principles of the EU (Walt 2016). They include the EU's choice for multilateralism; the promotion of free trade and the ambition to conclude a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) agreement with the US; the EU's climate change policy; the promotion of democracy, human rights and state-building as core objectives of EU foreign policy; and the agreement with Iran on its nuclear capabilities (which was one of the EU's major diplomatic successes).

Potentially having the most far-reaching impact are President Trump's expressed views on NATO and Russia, as they go to the heart of the Europe's defence and security. Regarding NATO, the main security provider of most EU member states, Trump emphasised that the European allies have to significantly increase their spending on defence as it is not acceptable that only 5 of the 29 NATO members spend the agreed minimum of 2% of GDP on defence (US, UK, Greece, Poland and Estonia). Or as he formulated rather bluntly during his campaign: 'The countries we are defending must pay for the cost of this defense – and, if not, the U.S. must be prepared to let these countries defend themselves' (Trump 2016). Although the Trump Administration changed its tone about NATO in the first months of 2017, its discourse raised doubts about the extent to which European countries could continue to count on the American security guarantee. This was particularly felt in Central and Eastern European countries, as Trump's position on NATO came combined with a discourse on a normalisation of the relations with Russia, which contrasted with the EU's view that sanctions towards Russia for its annexation of Crimea and involvement in the Donbass region should be maintained at least until the Minsk II agreement is fully implemented.

However, as is the case with Brexit, the impact of the new American President on the EU and European foreign policy is unclear today, as it will depend on, among others, the degree to which the

actual American foreign policy corresponds to the (campaign) rhetoric and on the question whether changes in American foreign policy will serve as a boost for European cooperation and integration in the field of foreign and security policy, or rather as a cause of more disengagement and disintegration in Europe.

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