

ESSAY

The world in transition: the evolution of the world order as a challenge for the European Union

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Abstract

The objective of this essay is to substantiate the research thesis that one of the most significant challenges facing the European Union (EU) from its international environment is the ongoing transformation of the global order. To support this thesis, it is essential to address two primary research questions: firstly, how these changes are taking place and what are their inherent characteristics, and secondly, to what extent do these changes impact the European Union as a global actor? To investigate this issue, the author employed a research methodology that incorporates the dichotomy between the theories of realism and normativism. This dual-theoretical framework facilitated the drawing of conclusions that substantiate the thesis presented in this work.

Keywords

European Union, global order, political realism, normativism, interests, values

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Methods

It is evident that the European Union (EU), as one of the foremost actors on the global stage, does not function in an international vacuum. While its diverse and substantial potential allows it to exert some influence over the external environment, it is equally subject to various external influences. In contemporary times, the significance of these external factors is progressively increasing, often linked to crisis situations such as political conflicts, wars, and economic crises. Consequently, the EU is compelled, irrespective of its preferences, to respond to these various international challenges.

This essay is premised on the research thesis that one of the greatest challenges facing the EU from its external environment is the transformation of the global order.¹ To substantiate this thesis, the author addresses two research questions: first, how these changes are taking place and what is their nature, and second, to what extent these changes are significant for the EU as an actor in international relations?

To examine these issues, the author proposes adopting a research approach that considers the dichotomy between two classical theoretical schools in the field of international studies. These schools are variously defined in the literature, but broadly speaking, they can be categorised into an approach based on political realism or rationalism and an approach based on normativism, idealism, or constructivism. According to researchers, “the realist school focuses on state policy and its security”,² asserting that “a state’s foreign policy is the result of the influence of its power”.³ In contrast, the normative school argues that “international order is not just about the distribution of material power and the hierarchy and authority structure”, but is also based on “norms and rules that guide state behaviour and govern their relations with other states”.⁴

To put it simply, this dichotomy involves choosing between two fundamental categories: interests and values. Interests are pursued in the pragmatic sphere, encompassing activities undertaken by international actors in the material dimension, such as politics, diplomacy, economy, and defence. Values, on the other hand, fall within the normative sphere, incorporating ideological or political ideas and concepts that influence the direction and shape of actions taken by these international actors.

¹ Without delving deeply into the broad scope of this topic, it is sufficient to define the global order as the current state of political, economic, military, and other relations among international actors, with a particular focus on the interactions between the world’s largest powers.

² A. Rosiński, “Wielowymiarowość europejskiego bezpieczeństwa i obrony – założenia teoretyczne,” in *Studia europejskie. Wyzwania interdyscyplinarności*, ed. J. Czaputowicz (Warsaw: WDiNP UW, 2014), 250.

³ J. Czaputowicz, “Teoretyczne wyjaśnienia Europejskiej Polityki Bezpieczeństwa i Obrony,” *Stosunki Międzynarodowe* 2 (2013): 10–12.

⁴ Ch. A. Kupchan, “Reordering Order: Global Change and the Need for a New Normative Consensus,” in *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World*, eds. T. Flockart *et al.* (Washington: Transatlantic Academy, 2014), 6.

World in transition

The first research question can be distilled to: What kind of world does the European Union function in? To answer this, we must begin with the truism that one of the most significant characteristics of the modern world is its ongoing, rapidly accelerating, and often revolutionary changes across virtually all spheres of life. These include politics, economy, science, technology, social issues, culture, and the military, among others. In essence, the world is in a state of rapid transformation.

The end of the Washington Consensus?

In the realm of international relations, a key manifestation of this transformation is the disruption of the current global order, which emerged at the close of the last century following the collapse of the communist system in Europe and was characterised by the dominant position of the United States, supported by the European Union and other Western allies. This period was succinctly captured by scholars such as Charles Krauthammer, who referred to it as the historical “unipolar moment”, and Francis Fukuyama, famous for his thesis on the “end of history”. This concept heralded an era of undisputed global dominance of the socio-economic order introduced by capitalism, perceived to be impervious to challengers.

However, this era notably embraced an exceptionally neoliberal form of capitalism as its prevailing version. So-called turbo-capitalism adhered strictly to the principles of the so-called Washington Consensus, advocating for a free market economy blindly believing in the supremacy of, in Scottish philosopher Adam Smith’s words, the “invisible hand of the market”, unrestricted free trade, and minimal state regulations. Prominent examples included the administrations of Ronald Reagan in the USA and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain. The famous “greed is good” quote from Michael Douglas in the movie “Wall Street” became a symbolic representation of this ideology in popular culture. Concurrently, significant feedback emerged; the neoliberal economy accelerated the existing processes of globalisation, thereby bolstering the rise of turbo-capitalism itself. Globalisation has forged a network of increasingly extensive and robust connections and interdependencies among all participants in international relations, spanning not only the economic sphere but virtually all aspects of life. These ties have tightly integrated the world, turning it into, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, a “global village”.

However, orthodox neoliberalism’s detrimental effects became apparent relatively quickly. A poignant example of this was the swift and perilous accumulation of social problems in nations that fully embraced neoliberal policies. A classic case in point was the economic collapse experienced by Chile following the implementation of recommendations by American advisors from the Chicago Boys group, notably led by Milton Friedman. While these policies did result in a rapid GDP growth, they also exacerbated massive income inequalities, leading to significant social stratification. This undermined the neoliberal assertion that, to employ the metaphor, a rising tide lifts all boats through economic development. Despite

a general improvement in global living standards and quality of life, the World Inequality Lab estimates reveal that the richest 10% of the global population currently takes 52% of global income and owns 76% of the world's wealth, whereas the poorest half of the population earns 8.5% of global income and barely owns any wealth at all, possessing just 2% of the world's wealth.⁵ Such a disparity inevitably generates substantial tensions, and not just economically, but also socially and politically.

Simultaneously, globalisation has revealed ambivalent effects. On one hand, it facilitated accelerated development – both that of the economic and civilisational – of many less developed regions worldwide. On the other hand, it precipitated the emergence and/or exacerbation of numerous adverse phenomena and processes. Without delving deeper into this intricate topic, one notable example is the profound economic shifts that have consequently influenced politics and social dynamics within the most developed Western nations. The trend of relocating industrial production from developed countries to developing nations, attracted by favourable investment conditions and notably cheaper labour, intensified. However, this shift contributed to the gradual economic and social decline of the middle class in Western societies. Consequently, it led to perilous outcomes such as the shrinking of the traditional political base that supports liberal democracy and the rapid rise of extreme and populist forces.

The growing importance of emerging markets

All of these developments have shaken turbo-capitalism, which was once seen as invincible and eternal. It became evident that history would repeat itself, as serious competitors emerged to the capitalist system leading to profound changes in the global order. Figuratively speaking, the West has inadvertently “released the genie from the bottle” by fostering the economic growth of its future primary competitors, including numerous countries categorised as so-called emerging markets. This transformation occurred under the banner of neoliberalism, promoting a fully-free market economy and accelerating globalisation processes. China, despite its formal communist ideology, reaped the greatest benefits by swiftly modernising its previously underdeveloped economy. Facilitated by its accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2001, China evolved from being the world's factory, flooding markets with inexpensive, basic products, into a modern economic powerhouse with advanced information technologies and other capabilities. This ascent propelled China to become the world's second-largest economic force and positioned it to challenge the United States, the current hegemonic power. With its substantial economic and technological prowess, considerable political and diplomatic influence, and a rapidly expanding military, Beijing is unmistakably aiming – albeit in an indirect sense – to assume a leading global role.

⁵ World Inequality Lab, “World Inequality Report 2022,” accessed April 13, 2024, <https://wir2022.wid.world/>.

China stands as the foremost, though not solitary, competitor to the Western world. In this vein, attention frequently turns to the BRICS group, formed in the early 2000s with the explicit aim of providing a counterbalance to Western dominance. In addition to the formidable superpower China, the BRICS group also includes the Russian Federation, which has escalated tensions with the West particularly following its military actions in Ukraine. (Interestingly, Moscow openly acknowledges this adversarial relationship, while many Western countries prefer not to explicitly acknowledge it). However, Russia's influence is predominantly military in nature, as demonstrated by its recent so-called special military operation in Ukraine, which revealed its limitations and overestimations in military capability. Economically, aside from its substantial raw material resources, Russia does not wield significant influence in the global economy.

Among the other members of the BRICS group, India (being the most populous country in the world) stands out as gradually achieving the status of a regional power in both economic and military domains, having the fifth largest economy and the second largest army on a global scale. Brazil, another BRICS member known for its vast population and geographic size, is still emerging as a potential superpower and is striving to fully leverage its economic and social advantages. On the other hand, South Africa, joining BRICS in 2011, is often viewed as a member for solely symbolic or propagandistic reasons. While it boasts the strongest economy in Africa, it does not hold any significant sway in the global economy. In 2024, several new countries joined the BRICS group (without a name change): Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates (Türkiye and Azerbaijan have submitted applications for membership). Among these countries, only the UAE and Türkiye boast a more or less stable economies, while all of them are authoritarian regimes grappling with significant domestic and foreign policy challenges.

Given these characteristics, it is difficult to regard the BRICS group as an effective counterweight or a viable alternative to the Western world. This is true even though the aggregate GDP of BRICS members has slightly surpassed that of the G7, which consists of the economically strongest Western nations. (It should be noticed that the United States alone produces as much as $\frac{1}{4}$ of global GDP, while China - about 17%).⁶ In addition the BRICS participants exhibit divergent orientations and political interests. A clearly anti-Western stance is adopted by China, Iran, and Russia (with the latter two being particularly extreme), and to some extent by South Africa, which supports Russian aggression against Ukraine. Conversely, the remaining members strive for a more balanced foreign policy, navigating between the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia. This balanced approach is especially evident in India (despite the authoritarian tendencies of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it remains the largest democracy in the world, as demonstrated by the results

⁶ International Monetary Fund (IMF), "World Economic Outlook Database, April 2024," accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/April/weo-report>.

of the 2024 parliamentary elections), as well as in Brazil and Egypt. These countries trade with Russia and refrain from officially condemning its war in Ukraine, yet they also endeavour to maintain constructive relations with Washington and Brussels.

In general, the functioning of BRICS holds some significance in the realm of political and ideological propaganda as a symbol of opposition to Western domination. However, its tangible results, particularly in the economic sphere, are not very impressive. This is manifested by the failure to achieve one of its official goals: the introduction of a common world currency by BRICS members as an alternative to the dollar (such aspirations have remained largely theoretical and can be considered more as economic fantasies than realistic objectives). The poor economic condition of the BRICS group is evidenced by several telling facts. For instance, a special investment fund for BRICS countries, established by American banks in 2003, resulted in nearly 90% losses instead of the anticipated extraordinary profits and was subsequently closed after 12 years.⁷ This outcome led some cynical commentators to suggest that the BRICS acronym should stand for “Bloody Ridiculous Investment Concept”. (It is also notable that Saudi Arabia and Argentina ultimately declined the invitations extended to them in 2023 to join the group).

The end of Western domination?

The emergence and activities of groups such as BRICS are just one manifestation of a broader trend disrupting the current global order, characterised by a decline in Western dominance. This is not a new phenomenon; over a century ago, Oswald Spengler predicted the collapse of the Western world, based on the concept of the development and inevitable fall of great civilisations. Many researchers have echoed similar themes, albeit based on different assumptions. Notable among them are Immanuel Wallerstein, Niall Ferguson, Ian Morris, John N. Gray, Emmanuel Todd, Fareed Zakaria, and Benjamin Barber. Among Polish scholars, Roman Kuźniar has notably supported the term “Post-Western World”, which is widely used in the literature on the subject.

Politicians and analysts highlight several specific phenomena and events that indicate the decline of Western domination. Among these are the great financial and economic crisis that began in 2008, initially affecting the American economy and subsequently impacting other countries, and the outbreak of war initiated by Russia against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. These events underscore the broader assessment that a new stage is emerging in the history of contemporary international relations. As Timothy Garton Ash articulates, we transitioned from a “post-war” period after 1945, to a “post-wall” period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and now, following Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2022, we are entering a “post-Western” period.⁸

⁷ See E. Bendyk, “Niech rozum puknie się w głowę,” *Polityka* 51 (2017): 104.

⁸ See T.G. Ash, *Homelands. Historia osobista Europy* (Kraków: Znak Horyzont, 2024).

The outbreak of the Ukrainian conflict indeed marked a significant turning point. Moscow was reportedly emboldened to initiate this conflict by the perceived weakness of Euro-Atlantic integration structures. (A notable example of this was French President Emmanuel Macron's 2019 statement describing "NATO's brain death"). The reactions to the conflict further emphasised the real divisions among various actors on the global stage. Of course, significant differences had already emerged on other occasions, but events such as the voting on resolutions at the UN intended to condemn Russian aggression revealed that not the entire international community actually condemns it. This was not so much about expressing direct support for Russia's aggressive policy – only a few of its close allies did that – but rather about demonstrating distrust towards the policies of Western countries, led by the United States. This stance was guided by the principle of opposing whatever the Americans, or more broadly, the entire West, supported, regardless of the circumstances. This type of quasi-anti-imperialism remains prevalent in the attitudes of many societies and governments in former Third World countries. While this anti-imperialism had its justification in the past, during colonial times or the Cold War, it has now evolved into a political or ideological manifestation of opposition to the perceived, whether alleged or real, hegemony of the West.

The Global South

In general, the formation of a distinct coalition of states is becoming increasingly evident, dating back to an earlier period but underscored by recent events such as attitudes towards the war in Ukraine. Commentators refer to this coalition as the Global South (GS), though this term is imprecise since it does not denote geographical location but rather an orientation towards the broadly understood West. This concept may draw comparisons with the former term of "Third World", which predominantly encompassed developing countries, but such comparisons can be misleading. The GS comprises countries with vastly different levels of development that do not strictly align with Western world and exhibit varied attitudes towards it, ranging from hostile and unfriendly to neutral, ambivalent, or cooperative. It means that the Global South represents a diverse grouping that accommodates a wide spectrum of countries. It includes China, which competes directly with the US, as well as adversary nations such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Additionally, countries that *de facto* cooperate with the West, such as Brazil, Indonesia, Egypt, Nigeria, and India (the latter even participating informally in Western security structures like the QUAD group), are also part of this coalition.

So what really connects the countries of the Global South? Broadly speaking, the cohesion among ruling elites and societies in Global South countries revolves around a growing conviction that the current global order excessively favours the West, particularly the political, economic, and military hegemony of the United States. (It is noteworthy that Americans allocate roughly the same amount on their armaments as the rest of the world combined, and their mega-corporations, particularly in

the IT sector, maintain a dominant position in global markets). Prominent among the Global South are Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran, who vocally advocate for a purportedly more equitable, just, and peaceful (sic!) international order. However, other members of the Global South are also increasingly assertive in expressing similar aspirations.

Even those countries that collaborate with the West in specific domains seek greater acknowledgement of their unique national interests. This recognition is seen as crucial for enhancing their autonomy in foreign policy and expanding their manoeuvrability in political relations, foreign trade, scientific collaboration, and other spheres. As a result, these countries, as Timothy Garton Ash aptly put it, approach “the world *à la carte*”. This means they “align closely with the United States on certain issues, with China on others, and with Russia on others”.⁹

As a case study, one can examine the policy pursued by Saudi Arabia, which was a significant and close ally of the West during the Cold War. Functioning as both an “unsinkable aircraft carrier” for the American military and a key supplier of oil, Saudi Arabia was highly dependent on its Western allies, or, rather, protectors. The first signs of its growing aspirations for greater autonomy emerged with Riyadh’s oil embargoes on Western countries in the 1970s, a response to their support for Israel in various Middle Eastern conflicts. Over the last two decades, the desire for greater independence on the international stage has intensified and become increasingly apparent.

Under the current rule of Prince Muhammad Ibn Salman (who portrays himself as a modern reformer) Saudi Arabia has adopted a foreign policy that balances relationships between the West, China, and Russia. This policy is exemplified by recent efforts to establish diplomatic contacts with Iran, its arch-enemy and a key element of the global “axis of evil” as perceived by the United States. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has expanded economic ties with Beijing and Moscow. Although Riyadh evidently has not joined the camp of Washington’s adversaries, bilateral ties with the United States have significantly weakened. A prime example of Saudi Arabia’s new policy is its extremely ambitious project to become one of the world’s leading IT centres, particularly in the development of artificial intelligence technology. This initiative, which requires enormous expenditure, aims to position Saudi Arabia as the third global leader in cutting-edge technologies, following the USA and China. In pursuing this goal, the Saudis seek to collaborate closely with both American and other Western partners, including Europeans, as well as with the Chinese.

The case of Saudi Arabia warrants further attention due to its potential role in resolving a conflict that significantly affects the European Union’s global position. This pertains to the war in the Gaza Strip, initiated by Israel in retaliation for the

⁹ T.G. Ash, “Putin z nami nie wygra,” *Polityka* 24 (2024): 17.

brutal terrorist attack carried out by Palestinian Hamas on its territory on October 7, 2023. This conflict represents yet another chapter in the protracted Israeli-Palestinian struggle, but the current situation is particularly perilous.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is undoubtedly one of the most intricate geopolitical dilemmas of the modern era, making it challenging to formulate objective assessments regarding culpability. Both sides possess well-founded grievances, yet both also bear considerable responsibilities for the perpetuation of the conflict. In the context of the current fighting, several justified doubts arise. On one hand, there is the question of whether the retaliatory actions of the Israeli army, which have led to extensive material destruction and the deaths of thousands of civilians, exceed the bounds of morally and legally justified self-defence. On the other hand, the conflict, provoked by a terrorist organisation, has also spurred a global campaign of vehement anti-Israel protests. These protests are not solely directed against the policies of the Israeli government, led by the highly controversial Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Some of these protests, in their extreme form, question Israel's very right to exist, thus manifesting classic anti-Semitism. (It is important to note that criticism of Israel does not necessarily equate to anti-Semitism).

In the context of these considerations, the war in Gaza has become, alongside the war in Ukraine, another catalyst for strengthening anti-Western tendencies among GS countries. A broad coalition of countries has emerged, which combines their sharp condemnation of Israel with accusations against the West, particularly the United States, for providing military and political support to Israel. This narrative paints a diabolical image of Israel as the criminal outpost of American and European imperialism. Harsh criticism of Tel Aviv has been reflected, among other ways, in the outcomes of votes on successive UN General Assembly resolutions and the unprecedented appeals against Israel at the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice. As a result, there is a clear division of positions on this issue between almost all countries of the Global South and almost all Western countries. This divide is symptomatic of broader geopolitical fault lines, and numerous other examples of similar divisions on various issues could be cited.

Interests versus values

To better interpret the aforementioned main features characterising changes in the global order, it is necessary to employ the research approach highlighted in the introduction. This approach considers the dichotomy between the pragmatic sphere, which pertains to real interests, and the normative sphere, which encompasses ideological values.

By accounting for this dichotomy, one can discern certain trends currently emerging in international relations. One of these trends is the clear intensification of tendencies promoted by the school of political realism. This school prioritises the pursuit of national interests above all else, often at any cost. Alongside this, there is a noticeable tendency to inhibit or even reject globalisation processes perceived as

detrimental to these interests. It seems that the turning point here was the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to mass lockdowns of industries and services globally. This sharply highlighted the excessive dependence of economies, especially in the Western world, on international supply chains for important products and raw materials. The intersection of these two trends – the growth of national egoism and the criticism of globalisation – could have significant consequences for all participants in international relations, including the European Union. This situation underscores the increasing importance of the pragmatic sphere, while making it more challenging to operate within the normative sphere.

Globalisation, despite its many negative effects, has also brought numerous positive outcomes that should not be overlooked. These benefits include increased openness, transparency, and innovation across various areas of life worldwide. Such advancements have the potential to strengthen values as democracy, human rights, and civil liberties. However, counteracting this, there is a growing intensification of trends rooted in a realist paradigm, which denies the positive impacts of globalisation. This trend is marked by an increase in global violations of democratic principles and human rights, alongside a rise in nationalism and various forms of extremism, leading to conflicts and wars. A telling manifestation of this trend is the ongoing decline in the number of countries considered as being democratic over recent years. According to 'The Economist's Democracy Index, the total number of such countries dropped from 76 to 74 and at the same time the percentage of people living in them decreased from half of the global population to the current 45%. What's worse, the number of authoritarian regimes has increased by 8 countries, in which approximately 40% of the world's population now lives.¹⁰ So it's not a coincidence that American President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have repeatedly emphasised the need to bolster the alliance of democratic nations in response to the rising tide of anti-democratic forces globally.

One can, therefore, formulate a thesis that world politics is increasingly characterised by a contradiction between the growing realist approach and the normative approach. Criticism of the West's current dominance in the economic, political, and military spheres aligns with the undermining of the Western ideological values system, particularly concerning democracy and basic human and civil rights. Politicians and commentators from Global South countries, especially those with tense relations with the West, are vocal in this criticism. A prominent example is the views of Alexander Dugin, a favoured ideologist of the Kremlin. Dugin argues that Russia's policy is justifiably marked by "hostility towards contemporary liberalism, globalism, and postmodernism", as well as criticism of Western societies for "promoting a consumerist model of life, devoid of any valuable moral norms".¹¹

¹⁰ The Economist Intelligence Unit (The EIU), "Democracy Index 2023. Age of conflict," accessed August 21, 2024, <https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy-Index-2023-Final-report.pdf>.

¹¹ P. Eberhardt, "Koncepcje geopolityczne Aleksandra Dugina," *Przegląd Geograficzny* 2 (2010): 227.

Leaving aside the obvious geopolitical reasons for Russia's current hostility towards the West, it is crucial to recognise that we are indeed experiencing a global crisis of the foundational paradigms that have thus far governed political, social, and economic life. There is a conspicuous lack of new ideas capable of effectively replacing the old ones. Zygmunt Bauman's insightful diagnosis sheds light on this issue, highlighting the loss of control over the world we have created. This situation has given rise to Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity", where established norms and structures have become fluid and uncertain. To a large extent, we are succumbing to what Bauman termed "retrotopia" or "retro utopia", a phenomenon characterised by the naive idealisation of the past, fear of the future, and the diminishing positive connotations associated with the concept of progress.¹² Figuratively speaking, the world has lost its compass, leaving us directionless and uncertain about the path forward. In this situation, the current global "market of ideas" resembles a vast supermarket where consumers – comprising all participants of international relations – select the most suitable products from a range of competing offers. However, none of these ideas is sufficiently compelling to decisively prevail over the others.

The European Union and the world

In addressing the second research question regarding the significance of changes in the global order for the European Union, it is essential to employ a dual-perspective research approach, which allows us to view the EU from two fundamental points of view. On one hand, the EU can be viewed as a participant in international relations that pursues its real interests within the pragmatic sphere. On the other hand, it can be perceived as a global actor operating within the normative sphere, guided by a specific catalogue of ideological and political values referred to as "European values".¹³

The EU and the pragmatic sphere

Therefore, applying the aforementioned research approach, we can attempt to assess the gravity of the challenges posed by changes in the global order for the European Union. As already indicated, one of the essential features of these changes is the intensification of tendencies aligned with the assumptions of political realism. This approach underscores that the primary competitors or opponents of the West, and consequently the EU – such as China and Russia, as well as aspirants to nuclear-power status including Iran and North Korea – explicitly declare their intent to secure their narrowly defined national interests at all costs. These powers prioritise their own strategic and economic goals, often at the expense of Western interests. The pursuit of these objectives is frequently masked by normative rhetoric, invoking noble

¹² See Z. Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge-Malden: Polity Press, 2017).

¹³ As the author articulated in another work: "the functioning of the European Union is based on a set of (...) basic ideological values", which include, among others, "democracy, the rule of law, human rights and civil liberties, and social justice" – See O. Barbarska, *Polityka wschodnia Unii Europejskiej jako część składowa polityki zagranicznej UE* (Warszawa: ASPRA-JR, 2018), 123, 124.

principles such as “respect for sovereignty” or “a more just international order”, a tactic especially prevalent in Russian propaganda.

The situation is further complicated by the gradual and consistent shift of the “centre of gravity” of the modern world from the Atlantic to the Pacific. This phenomenon encompasses economic, political, and military dimensions, signalling a relative decline in the significance of Europe – a continent that has dominated global affairs for centuries and including its most significant organisation, the European Union. The challenge lies in the fact that this new “centre of gravity” encompasses not only the EU’s competitors from the Global South countries but also its closest strategic ally, the United States (along with other allies of the Western world such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan). Consequently, Europeans find it challenging to interpret the “tectonic movements” unfolding in the global order solely through the lens of the dichotomy of “us here in the West, versus them, the Global South”.

An essential consideration here is the shift in US policy since the presidency of Donald Trump, which has largely adhered to the paradigm of political realism. This approach prioritises safeguarding American national interests, particularly amid the escalating rivalry with China, acknowledged as the foremost arena of strategic importance. This approach appears to possess enduring characteristics, remaining largely unchanged during the presidency of Joe Biden (despite his reputation for being much more pro-European and globally engaged compared to Trump). Moreover, there is a noticeable rise in isolationist inclinations within American foreign policy, which resonate strongly across significant segments of the political establishment and society. (Prominent examples of these tendencies can be seen in the viewpoints of outspoken figures such as pro-Russian congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene and analyst John Mearsheimer, both of whom vehemently criticise their country’s involvement in supporting Ukraine). Consequently, there is a notable decrease in Washington’s prioritisation of Europe, risking the potential loss of its longstanding status as the United States’ foremost strategic ally. (Recall President Trump’s previous public characterisation of the EU as an “enemy”).

As previously noted, the rise of realism-based trends coincides with a gradual erosion of the global order that had been predominantly shaped by the Western model of ultra-liberal turbo-capitalism. This indicates a significant axiological challenge for the European Union, which had aligned much of its economic and social development with the principles of the Washington Consensus for many years. This deficiency persists despite the EU’s longstanding advocacy for its own “European way of life”, distinctively less aggressive than the American form of capitalism, as well as the fact that several Member States maintain elements of the welfare state. Nevertheless, Brussels has consistently propagated a liberal model over an extended period, including in its interactions with candidate countries – illustrated, for example, by the well-known “shock therapy” as implemented by Leszek Balcerowicz in Poland.

The EU and the normative sphere

This issue highlights that beyond practical challenges, the EU also confronts normative dilemmas. The breakdown of the current global order signifies a crisis not just for the Western economic model based on the turbo-capitalism, but also for the axiological underpinnings of Western civilisation as a whole. Consequently, the European Union finds itself subject to similarly harsh critiques as Western civilisation overall.

Surprisingly, some European intellectuals excel in articulating these critiques, such as writers Michel Houellebecq, Michel Onfray, and Arturo Pérez-Reverte. According to the latter, Europe is currently “in the last phase of decadence”, suggesting that European civilisation, which forms the basis for EU integration, is “doomed to die”.¹⁴ This starkly pessimistic assessment is linked, among other factors, to the crisis of European identity. A primary cause, as analysed by Roman Kuźniar, is the European Union’s erosion of its existing axiological foundations, which have historically drawn significantly from Christian heritage, now overshadowed by pervasive individualism and liberalism. Kuźniar further identifies another facet of the European identity crisis as the atrophy of the EU’s will to power. This reluctance, rooted in ideological considerations, manifests as a conscious hesitance among European Union decision-makers to fully embrace the responsibilities of a major power, and to grapple with the geopolitical implications that accompany such a role.¹⁵

In practical terms, the crisis of European identity carries significant and wide-ranging consequences. Foremost among these is the challenge of fostering a sense of community across the societies of EU Member States. Throughout the history of European integration, this process has unfolded with varying degrees of success and setback. However, recent years have witnessed growing indicators of unfavourable or even hostile sentiments towards the European Union. This trend is exacerbated by crises such as the repercussions of the conflict in Ukraine and the challenges posed by migration, fuelling the rise of populist, radical, and nationalist forces.

In examining the causes of this situation, it is crucial to consider both internal conditions within the EU and factors stemming from the international environment. Undoubtedly, the troubling trends within the EU are partly fuelled by external impulses and inspirations. These include, notably, the successes of nationalist and populist movements in various countries worldwide – Russia being a prominent example, and unfortunately, to some extent, the United States as well. The repercussions of such influences are significant as they have the potential to inflict tangible harm upon the EU. (A notable instance is the impact of Russian propaganda on shaping the outcome of Brexit).

¹⁴ A. Pérez-Reverte, “Nadchodzi nowy świat. Burzy i naporu,” *Gazeta Wyborcza. Magazyn Świąteczny* 12 (2015): 20.

¹⁵ See R. Kuźniar, *Europa w porządku międzynarodowym* (Warszawa: PISM, 2016).

Furthermore, the current global disorder in axiological terms significantly impacts the European Union's position. As a proactive advocate of "European values", the EU faces the imperative to defend these principles against various ideological adversaries worldwide, ranging from Putin to Islamic terrorists. These opponents aim to weaken the European Union by undermining its normative foundations, highlighting perceived flaws of the "decaying West". Such attacks have dual consequences in that they bolster the resolve of proponents who advocate maintaining the EU's democratic character, while simultaneously providing fodder for opponents of European integration.

Conclusions

An analysis of the challenges confronting the European Union due to shifts in global order should not be construed, as opponents often do, as advocating catastrophic visions of European integration's collapse. It is important to remember that, according to numerous politicians and scholars, a hallmark of the EU phenomenon is its capacity to navigate from one crisis to another. Each crisis, as articulated by Tomasz Grosse, was meant to "catalyse integration and propel it forward".¹⁶

Nonetheless, the EU indisputably confronts formidable challenges stemming from its international environment. As demonstrated in addressing both research questions, the initial thesis asserting that one of the foremost challenges facing the European Union is the shifting global order appears substantiated. A comprehensive examination of whether the EU desires to, has the capacity to, and how it should confront this challenge lies beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is pertinent to note that amidst the discussed failures, there have also been notable successes.

In the realm of pragmatism, the EU's response to the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 serves as a compelling example. During this period, the European Union demonstrated unexpected resolve by swiftly condemning Russia's aggression and providing substantial and comprehensive assistance to Ukraine, including military aid (amounting to approximately 100 billion euros). This marked the first instance in its history that the EU engaged in such a significant and coordinated effort of direct military assistance to a non-Member State, diverging from its traditional role as primarily a so-called civilian power. This action highlighted the EU's capability to safeguard its interests in security matters while simultaneously assuming a more assertive role on the global stage.

Furthermore, adopting such a stance also carries implications for the normative sphere. The European Union has demonstrated its commitment to being a "normative power" that upholds "European values". This underscores the assessment articulated years ago by Christopher Hill that while the EU may exhibit a "relatively

¹⁶ T. Grosse, "Zmiana modelu integracji, czyli o fiasku neofunkcjonalnej koncepcji kryzysu," *Mysł Ekonomiczna i Polityczna* 4 (2015): 108.

weak sense of common history and identity” (due to diverse historical experiences among its member states), it remains “strong in terms of values”.¹⁷

In essence, confronted with profound changes in the global order, the European Union is compelled to redefine its role in the world – not only in relation to its competitors and adversaries, but also among its existing allies. Simultaneously, it must pursue a balanced policy, safeguarding its vital interests while steadfastly adhering to the values it espouses.

Ethics and consent

No ethical approval or consent required.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

¹⁷ C. Hill, “Introduction,” in *The Actors in Europe’s Foreign Policy*, ed. C. Hill (London: Routledge, 1996), 9.