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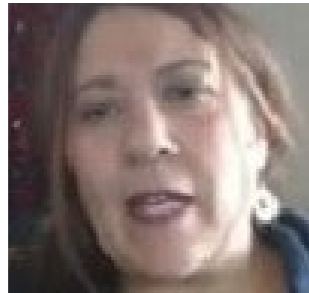
THE EUROPEAN UNION FROM A GLOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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1. PRESENTATION: THE EUROPEAN UNION FROM A GLOCAL PERSPECTIVE



The project “We talk about Europe from Here: The European Union from a Glocal Perspective” is the result of the primary orientation of the IGADI, which was born as at the end of the Cold War (1991) as a think tank specialized in the analysis of international relations and their new global dynamics, such as, for instance city or region paradiplomacy. Considering this, the initial objective of the project was to approach the European Union in an original way, in order to conceive the EU as a Glocal International organization and bring it closer to citizens and to citizens and their daily lives.

To achieve this, we created a Research Group formed by researchers specialised in different IGADI thematic lines: European Union (Serafín Pazos Vidal and Paula Lamoso), Economy (Diego Sande Veiga), Observatory of Chinese Politics (Raquel Isamara León de la Rosa) International Cooperation and the 2030 Agenda (Tamara Espiñeira), and Paradiplomacy (Patricia Coloret and Daniel González Palau).

The Group was created in August 2024, and each researcher must answer three open questions in his/her own area: Does it make sense to talk about the EU as a Glocal International actor? How do the local and the global connect in the European Union? Do you know any other glocal international actors? Who do you think stands out and how do they organize their global governance?

Thus, the concept of “glocalisation” is at the centre of this project and of this online monograph that you are now reading. It is a term that merges the global and the local, capturing the continuous interaction between both levels of reality. This interconnection and this reality have become particularly evident in the European Union, where the political, economic and social decisions taken at a supranational level have direct repercussions on local communities. At the same time, local characteristics and needs influence the development of broader policies, creating a cycle of mutual influence.

The cycle of conferences and the online book - both of them anticipated results of the project financed by the State Secretary for the European Union (Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU and Cooperation) - aim at highlighting and explaining this bidirectional relationship.

A Series of Conferences under the format of an internet television program.

A Series of Conferences under the format of a TV programme was organised in order to turn the project into a tool to bring the European Union closer to students and researchers, as well as to citizens in general. Notwithstanding the technical production questions this challenge entailed, the programme included interventions by our five main researchers, and the participation of expert guests in each of the five sessions.

Therefore, aside from our main specialists, these sessions featured a team of first-rate participants, with the presence of Miguel García-Herráiz (Deputy Director General of Institutional Relations, of the Secretariat of State for the European Union-Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU and Cooperation from Spain) and María Canal Fontcuberta (Press Officer and Spokesperson, Representation of the European Commission in Spain) at the inauguration of the Cycle, as well as participation in the five sessions from analysts such as Ignacio Molina (Real Instituto Elcano) or Andrea Mila (Carolina Foundation), to journalists such as David Reineró (Praza Pública), Tino Santiago (Televisión de Galicia) or María Xosé Porteiro (Advisory Council of IGADI), and even a member of the Diplomatic Corps, Javier Parrondo (Director of Casa Asia) and also business specialists, such as Alberte Nespereira (Grupo Pescapuerta). The five intense one-hour sessions of “The European Union from a Global Perspective” sessions are now available on the IGADI YouTube channel.

An online book to understand 21st Europe and the 21st world

Thus, the book that you now have on your screen is structured around the five main interventions by the main specialists of “The European Union from a Glocal perspective” sessions. These brief, direct texts aim to make complex concepts-about the governance of the European Union and its impact on local realities and current international relations—accessible.

We thus hope to contribute to creating a space for dialogue and reflection, which may encourage and transcend academic reflection, connecting with the world of politics, journalism or business in order to help citizens achieve a greater understanding of the role of the EU in their lives, by highlighting the best of its historical endeavours.

2. WHAT IS EUROPE DOING IN YOUR REGION?

Serafín Pazos Vidal, Coordinator of the IGADI Research Line in the European Union and head of the territorial development policies area at AEIDL (European Association for Innovation in Local Development).



The “permissive consensus”, whereby the EU was considered a part of foreign policy and a distant process managed by elites, has long waned (Forner Muñoz, 2022). This is good: “Europe” should not just be left in the hands of a few in main capitals and in Brussels. This is good: “Europe” should not just be left in the hands of a few in main capitals and in Brussels. New technologies have also contributed to this: it is said that the European Union is complex but its level of transparency is much higher than that of many Member States. Thus, even today in some cases the idealised image of “Brussels” as a space of concord has a balsamic effect that may help overcome bitter internal differences. A paradigmatic example of this is the mediation of the European Commission so that the two main Spanish parties could come to an agreement for the renewal of the General Council of the Judiciary.

Yet, the awareness about the increasing impact of the decisions made in Brussels - often at a global level, as is the case with the antitrust decisions and fines ordered against technology companies from outside the EU -, known as the “Brussels Effect” (Herrera, et al. 2021), is not necessarily welcomed by everyone, particularly by territories that see themselves as losers of globalisation (Dijkstra et al., 2020).

The principle of subsidiarity was already introduced in the Maastricht Treaty, back in 1992, in order to try to reassure those who feared that the EU was going too fast and too far in its integration (Pazos-Vidal, 2019), which were mainly the different regions at that time. The Committee of the Regions, where all the regional presidents are ex officio members, and a delegation of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces (FEMP, by its acronym in Spanish), try to mediate and ease the tension between autonomy and integration. (Pazos-Vidal, 2023).

The European Union is therefore a “glocal” actor. This is not exceptional: things happen somewhere. What is clearly distinctive about the EU is the overlap between the general and the local: in spite of the principle of Primacy of EU Law (not explicitly stated in the Treaties and is occasionally contested even by some Constitutional Courts), the Principle of Subsidiarity determines that decisions must be made at the closest possible

level to the citizen. The constant expansion of policies and legislation with a direct effect at the local and regional levels. Yet, all Treaties require the EU to respect the constitutional identity of the States, as well as regional and local autonomy (Cruz Villalón, 2013). The multilevel governance paradigm explains the intimate interaction and interdependence between local, regional, state and community levels.

Furthermore, the European Union is capable of generating new territorial realities. The LEADER initiative was created almost four decades ago to provide many countries and regions with a local development policy that many simply lacked (del Pozo, et al. 2022). And the same thing goes for the initiative for sustainable urban development, the European Urban Initiative (Huete García et al., 2017). Not only did the cohesion policy make financial tools available to invest in territories, even in rich Member States (net contributors to the community budget), providing them - in many cases for the first time - with multi-annual planning of public policies and with the Partnership Principle or principle of association with stakeholders; in some countries it even “created” regions where all the aforementioned elements did not exist (De Gregorio Hurtado, 2024).

The EU intervenes in the daily reality of the territories and their inhabitants. For example, two municipalities cannot offer a service jointly if they do not meet certain requirements of the Public Procurement Directive. The same happens with airport concessions and toll highways. The granting of certain subsidies to private entities is limited by the State Aid Guidelines (this is the case, for example, of the so-called “differentiated taxation” in territories such as Soria or Teruel). Given the limitations imposed by the aforementioned principle of local autonomy, the EU seeks to protect the freedom of establishment of companies, the free circulation of capital and the freedom of movement of workers, while preventing corrupt behaviours and the creation of monopolies.

Community planning is responsible for the protection of public goods such as the environment or natural areas. Without a definition of protected environmental zones by Community Law, it is very difficult for state or territorial political decision-makers alone to confront the pressure of short-term economic interests over sustainability (e.g., sewage treatment plants, mines, pulp, etc.) (Galicia et al., 2015). The same can be said about the legislation on waste management and recycling: Spain is not among the first, but it would very probably be much worse were it not for the community legislation in force.

In fact, complex states such as Spain feature a significant deficit in the application of Community legislation (European Commission, 2024). This is partially due to their insufficient internal capacities, which poses an ever-growing challenge for European institutions. This is one of the priorities of the post-COVID-19 recovery plan officially known as the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism. Aside from the traditional funds (mainly Structural Funds and the Common Agricultural Policy), Spain receives approximately €30,000 million per year (Ministry of Finance and Public Service, 2023), which matches the budget of the Community of Madrid. Although figures are not really tangible for most citizens, it is possible to find out the EU amounts invested, often at a local level. Thus, for example, Structural Fund investments can be geolocated in the European Commission’s interactive database KOHESIO⁽¹⁾. The European Parliament Research Service has developed a database called “What Europe does for me”.⁽²⁾ Besides, in Spain there are EU information offices (such as CDE,

EuropeDirect, EURES) throughout the territory, as well as centres focused on European Studies, Commission and Parliament representatives, or programs like “Let’s talk about Europe”.

However, given that the EU is a continental democracy, the question is not “what the EU does for me” but rather what we as citizens can do for the common good. In the short term, it is up to us to vote, obviously. And it is also up to us to apply, to the extent of our possibilities, the European decisions (for example, recycling). Also, where appropriate, we must report oligopolistic⁽³⁾ behaviours or environmental infringements (General Council of Lawyers of Spain, 2007)

President Von der Leyen’s recently presented Political Guidelines (Von der Leyen, 2024) place great emphasis on participation: participation possibilities will be expanded: new Citizen Panels, EU Acquis Stress Test, EU Youth Test, Reality Checks, and the existing Rural Pact or Urban Agenda. Also, regarding the proposals included in the recent Letta Report (2024), there is a possibility of rearticulating the European internal market and competition policies, regarding the “right to remain” in your place of residence, guaranteeing a series of essential services throughout the territory, including housing - something new in Europe -. Territorial Cohesion and Freedom of movement are two sides of the same coin.

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(1) <https://kohesio.ec.europa.eu/>

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3. WHAT ARE THE EUROPEAN FUNDS? HOW DO THEY REACH GALICIA AND THE EUROPEAN REGIONS?



Diego Sande, Coordinator of the IGADI Research Line in Economics and professor at the University of Santiago de Compostela.

To this day, most citizens still lack an in-depth knowledge about the configuration of European policies, at the levels of design, budget- assignment, implementation and management, to a great extent. No doubt, the geographical distance between a territory like Galicia and the decision-making centre in Europe is a relevant factor in this sense. And while the mass media have played an important role over the last few decades in the spread of information about European actions at the political and economic levels, media logic - more focused on highlighting certain information according to political marketing criteria - has sometimes turned the European approach into a set of figures, policies and programmes that make it impossible to tell its structure and real functioning apart from the mechanisms implemented by Brussels. This is why this document intends to provide a pedagogical approach to aspects such as the financing of the European Union (EU), or its organisation, as well as the management and architecture of the funds, in order to draw conclusions that may allow us to implement useful policy orientations in the future.

1. Basic aspects of EU financing

To date, the EU has different forms of financing, including (EU, 2024a) grants (applied for by presenting project proposals during an open call), subsidies (managed by national or regional authorities), loans, capital guarantees (financial assistance to support EU policies and programmes), loans to non-EU Member States, and awards (for the winners of the Horizon Europe programme).

EU financing can be accessed by multiple actors, including researchers, farmers and rural companies, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), new companies, public entities, non-profit organisations and other beneficiaries. This financing is managed in three different ways:

- » *Directly*: The European Commission manages EU funding, publishes calls, endorses proposals and results, and signs agreements and payments directly.
- » *Jointly*: This is approximately 70% of the total financing percentage. The European Commission and the national, regional and local authorities manage financing jointly. Joint management takes place fundamentally through the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) for regional and urban development, the Cohesion Fund (CF) for less developed regions, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for social inclusion and good governance, the Just Transition Fund (JTF) to support the regions that are most affected by the transition towards climate neutrality, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF).
- » *Indirectly*: This is approximately 10% of the total financing percentage. According to this modality, associated organisations or other administrations within or outside the EU manage financing, which usually takes the form of subsidies. Thus, for example, the greatest part of EU funding intended for humanitarian aid and international development is managed indirectly.

2. The EU regulatory policy

In order to implement its (our) policies, the EU has a budget. This budget is crucial to respond to the current challenges the EU must face, e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, energy independence and its own strategic autonomy. Furthermore, according to its own data (EU, 2024b), the EU budget guarantees the democratic, peaceful, prosperous and competitive operation of the EU, while strengthening a supportive Union that may help all its Member States, their citizens and other countries. In short, the EU budget aims to reinforce both the continental economy and the European geopolitical position.

The EU adopts long-term expenditure plans, known as Multiannual Financial Frameworks (MFF), which establish the EU spending priorities and limits for a multiannual period. The current long-term plan extends from 2021 to 2027. In addition to the long-term plan, an annual plan is negotiated and adopted every year. It establishes the expenditure and revenue for each financial year with regards to the amounts agreed upon in the multiannual budget. To this end, the Commission presents a draft proposal which is then negotiated and approved by the European Parliament and the Council. The Commission is therefore in charge of financial management, although more than half of the budget is managed jointly by the Commission and the national governments. Furthermore, every year, the Parliament endorses the execution of the budget of the previous year and decides whether or not to approve the Commission's next steps following the Council's recommendations. This is known as "management approval".

For the 2021-2027 period, the EU budget, together with the NextGeneration EU recovery fund, can be disaggregated into the following seven areas of expenditure:

Table 1: Assignment of Cohesion Policy Resources by Member State

	MFF	NEXT GENERATION EU	TOTAL
1-SINGLE MARKET, INNOVATION AND DIGITAL ECONOMY	132 800	10 600	143 400
2-COHESION, RESILIENCE AND VALUES	377 800	721 900	1 099 700
3-NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT	356 400	17 500	373 900
4-MIGRATION AND BORDER MANAGEMENT	22 700	-	22 700
5-SECURITY AND DEFENCE	13 200	-	13 200
6-NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WORLD	98 400	-	98 400
7-EUROPEAN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION	73 100	-	73 100
TOTAL MFP	1 074 400	750 000	1 824 400

Source: European Commission, MFP 2021-2027

It must be taken into account that for the period 2021-2027 the management of the long-term plan was initially established as follows: 56% managed by the national authorities and the Commission ("joint management"), 37% managed by the Commission and the Commission agencies and offices outside the EU ("direct management"), and 7% managed by other international organisations, national agencies and non-EU countries ("indirect management"). As to the NextGenerationEU funds, 90% of them are channelled through the Recovery and Resilience Mechanism (direct management), with a total value of €648,000 million, although the execution of the budget corresponds to the Commission.

3. EU Fund architecture: Programmes in Spain and Galicia

The programmes to be developed for the 2021-2027 period as part of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) include, mainly, the preparation of the Association Agreement and the Programmes. The Association Agreement (AA) is a document of a strategic nature prepared by each Member State and including the basic formulation of the investment priorities of the ERDF, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the European Maritime Fund of Fisheries and Aquaculture (EMFFA), and the Just Transition Fund (JTF), taking into account the specifications of the Common Provisions Regulation. Thus, article 5 of the Common Provisions Regulation establishes that the ERDF, the ESF+ and the EMFFA must provide support for the following five Political Objectives (DOUE, 2021):

- » **PO 1. A more competitive and intelligent Europe**, by promoting an innovative and intelligent economic transformation as well as regional connectivity with information and communication technologies.

- » **PO 2. A greener, low-carbon Europe**, in transition towards a resilient, zero net carbon emission economy, by promoting a clean and equitable energy transition, green and blue investments, a circular economy, the mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, risk prevention and sustainable urban mobility.
- » **PO 3. A more connected Europe**, by improving mobility.
- » **PO 4. A more social and inclusive Europe**, by implementing the European Pillar of Social Rights.
- » **PO 5. A Europe closer to citizens**, by promoting the integrated and sustainable development of all types of local territories and initiatives.

Furthermore, article 108 of the Common Provisions Regulation divides regions into three groups based on their per capita GDP with regards to the EU-27 average:

- » **Less developed regions:** regions whose per capita GDP is less than 75% of the EU-27 average (in Spain, the Autonomous Communities of Andalusia, Castilla-La Mancha, Ceuta, Extremadura and Melilla).
- » **Regions in transition:** regions whose per capita GDP is between 75% and 100% of the EU-27 average (Asturias, Balearic Islands, Canary Islands, Cantabria, Castille and Leon, Galicia, Rioja, Murcia, Valencia).
- » **More developed regions:** regions whose per capita GDP is higher than the 100% of the EU-27 average (Aragon, Catalonia, Navarre, Madrid, Basque Country).

At the regional level, in the case of Galicia, today the Xunta de Galicia offers information on the management of the following Operational Programs where it has competencies:

Table 2: European Operational Programmes in Galicia, 2021-2027

OPERATIONAL PROGRAMME (OP)
PO FEDER GALICIA 2021-2027
PO FSE GALICIA 2021-2027
PO FONDO DE TRANSICIÓN XUSTA 2021-2027
PO FSE ASISTENCIA MATERIAL BÁSICA (BÁSICO)
PO COOPERACIÓN TERRITORIAL EUROPEA (INTERREG) 2021-2027
P NEXTGENERATION EU

Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of the study by Sande & Sande (2023)

At the same time, at a local level, the General Directorate of Autonomous and Local Cooperation acts as an Intermediate Body in the Administrative Unit for the European Social Fund (UAFSE), participating in the management of the Employment, Education, Training and Social Economy Programme (EFESO, by its acronym in

Spanish) of the FSE+, for the 2021-2027 period, through which training projects for employment promoted by local entities are financed. Thus, the Ministry of Territorial Policy and Democratic Memory (2024) has local competencies with regards to the management of FSE+ grants for the current period.

4. Difficulties issuing from institutional design and fund execution

This complex design and the implementation of the Funds entail certain difficulties which become apparent in time. Let us comment on some of the main difficulties detected by recent studies:

- » The slow implementation of operational programmes and management complexity.
- » The complexity of the network of participating bodies (Sande, 2020; Sande & Vence, 2019).
- » The lack of experience in the areas of management and execution on the part of the participating bodies (Sande, 2020).
- » Difficulties in justifying expenditure.
- » The leakage of resources towards other territories (Sande, 2024a; n.d.).
- » The existence of limited information on the impact of these funds due to the quality and scope of the indicators used (Sande & Vence, 2021; 2024b; 2024c).

5. Recommendations

Considering all this, in this document I would like to include some useful recommendations:

- » Simplifying administrative complexity so as to speed up the implementation and execution of the operational programmes.
- » Simplifying the network of bodies involved in the execution of some programmes, so that it can be carried out by those with experience in fund management.
- » Appointing specialised personnel and providing the competent bodies with training in fund management and execution.
- » Finding Financing Not Linked to Costs (FNLC) or other methods to simplify expenditure justification.
- » Redefining and limiting certain policies to achieve greater efficiency, setting (if necessary) limitations regarding the beneficiaries who can access the resources of the regions for which those resources are intended.
- » Promoting and implementing critical assessments and new indicator evaluations, using non-executed technical assistance resources (Sande, 2024b; n.d.).

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4. THE EXTERNAL ACTION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AS A GLOBAL AGENT: WEAKNESSES, THREATS, STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES



Paula Lamoso-González, associate researcher at IGADI and professor at the University of Loyola, Andalusía.

The 9/11 terrorist attack shook the foundations of the international system, and one of the main questions that the EU Member States intended to address during the Convention on the Future of Europe (2003-2004) - which was a prelude to the failed Treaty aimed at establishing a European Constitution was “What is the role of Europe in this transformed world?” (European Council, 2001). The Treaty of Lisbon, which includes the agreements of the Convention on the Future of Europe, represented a major transformation in the institutional architecture of the EU’s External Action. The position of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the position of Commissioner for Foreign Affairs merged into that of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP). In addition, the European External Action Service (EEAS), which is the EU’s diplomatic service, was created in order to assist the Union in the fulfilment of its obligations. The objective was to provide the EU’s external action with greater coherence, visibility and continuity.

But now we are living in a period of global uncertainty and, yet again, we are rethinking the role that the EU should play in the world. This rethinking has taken place mainly after the COVID-19 crisis, which has accelerated the reconfiguration of the global scenario and the crisis of multilateralism, and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, understood as an attack on the values and principles on which the EU project is based. As a result, the EU has been forced to pursue a more pragmatic approach from the point of view of its foreign policy. According to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, “We have entered an era of geostrategic rivalries,” which makes it necessary for Europe to be more assertive when defending its

strategic interests (European Commission, 2024). Thus, in this article, I intend to review the EU's greatest weaknesses, threats, strengths and opportunities for the 2024-2029 mandate.

In the first place, the biggest weakness of the EU in the field of external action is its decision-making process. Foreign policy is the only purely intergovernmental political area where decisions are made unanimously. This implies that any Member State can block a decision, and many times this occurs due to their different positions on issues that have nothing to do with the one being voted on, which delays the ability to respond to global crises. This has become increasingly more complicated given the higher number of Member States and the fact that their (extremist and populist) governments defend increasingly divergent and fragmented interests. Although this process reinforces unity when agreements are reached, the time necessary to achieve consensus is often incompatible with the speed demanded by international challenges.

In the second place, there are threats. The current geopolitical context is marked by the rivalry between China and the United States, which some refer to as the "new Cold War". Another issue is the crisis of multilateralism and the rise of populist and authoritarian movements that challenge the fundamental values of the EU: human rights, democracy, equality, and the rule of law (Art. 2, TEU)(European Parliament, 2024). The EU defends the multilateral system, supporting its reform in order to preserve it and to ensure a more balanced representation of the great powers. Furthermore, instability in neighbouring regions, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine or the conflict in Gaza, are perceived as a direct threat to European interests and security. Another significant threat is the rise of protectionism and deglobalization, which weaken the EU's economic influence. The president of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, has pointed out that the global economy is fragmenting into competitive blocs and causing an increase in protectionism, which may erode the EU's role in global value chains (Burguete, 2023).

In order to respond to these challenges, the EU possesses great **strengths**. It is the largest commercial power in the world,⁽⁴⁾ with a market of more than 400 million people. Likewise, its ability to export its regulatory criteria has been key to influencing international trade and the regulation of the global market. This has an impact on local communities as it automatically raises regulatory standards, improving citizens' lives. Furthermore, the EU is the largest donor of development aid in the world. This is an important foreign policy instrument (OECD (s/f))that allows the EU to make a great impact on local communities, by building infrastructures, and launching projects to promote education, health and sustainable development, for instance. Since the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, the HR/VP and the EEAS, with more than 140 delegations around the world, have strengthened European diplomacy. These delegations also function as a contact point with local communities: local governments, NGOs and citizens.

The recent creation of a diplomatic academy is another step towards the consolidation of a truly common diplomacy. And we should not forget a defence policy which, albeit not fully competitive yet, has developed increasingly since the 2016 Global Strategy, with the creation of the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PE-SCO) or the European Defence Fund. The role of the European Parliament has become more decisive in the

EU's external action too, as a promoter of democracy and the rule of law in the world. Finally, the EU is a key actor in responding to humanitarian crises, natural disasters and conflicts, making a decisive impact on local communities. In short, the EU stands out for being a global regulatory power and for its soft power resources.

Lastly, let us bear in mind that the international situation also presents a series of **opportunities** that the EU must exploit strategically in order to strengthen its global influence in areas in which it already is a leader, such as climate change or the digital revolution. The Von der Leyen 2019-2024 Commission promoted the European Green Deal as the flagship of its mandate, turning the EU into a referent in ecological transition through the implementation of initiatives that promote clean energy and environmental conservation. Likewise, the EU has launched the Global Gateway, an initiative that will allocate €300 billion to key infrastructures between 2021 and 2027, with a focus on digitalization and sustainability. This program offers an opportunity to strengthen ties with strategic partners, by promoting local development and attracting private investment. At the same time, it helps protect natural resources which are vital for local communities and improves their resilience against climate disasters.

To sum up, the current international situation, marked by geostrategic rivalries and challenges to democratic values, questions the influence of the EU in the world as a global actor, based on its soft power policies. The need to reach unanimous decisions regarding common foreign and security policies limits the EU's ability to respond quickly to global challenges. Furthermore, the divergence of interests between Member States affects their credibility and influence. The rise of protectionism, the crisis of multilateralism and the instability around its borders are direct threats to its security and influence. Given all this, the EU must adopt a pragmatic approach and prioritise its strategic interests. However, it must not stop defending its fundamental values: democracy, the rule of law, human rights and essential freedoms-key elements of both its identity as a regional integration project and of its foreign action.

However, the EU has significant strengths. It is a leader in international trade, and in the export of regulatory standards and development aid. The creation of the HR/VP and the EEAS, with more than 140 delegations, has consolidated its global presence and soft power, with a great impact on local communities. Furthermore, global challenges such as climate change and the digital revolution are seen as opportunities, with initiatives such as the European Green Deal and the Global Gateway reinforcing its leadership in the ecological and digital transitions. In conclusion, to maintain its relevance in a competitive and constantly changing global scenario, the EU must continue working on a more cohesive, efficient external action capable of responding quickly and determinedly to global challenges and defending its interests while maintaining its values and principles.

(4) Europe is the world's largest exporter of manufactured goods and services. In 2023, the United States was the main destination for EU goods, with 19.7% of its total exports, followed by the United Kingdom (13%), and overtaking China (8.8%). [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/es/sheet/160/la-union-europea-y-sus-socios-comerciales#:~:text=Europa%20es%20el%20mayor%20exportador,China%20\(8%2C8%20%25\)](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/es/sheet/160/la-union-europea-y-sus-socios-comerciales#:~:text=Europa%20es%20el%20mayor%20exportador,China%20(8%2C8%20%25).).

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5. THE EUROPEAN UNION, AMERICA AND CHINA IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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Introduction

The foreign policy of the European Union (EU) underwent a process of institutionalisation between the Treaties of Maastricht and Lisbon. Since then, the EU has structured a mechanism to establish links with the rest of the world, which has allowed it to generate a joint vision.

At the international level, the dynamics between the different international actors has evolved towards a global vision. Glocality has emerged as a vision that allows us to rethink citizenship and development from a perspective of sustainability. At the same time, it has made it possible to introduce global dynamics through the local space. This has turned the European Union into a key player in the promotion of this global dynamic.

This article seeks to analyse two case studies: the American continent and China. This review aims to identify the European Union's most important agenda and its global action. In the case of America, it is the relation with Latin America that is analysed. In the case of China - one of the most controversial relations between the EU and a foreign country - this revision focuses on a most topical axis: the economic-commercial activity and cooperation.

The conclusions drawn with regards to these case studies are presented at the end.

“Thinking globally, acting locally”

The foreign policy of the European Union aims to achieve the following goals (European Union, 2024):

- » Keeping peace
- » Strengthening international security
- » Promoting international cooperation
- » Developing and consolidating democracy, the rule of law and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

In line with this, the European Union has established itself as a key actor and provider of new dynamics. Thus, it has reaffirmed its connection with the powers that lead the West, while recognising the importance of other actors such as the different emerging economies and regional groups.

In fact, the very construction of the EU has rendered multi-level relations visible, from the supranational to the local sphere. The action of the European Union is the only one in the international system that integrates a supranational level and, by implementing different cooperation mechanisms, it is committed to the promotion of an agenda that benefits regions and/or locations.

Besides, the aforementioned global dynamics brought about the adaptation of the EU and resulted in its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). In 2016, the idea of a “Stronger Europe”, a concept that evokes a strategic autonomy, was put forward. Since then, understanding China’s role within the international system and how it affects the EU has been a major challenge. And this challenge brings to the spotlight the Chinese positioning through international cooperation for development, which results in China’s leadership in South-South cooperation. Given all this, in 2021 the EU launched the “Global Gateway” strategy, which is a €300 investment fund aimed at promoting global connectivity. In addition to this, in 2023 the Parliament issued a resolution to contribute to the Global Europe project as a “Neighbourhood, Development Cooperation and International Cooperation Instrument” by means of an €80 billion fund (Malovec , 2024).

Mechanisms to link with countries from outside the EU: cooperation and trade, Latin America and China

As outlined in the previous section, international cooperation for development has been one of the drivers to link with third countries, and the EU has been the protagonist in North-South cooperation. The EU is the main donor at a worldwide level, mainly, through its institutions. According to the government of Spain (undated), the EU provides “45%, or more than €66 billion every year, which are used to promote sustainable development”.

In the case of Latin America, the EU has articulated its foreign action through cooperation, identifying certain mechanisms such as summits, parliamentary diplomacy, the relations with regional blocs and the bilateral relation between the EU and the State. This has resulted in a series of agreements that integrate 27 countries in the region (European Parliament, 2024a). During the 2023 CELAC-EU summit, a joint agenda was established and it included the following points:

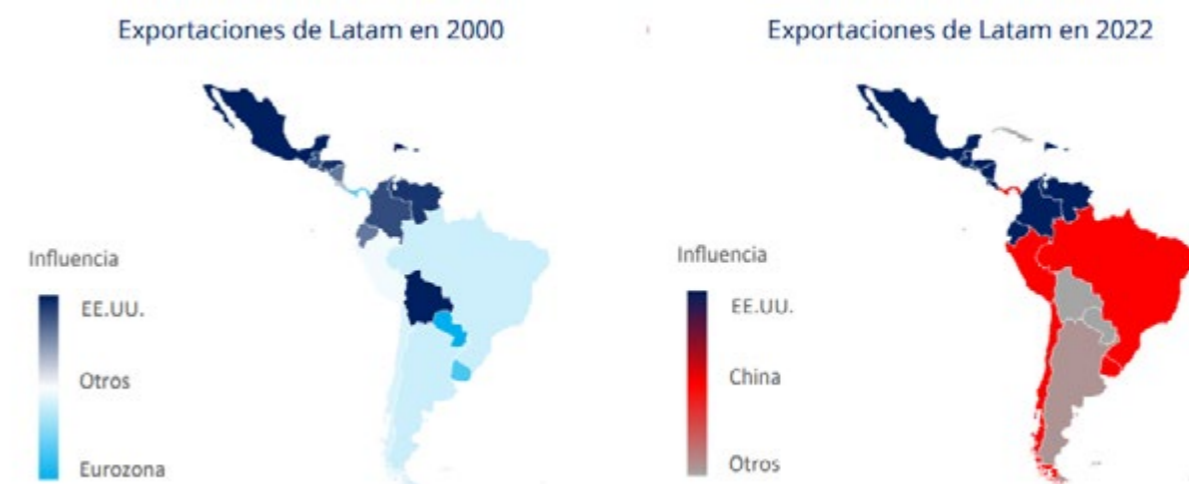
- » Bilateral cooperation
- » Peace and security
- » Trade and investments,
- » Fight against climate change
- » Justice and security for citizens

With this vision, the EU intends to place \$50.5 billion in high-quality investments in Latin America. The declaration of the aforementioned summit, included 41 points stressing the importance of “having a fair, inclusive and effective multilateral system in place in order to allocate adequate resources to sustainable development” (Sierra, 2023).

In this regard, one of the mechanisms used by the EU abroad is the “democracy clause”. This element has been integrated in the agreements signed between the EU and other countries, and it has laid the grounds to create links with third countries, mainly with developing countries.

Authors such as Cordero (2002) point out that this clause can be viewed in two ways. One has to do with “the effective protection of human rights and the democratic regime” (Cordero, 2002, p. 126). But the other, which has to do with punitive action, focuses on the possibility of the EU and its Member States to impose context-specific sanctions as a reaction to cases of massive, serious and systematic violations of human rights or to the interruption of the democratic processes, which affects development and constitutes a threat to international peace and security (Cordero, 2002, p. 128)

Despite the number of agreements and the democracy clause, in commercial terms, the EU has been brushed aside by commercial actors such as China. The following figure shows this transition.



Source: Bloomberg, 2023.

However, there are still some strategic sectors. Thus, the region is increasingly attractive for the EU, mainly in the areas of renewable energy and lithium.

In the case of China, the dynamics are different. Due to China’s evolution in terms of cooperation and trade, the way in which the EU relates to this country is very different from the way it relates to Latin America. In other words, as far as Europe is concerned, China has swayed from cooperation to competition.

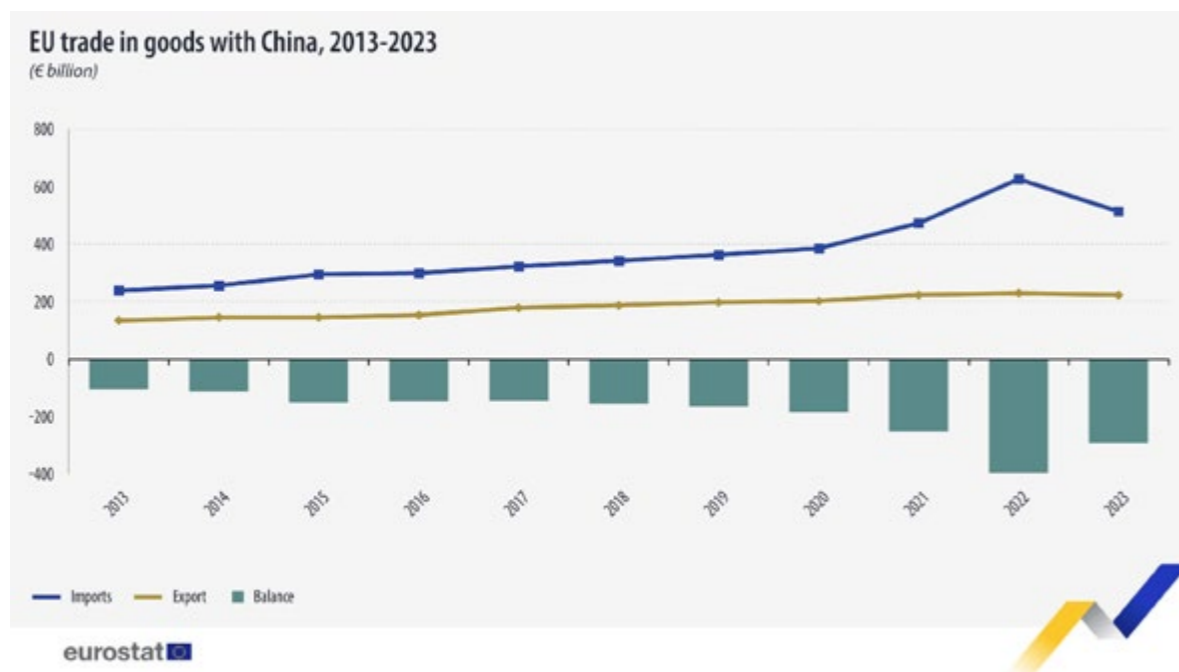
Thus, at the cooperation level, China is no longer a receptor but a provider, having entered the arena mainly in regions where the EU was present, such as Africa and Latin America. It is at this point that the Western discourse introduces concepts that evince a derogatory approach to China’s position - as is the case with the “Beijing Consensus”, referred to as antagonistic to Washington’s leadership in the global South -, or the argument of “Neocolonialism”, used to refer to the displacement of Europe in Africa.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has posed a threat to the Western European traditional zone of influence. But at the same time, this Chinese strategy has taken cooperation to another level. This Eurasian corridor and the infrastructure megaprojects it entails have become a geoeconomic and geopolitical destabilizer, since the advantages observed by Eastern countries may not necessarily match those that have been traditionally observed by the EU.

Therefore, this bilateral relation has become one of mistrust and concern for the EU. This is part of the European discourse because in 2019 the EU described China as “a cooperation partner” and a “negotiation partner”, as well as “an economic competitor” and “a systemic rival” (European Parliament, 2024b, p.2). This discourse has been reinforced by an increased trade deficit in the European bloc.

The following graph shows that this gap has increased over the last 10 years, with the exception of the adjustments implemented during the pandemic. However, this trend was adopted in 2023, in line with the EU's decision to reduce its dependence on China in the area of trade, based mainly on the concept of *derisking*.

Although there have been a series of exchanges between both actors, the policy conducted by the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, is not most closely akin to China. At the level of discourse, Ursula von der Leyen has overtly expressed her concern about the arrival of new Chinese products to the EU. Thus, in June 2024, the European Commission made its intention to increase tariffs explicit, mainly with regards to Chinese electric vehicle imports, justifying it on the grounds of the “unfair subsidies” that put the European automotive sector at risk. In 2023, more than 440 thousand electric vehicles will enter the EU.



Source: CDE, 2024.

However, the joint focus on China has not limited the bilateral relation with the member countries of the European Union. In this sense, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia are countries that form part of the Belt and Road Initiative; with Italy leaving in 2023. This has motivated meetings and tours such as that of President Xi in May 2024 to France, Hungary and Serbia, and that of Pedro Sanchez to China in September 2024. These visits are the reason why these countries have advocated for the elimination of the tariff and non-tariff barriers promoted by the EU.

Conclusions

The EU's experience at setting up links has been very different in Latin America and China since, while Latin America has become an area claimed by the United States, the EU and China, the relation with China has evolved and turned them all into antagonistic actors, given the EU's high economic dependence on China.

This comes to prove that the EU and China have used cooperation for development in the world as a mechanism to establish links with countries outside their borders. Although in the case of Europe this aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals and the values promoted by the EU's own foreign policy, in the case of China it is in line with this country's own experience and perspective as an alternative to the Western model.

Thus, the democracy clause allows some countries to align with this model, while many others decide to establish links with China. Similarly, it is important to note that China's bilateral relations with some EU countries generate controversy and positions both for and against the whole issue.

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6. THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE GLOCALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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The European Union has established itself as a supranational entity committed to the promotion and protection of human rights. This commitment is reflected in its legislation, but the protection of human rights in the EU is not limited to the Member States and their institutions: it also percolates to the local level, where the glocality of these rights acquires special relevance.

On the one hand, when we think about the European Union, we usually think of a set of institutions (Council, Parliament, Commission) with a formal structure and supranational operational functions/effectiveness. This perspective entails an automatic association between the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), as far as human rights are concerned. This Court belongs to the Council of Europe, a continental intergovernmental organisation different from and prior to the EU. Yet, this has not prevented the EU from absorbing and adapting part of the doctrines of the ECHR and its Convention through the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, adopted in 2000 (Delgado, 2004). This Charter guarantees the safeguarding of human rights within the Union, both regarding its institutions and its Member States when they apply the EU regulations.

However, this structural approach may seem distant from the daily lives of citizens and the reality of local governance. It is essential to take into account that local governments and communities play a crucial role in the implementation and respect of human rights. Besides, Rhodes (1997) suggests that the European Commission has implemented governance through networks that facilitate the transfer of European policies to the local context, using a series of instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2005) that allow the formulation of regulations that respect human rights and are, in many cases, based on the so-called soft law (Saurugger & Terpan, 2020).

These instruments are numerous and diverse. In this analysis, we will focus on three types: a regulatory instrument (the “political criterion” as a condition to access the EU), an international financing instrument (EUROSociAL+) and an accreditation instrument (European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity).

The political criterion and its local dimension

The Copenhagen Criteria establish that in order to enter the EU candidate countries must have stable democratic institutions (political criterion), a functional market economy and the ability to take on the obligations of membership. The political criterion specifically requires the existence of institutions that guarantee democracy and the rule of law.

This political criterion, therefore, encourages local governments to implement reforms promoting decentralisation and, hence, granting greater autonomy and decision-making capacity at the subnational level. This facilitates the application of inclusive and participatory policies that respect fundamental rights. Therefore, this political criterion helps local authorities develop and protect human rights, demanding that they guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities (Todorova, 2019.)

Compliance with this criterion to enter the EU also encourages the protection of human rights in key areas such as education, health and public services, ensuring equitable access and avoiding any form of discrimination, from all levels of governance. Local authorities must create democratic mechanisms that include citizens in the decision-making process, which translates into public consultations, accountability and the reinforcement of transparency, thus strengthening the respect for fundamental rights in our daily lives.

Finally, the political criterion requires that local authorities work actively for the integration of minorities and vulnerable groups, ensuring that local policies respect and protect their rights, contributing this way to the social cohesion and democratic stability of the country as a whole.

EUROSociAL+

The EUROsociAL+ program (2023) is yet another important instrument of the European Union for the protection of human rights, especially in Latin America, through inter-institutional collaboration with local and national authorities. This program promotes inclusive public policies that foster social cohesion and support local governments in the implementation of reforms that strengthen democratic governance, in collaboration with European institutions (FIAPP, 2019.)

One of the main areas of focus of EUROsociAL+ is gender equality (Rodríguez, 2015) and the protection of women's rights, promoting female participation in public life and their access to essential services. Likewise, this program promotes social inclusion and respect for the rights of minorities and vulnerable groups, providing support to local authorities in the design of strategies to help improve the quality of life in disadvantaged communities.

EUROSociAL+ also supports the training of local authorities on issues related to justice and the rule of law, so that they can manage conflicts effectively and ensure the protection of human rights.

We must bear in mind that the defence and protection of human rights is an essential line of negotiation for

the European Commission in internal financing programs (such as Europe with citizens, Erasmus or others), external financing programmes (such as the aforementioned one) and international trade agreements (“good governance” as a requirement for commercial access.)

The European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity award

This award is granted by the European Union in recognition of the efforts made by cities to promote human rights, inclusion and diversity. Launched in 2021 by the European Commission (undated), the award celebrates cities that have implemented exemplary policies and practices to create more inclusive, equitable and respectful environments from the point of view of human rights, both for minorities and for other vulnerable groups.

This competition offers visibility to the best local practices, encouraging the exchange of experiences and motivating other cities to adopt similar approaches. By competing for the award, cities reinforce their commitment to human rights and fostering the implementation of more equitable and sustainable policies. Besides, international recognition strengthens the legitimacy of these policies among citizens and propitiates an environment of regional collaboration based on the ethics of “best practices”.

In this sense, we can mention other European “Capitals” that emphasise the local commitment to human rights, such as, for instance, the “Accessible City award” or even the “European Capital of Culture”. The former highlights the work of European local authorities in the application of the rights of people with disabilities, while the latter brings cultural rights to the focus.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the glocality of human rights in the EU context shows how supranational policies can be adapted to local levels, thus achieving an implementation which is closer to the needs of the communities. The EU through programs such as EUROsociAL+ and awards such as the European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity has promoted a type of governance that stimulates the protection of fundamental rights and encourages the participation of local authorities in their protection. This decentralised approach has brought about important advances in social inclusion, gender equality and minority issues.

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that the EU faces challenges in the implementation of the European principles of human rights.

Although it has established a robust regulatory framework, tensions between European values and the political and social realities of some Member States make it difficult to uniformly apply these rights, also at local level. A clear example would be the situation in some cities in Poland, where the so-called “LGBTI-free zones” have called into question the commitment to the rights of sexual minorities, proving that there is a gap between supranational policies and local actions. Such instances reveal the limitations of the EU when it comes to guaranteeing full respect for human rights throughout its territory, and also show that, in some cases, the available tools are not sufficient or adapted.

Therefore, it is not a matter of “thinking global and acting local”, on the contrary, it is a matter of “thinking local and acting global”, because local authorities must be recognized as fully-fledged European (international) actors in order to be able to discuss the realities of human rights with the EU institutions in a dialogue that has to take place “at street level”.

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7. CONCLUSIONS: A GLOCAL EUROPEAN UNION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY WORLD

After reviewing the thematic texts by our main specialists, we jointly addressed the key questions initially proposed: Is the European Union (EU) a Glocal International actor? How does the EU connect the local and the global spheres? Are there any similar Glocal International organizations?

- » **1.** The EU is, undoubtedly, a unique example of glocal governance, where global and local dynamics interact continuously and directly. It is not only one of the most complex and advanced international organizations in terms of economic integration, but also in political terms. Thanks to its multi-level governance structure, its decisions have a local impact on citizens in the European regions, making the European project tangible for citizens in their daily lives.
- » **2.** The connection between the local and the global in the EU is materialized through mechanisms such as the principle of subsidiarity, through structures such as the Regional Council and through financial instruments such as the Structural and Cohesion Funds. These innovations were fundamental for European regional development, as well as for the promotion of social inclusion, gender equality or the participation of minorities.
- » **3.** One of the two most powerful aspects of the EU's glocal profile is its capacity to act as a regulatory power. Through the so-called "Brussels Effect", the EU exports regulatory standards, and regulations concerning labour rights and environment and responsible consumption, which improve local conditions while placing the EU as an influencing international referent.
- » **4.** Despite these achievements, the density of the EU governance process created an important distance between its institutions and citizens. The technical and political complexity, together with the new global competitive dynamics, facilitated or contributed to Euroscepticism. This scenario has been accentuated by recent crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic or the Ukrainian war.
- » **5.** This growing disconnection is also explained by current geopolitical tensions, where the aggressive competition for resources and markets has an important impact on European local economies. Sectors such as the automotive, agri-food or manufacturing sectors are under global pressure, which affects local competition. The EU's ability to mediate in these dynamics must be put to the test, and it is essential to develop more flexible and coordinated responses to these new realities.



- » **6.** Even though the EU is a world leader in promoting sustainable development and in the fight against climate change, its external action has proved to have obvious limitations. The need to create a more coherent competitive discourse in order to face global challenges is still a pending issue. The strategic autonomy promoted by the EU is key, but it is still not fully developed to face the challenges of the new global scenario.
- » **7.** The core point of the EU's glocal profile is the defence of human rights, integrated -from our own history- in the internal and local dimensions, but also in its international trade agreements, and in any new memberships or in programmes of cooperation for development. Therefore, the contradictions and double standards that sometimes characterize its response to internal and international crises are detrimental to its image both in Europe and in the world.
- » **8.** In the current context, the world is glocal by nature due to the physical and digital connectivity infrastructures or to economic and environmental interdependencies. Therefore, no other international organization has developed a Glocal political project as complex and advanced as the one developed by the European Union. Entities such as ASEAN, the African Union or MERCOSUR have mechanisms that connect local to global, but lack the sophistication and scope of the EU in terms of multi-level governance or regulatory impact.
- » **9.** The uniqueness of the EU lies, therefore, in its ability to integrate different levels of governance, and this is what makes it the most important Glocal organization on our planet. However, this singularity poses challenges, especially regarding its economic competitiveness and the coherence and unity of its foreign action, which requires greater integration and coordination in order to be effective in the scenarios outlined for the upcoming decades.
- » **10.** In conclusion, the history of European construction or the creative capacity of its institutions are valuable assets that should spark off a future citizens can look forward to. Promoting the well-being of European society involves thinking "out of the box" and facing the future without any fear of innovation, going from local to global.

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