Institute of European Democrats

Call for Papers "Geopolitics & Values: what is the real power of the EU?"

MULTILATERALISM AND IDENTITY

Can the COVID-19 pandemic create a sense of common sharing and an improvement in international relations?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how the persistence of borders in a globalised scenario is an issue to be addressed and not underestimated. The trend of strengthening nationalistic tendencies has become more acute, and multilateralism was weakened. Since the EU's global position is frail, a further weakness resulting from a lack of common feeling would undermine the very role of the Union. Can we consider the popular opinion as a stimulus for cession of sovereignty in foreign policy, defence and security? Could a sense of community among Europeans imply a greater credibility of the EU itself? Starting from the concept of European identity, this paper analyses how the affection of citizens towards the process of European integration would be a catalyst for an efficient action of the EU on the defence of multilateralism and the promotion of European values. The main goal will be to present policy recommendations to strengthen the feeling of attachment to the European project.

Short bio

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TABLE OF ACRONYMS

CFSP = Common Foreign and Security Policy

COP = Conference of the Parties

COVID-19 = Coronavirus Disease 2019

EU = European Union

UN = United Nations

US = United States

WHO = World Health Organization

WTO = World Trade Organization

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted how the persistence of borders in a globalised scenario is an issue to be addressed and not underestimated. During the spring 2020, in the European Union (EU), national governments have decided to close their borders. At the same time, the trend of strengthening nationalistic tendencies has become more acute, with an emphasis on nationalist elements and an underlying narrative in which the internal features tend to prevail over the sense of European sharing (Giraudo, 2020, p. 43). Although late, the response of the EU institutions underlined the absence of frontiers when it comes to health, economy, jobs and diplomatic relations.

Therefore, the question of belonging and personal feelings becomes prominent for an assessment of the impact of the pandemic on the actions of the European Union. At a first glance, we might assume that citizens have more trust in their national governments than in the EU. But the process is much more complicated, and one can highlight a parallelism. On the one side, there is an effort to create a sense of community between the Member States, but it proves to be challenging; on the other side, EU's action on the international scene can be undermined because of a lack of confidence in its institutions. Every kind of action suffers from such a logic, both the internal and external ones. As nations are cultural constructions deriving from a sense of sharing, multilateralism is another social creation which needs trust among participants who share the same goals (Lazarou, 2017, p. 2). The revival of internal borders could be followed by the impossibility to promote an effective multilateralism in international relations. Since the EU's global position is already frail, a further weakness resulting from a lack of common feeling would undermine the very role of the Union.

The fragilities of the EU can be surmounted with an impetus from national governments towards a cession of portions of sovereignty in certain areas, such as health, research and foreign policy. Nevertheless, no path in this direction will ever be complete without solid support from citizens. Consequently, there is a call to understand how the popular opinion should be regarded as a stimulus for cession of sovereignty in foreign policy, defence and security. The crisis of legitimacy encountered by the EU at the beginning of the pandemic and the return of nationalistic visions could be catalysts for overturning a decadent course experienced by the European institutions. From a sense of community among European citizens and countries would derive greater credibility of the Union itself, already questioned by the management of the migration crisis. Accordingly, it will originate a more effective promotion of a modern form of democracy and defence of the rule of law and multilateralism in a global context.

To achieve this aim, our paper will analyse how the affection of European citizens towards the process of European integration would be a catalyst for an efficient action of the EU on the defence of multilateralism and the promotion of European values. The essay will be structured in three sections. The first one will review the academic literature on the theme of nationalism and the importance of identity discourse. Starting from the definition of multilateralism, the second chapter will retrace how the EU has approached the question of "effective multilateralism;" in parallel, it will trace how the pandemic has had an impact on international relations, with an analysis of the recent undermining of multilateralism. Eventually, the third chapter will examine the Eurobarometer data on the European sentiment of its citizens on several issues, to understand what is needed to develop a new path to promote multilateralism in international relations. The main final goal will be to present some policy recommendations to strengthen the feeling of attachment to the European project, which is considered to be the main factor for effective action on the

international, multilateral scenario, and to improve the action of the European Union thanks to those sentiments.

1. European identity: culture, economy, history, values, geography, and the rule of law

The importance of self-definition is a fundamental step to understand not solely who one is and the way one wants to appear in the eyes of others but to project oneself onto the social scene. For individuals, self-perception represents the junction point between one's mind and everything around. This condition can come true when there is a profound discourse on the theme of personal identity. This topic has been the focus of a wide range of scientific articles, papers and essays that have provided historical, sociological and political food for thought. It should, however, be remembered that it was the psychologist Erikson who extensively discussed the concept of identity at the beginning of the second half of the XX century (Fukuyama, 2019, p. 9). Nonetheless, personal identity is only one of the numerous existing identities. As a matter of fact, "[i]ndividual and collective identities are intimately intertwined, and it is not conceivable to address one without mentioning the other" (Giraudo, 2020, p. 5). In our paper, we would focus mainly on the latter.

Since the XVIII century, nation-states have been able to establish the most successful collective identities. Living in collectivities has become a defining element of men (Gellner, 1983, pp. 137-138), and nations are shelters against the uncertainties of the global scenario. Their success is so widespread that "people routinely divide the world into nation-states and identify with their own" (Storm, 2017, p. 173).

National identities cannot be considered as the only existing collective identities. Among the others, we find the European identity, which has proven to be one of the most remarkable for its intrinsic features. Nevertheless, it is controversial because of the impossibility to consider the European Union as a classic example of a nation-state (Ingravalle, 2020, p. 37). Giving a proper definition of the EU seems a challenging task that would require an extensive discussion. We may describe it as an atypical supranational organisation whose shape and competencies are continuously redefined because of its very nature, which includes diverse levels of accountability and processes of decision-making. As a result, Delors's suggestion to refer to the European Union as an "unidentified political object" (Secretariat-General of the Commission, 1985, p. 8) could be considered as one of the most convincing definitions ever appeared.

The European identity might not seem as "true" as the national identities. Checkel and Katzenstein (2009, pp. 2-3) underline that "[p]oliticization makes issues part of politics, and it involves a number of different actors and processes. Bureaucrats crafting a Europe centered on Brussels, and intellectuals theorizing and normatively justifying a new kind of (cosmopolitan) European allegiance, play key roles." We might remark a division: on the one side, a genuine national identity; on the other side, a constructed European identity. The *décalage* between the nation-state and the EU has to be kept in mind since the latter is not capable in influencing its citizens with those symbols and other imaginaries that exert a powerful impact for the former (Bettin Lattes, 2010, p. 30). Such symbols and "invented traditions" make people perceive a sense of common sharing among them: as Hobsbawm (1983, p. 1) maintained, their relevance comes from their ability "to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past." Consequently, the nation "is an imagined political community … because the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members,

meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1991, p. 6).

Nations may have inherent identities (Billig, 1995, p. 37) which are so powerful that people can perceive them as a defining part of their identity. Nonetheless, it is risky to see states as political entities with distinctive feelings that define their personalities; on the contrary, the focus should be pointed towards the decision-makers, who impose their own emotions and perceptions on the states themselves (Lebow, 2016, p. 36). Therefore, we must underline that the definition of the identity of an international organisation like the EU has been given by single individuals who carried out a historical and political analysis to define the European identity.

This is what happened at the Council of Copenhagen on 14 December 1973. Giving an idea of the nature of the then-European Community was the foremost purpose, but it was far from being straightforward. Since the Ministers aimed to find a common ground of the Nine Member States, they stated that those countries were "determined to defend the principles of representative democracy, of the rule of law, of social justice – which is the ultimate goal of economic progress – and of respect for human rights. All of these are fundamental elements of the European identity" (European Community, 1973, p. 119). Furthermore, such elements were declared as the founding bases for the international action of the Community (European Community, 1973, pp. 121-122). One can underline how values do not only define the European identity but also shape the foreign relations of the EU with the rest of the world.

The very debate on the European identity revived at the beginning of the 1990s when a significant discussion on the future of Europe was occupying the agenda of the chancelleries across the continent. In December 2001, at the European Summit of Laeken (Brussels), the heads of State and government emphasised that Europe had to be considered "as the continent of humane values, the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights, the French Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall; the continent of liberty, solidarity and above all diversity … The European Union's one boundary is democracy and human rights" (European Council, 2001, p. 3). Again, as in 1973, it was stated that the EU would have established a political and diplomatic dialogue with those actors that would have shown respect for the same values, most remarkably the rule of law (European Council, 2001, p. 3). Furthermore, the Treaties themselves affirm that the European integration derives from considering democracy, the rule of law and human rights as the cornerstones of a common project (Treaty on European Union, Preamble).

This construction of a sense of community among the Member States displays an added value of the European integration process. Nonetheless, these countries have different and sometimes competing histories: as Prosperi (2018, p. 77) recalls, multiplicity is Europe's distinct characteristic. The idea proposed here is that it is not possible to establish such a sense of community if there is no confidence among the citizens. In this process of formation of collective identities, communication plays a pivotal role (Thiesse, 2001, p. 289). Constructing on these reasonings, we can point out the importance of citizens' feelings, something that was underlined by Elias (1991), which advanced an extensive reflection on the "We-I" balance. Since the nation-state was still regarded as the main community, Elias suggested that a real feeling of supranational integration was far to be achieved (Thiesse, 2001, pp. 295-301).

It was Deutsch who proposed the theory of transactionalism in his essay *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (1957). The Prague-born political scientist highlighted that one needs to focus on common values and mutual trust to understand how political communities form themselves. Maintaining about a *security community*, namely "a group of people which has

become 'integrated'" (Deutsch *et al.*, 2003, p. 123), Deutsch affirmed that there are at least nine (or twelve) preconditions to establish it. Among them, we find "mutual compatibility of main values; … a distinctive way of life; … a marked increase in political and administrative capabilities …" (Deutsch *et al.*, 2003, p. 138).

EU citizens have clear ideas on what creates a feeling of community among them (see Table I in Annex). According to the Summer 2020 Eurobarometer Survey (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 133-136), culture (27%), economy (25%), history (23%), values (21%), geography (19%), the rule of law (18%), care for the environment (17%) and sports (17%) are listed as the main subjects. It is, therefore, conceivable that the EU claims to have a distinctive identity based on certain elements who moulded not solely its Member States, but the whole continent. Since they directly derive from the way people across Europe have contributed to shaping their personal and collective identities, we might argue that the European Union can only survive with the support of its inhabitants. The sense of community among European citizens and countries creates greater credibility of the Union itself.

2. Multilateralism and COVID-19 pandemic: towards a change in international relations?

In the first chapter of this paper, we have stressed the importance of values, democracy and the rule of law for the European Union, which considers them as the cornerstones of the European identity. Therefore, it becomes evident that the EU does not defend them only among the Member States, but also on the international scene. To achieve this goal, the European Union promotes the use of multilateral practices, which can be considered the opposite of unilateralism.

Producing a negative definition of multilateralism is easier than introducing a positive one because it "continues to be mainly understood as what it is not: unilateralism or bilateralism" (Bouchard *et al.*, 2014, p. 283). We can consider multilateralism as a "process of organizing relations between groups of three or more states" (Scott, 2015) which is based on three main features, namely "an indivisibility of interests among participants, a commitment to diffuse reciprocity, and a system of dispute settlement intended to enforce a particular mode of behaviour" (Scott, 2015). These elements underline that an *esprit de communauté* is needed to have a functioning multilateral order because the confidence among the participants is one of its founding bases.

Although we might think that multilateralism is a recent construction, we can retrace its first roots at the Congress of Vienna (1814 – 1815), when the main five European powers – Great Britain, Russia, France, Prussia and Austria – convened around some main principles of behaviour. This was a remarkable achievement, and we have to consider the Vienna Settlement as one of the main events in the European history: "1815 is the one and only time in European history when statesmen sat down to construct a peaceful international system after a great war and succeeded" (Schroeder, 1992, p. 705). Even though the new structure of the (European) international system lasted for nearly all the XIX century (Schroeder, 1986, p. 2), the first half of the XX century destroyed such a configuration. It was only after the end of the Second World War that multilateralism came back, as "a compromise between a rising multilateral governance and the resilience of the Westphalian order" (Badie, 2020, p. 128). The meaning of multilateralism has been modifying for the last 75 years (Bouchard *et al.*, 2014, p. 283).

1945 is a foremost date for multilateralism: the signing of the Charter of the United Nations (UN) opened a new season for international relations. Some years later, the recently-born European Communities became one of the main promoters of multilateralism and, in particular, of a "soft-

power" approach. Nye (2002, p. 9) defined it as the capability of "getting others to want what you want." Moreover, it "arises in large part from our values. These values are expressed in our culture, in the policies we follow inside our country, and in the way we handle ourselves internationally" (Nye, 2002, p. 9). Consequently, multilateralism and soft power can represent the means that the European Union adopts to act in the international scene (Lehne, 2017, pp. 16-17).

Such elements are included in the definition of the external action of the European Union proposed by Hill and Peterson (2014, p. 68): "a unique, *sui generis*, foreign policy actor … committed – in primordial, almost genetic way – to the goal of 'effective multilateralism' … [, and] a normative actor, which prioritises values over interests." We can contend about an effective multilateralism when the promotion of our values contributes to shaping the international scenario (Peterson and Bouchard, 2014, pp. 29-30). Despite the success it encountered at the European level, the very notion of effective multilateralism was advanced by Kagan concerning the United States (US) foreign policy at the beginning of the new millennium; consequently, we have to be aware that there has been an evolution and an adaptation of such a concept for the last two decades (Drieskens, 2014a, pp. 4-5).

In 2003, the European Union started using this notion, stating that "[a]n active and capable European Union would make an impact on a global scale. In doing so, it would contribute to an effective multilateral system leading to a fairer, safer and more united world" (Council of the European Union, 2003, p. 16). Since that moment, several documents have stressed its importance in the EU foreign policy (Hill and Peterson, 2014, p. 63).

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic produced an unpredictable, changing landscape, where the international scenario is often dismissed, even though the Coronavirus underlined that a sanitary crisis does not care about borders. The outcomes of such a context are that international relations are experiencing moments of weakness, and multilateralism is one of the main victims. Lazarou (2020, p. 1) argues that the COVID-19 pandemic "has exposed the multilateral system's inability to live up to the expectation projected on it in the current geopolitical environment." According to Anghel *et al.* (2020, p. 28), "[m]ultilateralism and the rules-based order were challenged even before the outbreak of the … pandemic." Nonetheless, the sanitary crisis has worsened the multilateral order and the international landscape. Although it is not yet possible to refer to the "second wave" because several decisions of the national governments are being taken at the time of writing of this paper, the "first wave" should be considered as the main point of reference for our discussion. In an unprecedented manner, the European Union experienced a momentum for the revival of the nation-state. With the closing of the internal borders of the EU, and an immediate incapability of the European institutions to react to the ongoing situation, the national governments and the respective Presidents and Prime Ministers often gained in popularity. This is the so-called "rally 'round the flag" effect, which is particularly strong in times of crisis (Ucciero, 2020).

Realism seems to be the most relevant approach in international relations, with "global and even regional powers try[ing] to maximise their weight and challenge the established international order using both 'soft' and 'hard' power tools" (Anghel *et al.*, 2020, p. 28). This crisis does not concern only security, but also several other subjects, such as human rights and the battle against climate change (Lazarou, 2020, p. 2). Furthermore, the multilateral order has been undermined by the Trump Administration, which decided to withdraw from several international agreements, like the ones signed at the Paris's XXI Conference of the Parties (COP21). Cofelice (2020) underlines that another remarkable attack to the multilateral order has been directed towards the World Trade Organization (WTO). In this "increasingly power-driven international world, where interests

prevail over values and norms" (Anghel, 2020, p. 5), the EU should start playing a mightier role. This has to become reality in the relationship with Russia and China, which can be defined as "unstable partners," since the EU should cooperate with them conditionally on the respect of human rights.

Multilateral action is needed, as recently pointed out both in the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2020) and by the UN Secretary-General (Guterres, 2020). The President of the European Parliament has stressed that "the values of peace, security and multilateralism … lie at the core of the EU and of its foreign policy pursuits" (Sassoli, 2020, p. I) and that there is a need of "re-energising multilateralism for development, security and peace" (Sassoli, 2020, p. II). In her first State of the Union Address, the President of the European Commission underlined "that the need to revitalise and reform the multilateral system has never been so urgent. Our global system has grown into a creeping paralysis. Major powers are either pulling out of institutions or taking them hostage for their own interests" (von der Leyen, 2020, p. 9).

Ten years ago, Lazarou *et al.* (2010, p. 13) maintained that the European Union could be a crucial player in the multilateral order. Thus, the construction of a new multilateral world must move on from realistic assumptions: if the EU is keen on promoting values, the rule of law and democracy, three of its defining elements, any other agreement should be subjected to such respect. Furthermore, to achieve such a goal, the EU has to "present a plan for the reinforcement of the multilateral institutions in the sector where it is more urgent: sustainable development, security, finance, trade" (Moro, 2020, Own translation). In this age of personal and social uncertainty, we have to keep in mind what Haass (2008, p. 44) famously stated, i.e. that the XXI century is characterised by "a dozen of actors possessing and exercising various kinds of power." Moreover, it must be recalled that "[t]he future does not need to belong exclusively to either regional or global multilateralism. It is more likely to be a shifting balance of the two" (Ikenberry, 2015, p. 412).

The suggestion is that the European Union should find a role for itself which will differentiate it from the rest of the international actors. Nonetheless, at the moment, the EU is not fit to act in the global scenario, because the foreign policy is not of exclusive competence of the European institutions. As Hill and Peterson (2014, p. 69) have highlighted, "[t]he European Union is clearly far more powerful for what it *is* than for what it *does*." Member States are jealous of their sovereign prerogatives in the field: they are not willing to renounce their priorities. Furthermore, the EU cannot solely rely on traditional "soft power" tools, but also "hard powers" ones. The goal is to achieve a "strategic autonomy" for the EU, outside the protection of the North Atlantic Treaty. With this term, we refer to the ability of a country or an organisation to launch and sustain operations without the aid provided by external parties and partners (Mikser, 2020). One has also to recognise that the strategic autonomy would be pointless if it won't be considered as the main strategy in the EU's international action but as a final goal. As Grevi (2019, p. 11) underlines, "[t]his is the heart of European integration: sharing sovereignty in some domains to become more effective in its exercise. Pursuing strategic autonomy is therefore part of a renewed effort to strengthen the basis for European sovereignty in changing international and domestic context."

Referring to the economic consequences of the pandemic, Saulnier (2020, p. 10) highlights "that when it is united, Europe can deliver more, more effectively and more efficiently, as common action provides a level of strategic depth that no individual Member State, nor any isolated group of Member States would be able to achieve." Nevertheless, such a move won't be feasible in the

next future, because a change in the Treaties will be needed. A change of mind in the European leaders would be its main prerequisite, but this is far from being realised.

Moving further, it is from European citizens' sentiments that could emerge a push to modify such a scenario. The populist rhetoric often maintains that people cannot influence the actions of the European Union. This reasoning is incomplete, since every institution reflects the vote of the citizens, although in different manners. The European Parliament is a direct expression of a popular vote, while the Council, the European Council and the European Commission are indirectly chosen by the same citizens. Consequently, there is the possibility to influence the EU's action thanks to the vote at the elections, both at a national and European level, and through the expression of personal feelings collected in the Eurobarometer surveys.

3. Eurobarometer: Europeans' sentiments toward the European Union and its policies

Since representation is strictly bound to multilateralism (Drieskens, 2014b, p. 193), analysing the perception and the confidence of Europeans towards the European institutions becomes crucial. As underlined before, the confidence among citizens is the first element to construct a sense of community. If it gets lost, there is no possibility to have a coherent and efficient action of the EU, neither among its Member States nor in the global landscape. Inquiring the opinion of the citizens has the advantage to point out some of the priority that they have towards the European Union. In this logic, decision-makers should mould their policies according to these results.

If we ask European citizens about their self-perception, we see that data have evolved quite remarkably since 1992 (European Commission, 2020a). At the time of the signing of the Maastricht Treaty, nearly 48% of the people perceived themselves as citizens of their own country and Europeans; on the contrary, 38% of them felt only as citizens of their nation. This latter percentage increased in relevance between 1998 and 2001, and then again in 2010. These moments represented times of crisis, especially after the economic collapse in the US. If women and men perceive themselves as only citizens of their state, it is a sign that the sense of community mainly belongs to the nation. Nevertheless, if people see themselves both as national and European citizens, it is a sign that the multilevel identity is a reality. Table II in Annex displays that there has been an increase since 2010. The last available data show that 55% of Europeans feel European too. This is remarkable since there is a widespread perception of Europe as one of the main defining elements of the individual. Moreover, 8% of people see themselves first as Europeans and then, as citizens of their nation. At the same time, less than one-third of European citizens perceive themselves solely as citizens of their nation.

Published in October 2020, the last Eurobarometer survey underlines that the pandemic has not affected the trust in the European Union, which is stable at 43%. Nonetheless, the confidence fell in 17 Member States, particularly in Bulgaria (-12%), Italy (-10%) and Malta (-8%) (European Commission, 2020b, p. 8). In parallel, the trust in the national government grew by 6%, arriving at 40%: this is the highest datum since 2007 (European Commission, 2020b, p. 6). 62% of EU citizens are satisfied with the measures taken to fight the Coronavirus outbreak by their national government; when coming to the EU institutions, this percentage falls to 45% (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 64-65).

QA6a I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it.
(% - EU - TEND TO TRUST)
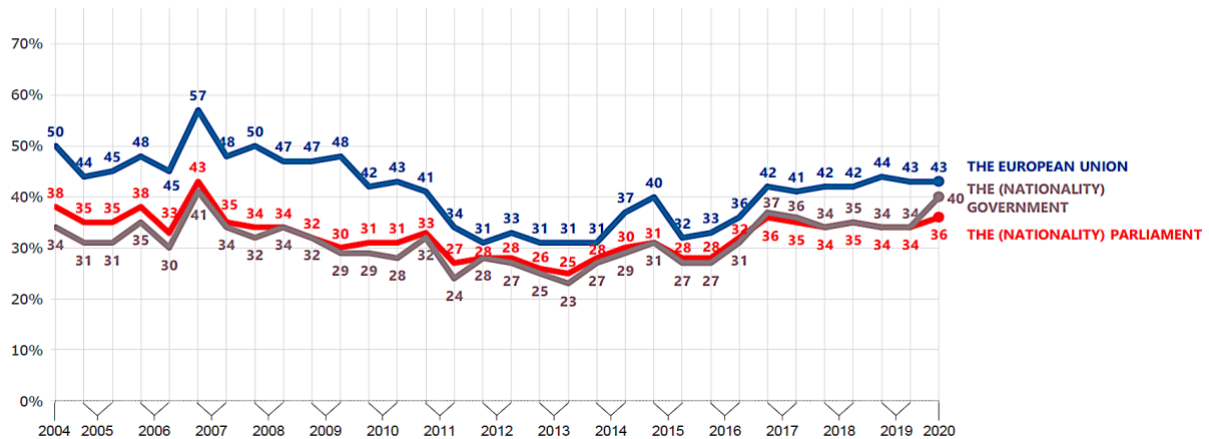
Source: European Commission, 2020b, p. 6.

According to the Survey (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 104-105), despite the previous considerations on the rise in confidence to the national governments, EU citizens have clear ideas: 71% support a common foreign policy of the Member States of the EU, with the highest percentages in Luxembourg (88%), Spain and Lithuania (84%), Germany (82%) and Cyprus (81%). For what concerns a common defence and security policy data are even higher, with a EU27 average of 77% and the highest support in Luxembourg (93%), Cyprus (88%), Latvia and Lithuania (87%), Belgium and Estonia (86%) and Spain (85%).

Besides, 69% of EU citizens think that the EU's voice counts in the world (European Commission, 2020c, p. 117); notwithstanding, only 22% deem that the political and diplomatic influence of the EU in the rest of the world is among the three most positive results on the European Union itself (European Commission, 2020c, p. 131). In her analysis on the support for the EU's common foreign and security policy, Kentmen (2010, pp. 295-296) maintains that

> [i]f individuals think that the EU has succeeded in bringing economic stability to their country, they are more likely to support the CFSP and a rapid reaction EU military force. As with individuals' economic evaluations of the EU, attachment to Europe is also a determinant of foreign policy attitudes.

Consequently, we understand that a European sense of community still exists. It is a reality that we must not undermine. If such a community does not exist in classical political terms, it is effective. And a European identity is present on the international scene. Although it is challenging to provide a definition, there is an "*ethos* (namely the basic values, the conception of the world and the ethical principles of knowledge and action) which outline the new European identity and define the rights and duties of citizenship" (Martinelli, 2017, p. 31).

The logic is straightforward: European citizens have a common feeling of belonging among themselves which is based on certain elements that contribute to the very definition of the European Union. Subsequently, this supranational organisation constructs its internal and external action on such values. If there is no attachment to Europe, everything collapses. This is the risk of what we have been witnessing with the ongoing pandemic. Nonetheless, a twofold trend has to be examined. On the one hand, the trust in the EU has remained the same, but it fell in numerous Member States: it is, therefore, fundamental to enquire about the reasons for this collapse to shape

better actions in the future. On the other hand, apart from the internal policies of the EU, the external ones seem to be of relevant importance for the citizens. The perception of a significant role played by the EU in the international scenario and the landslide support both for a common foreign policy and a common defence and security policy should let decision-makers realise that these policy areas should be implemented at a European level. Consequently, it appears that the EU citizens share the conclusions of the Council on the EU's action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism, namely that

> [o]ur interest lies in a multilateral system that is rules and rights-based, protects the global commons, promotes shared public goods, and delivers benefits for citizens in Europe and across the globe. Cooperation through effective multilateralism remains the best way to advance national as well as collective interests (Council of the European Union, 2019, p. 2).

Policy recommendations: are European values a possible answer?

The main objective of this paper was to understand if the COVID-19 pandemic could create a sense of common sharing and an improvement in international relations. European identity, sanitary crisis and multilateralism seem to be distant topics, far from being tangled one to the other. Nonetheless, 2020 has shown that they are strictly bound. Consequently, it is necessary to examine them together to shape policy recommendations fit to tackle the future.

Although the differences between them are quite significant, the European identity has been capable of having its own space in the field of collective identities. It does not produce the same feelings and sentiments of attachment as nations do, but the Eurobarometer surveys have underlined that more than six European citizens out of ten perceive themselves not only as citizens of their own country but also as Europeans (European Commission, 2020a). The fact that the two elements are kept together in one's self-perception opens up new possibilities for the implementation of policies both at an internal and an external level. In times of sanitary crisis, the widespread support for a European common foreign policy and defence highlights that Europeans are concerned about the role of the European Union in the global scenario. Although it is not reasonable to imagine that every person has expertise in this field, it is remarkable that there is a sort of separation between citizens and decision-makers. Politicians across Europe are jealous of their national prerogatives and are not willing to leave such decisions to the European level. Nevertheless, the international order is changing: classical forms of geopolitics have to be dismissed.

In an interconnected and globalised world, **new approaches towards multilateralism have to be shaped: the European Union has to play a leading role in such processes.** The multilateral order that was constructed after the end of the Cold War is now falling into pieces because of centrifugal forces. The Trump Administration has weakened Transatlantic relations and international organisations (Tocci, 2020, p. 2); at the same time, several other powers become crucial for the geopolitical game. The results of the US elections suggest that the future Biden Administration might reverse this trend and reconstitute a better multilateral scenario (Patrick, 2020). Nonetheless, the European Union must not wait for the other coast of the Atlantic to do the first move and remain on the sides of this international landscape: "Only a more capable, and thus more autonomous Europe, can meaningfully work with Biden's US to make multilateralism great again" (Tocci, 2020, p. 5).

Furthermore, **the EU must take advantage of the sanitary crisis to reinforce its legitimisation**. To achieve such a goal, **both European institutions and national governments have to seriously discuss European identity**. It does not have to be a sterile discussion on the blurry concept of a "European way of life," which has to be dismissed because of its lack of intellectual content. **The forthcoming Conference on the Future of Europe must involve a wide range of people to contend about what being European means.** Starting from the results of the Eurobarometer survey (European Commission, 2020c, pp. 133-136), **the main points to be addressed are culture, economy, history, values, geography, the rule of law, sports and care for the environment.** Only a profound understanding of such elements would guarantee a balance between the expectations of the citizens and the European decision-makers.

On a second level, we have to be aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the necessity for a mightier international role of the European Union. If the first step of discussing the very notion of European identity would be achieved, in this next stage **the European institutions must have the power to shape new lines for an effective foreign policy**. Since "[g]reat power competition, redistribution of global power and uncertainty about the future relevance of multilateralism will impact security and instability across the world, … potentially threatening global peace" (Anghel *et al.*, 2020, pp. 37-38), **the new European way towards multilateralism must see an emphasis on the values that define the Europeans and that Europeans consider as the basis for their common identity**. "International solidarity, [which] is at the heart of the EU's global response to the pandemic" (Bassot, 2020, p. 18), should be the lowest common denominator. This very concept can be considered as the keyword for the 2020 EU's action.

The sanitary crisis has highlighted the absence of borders for a wide range of subjects, starting from health and job market to several other areas. The same efforts that the European Union is doing for mitigating the impacts of the crisis on its citizens have to be made on an international level. **The EU must play a pivotal role in defining new global health policies inside the framework of the World Health Organisation (WHO). Furthermore, the same has to be done for what concerns the World Trade Organisation and climate agreements.** Since everything is connected, we cannot approach any more a question as a single, separated object. This stems from the very values that the European Union wants to promote and that European citizens consider as fundamental.

If such a discussion and implementation of policies will see the light, we might improve the future actions of the European Union, particularly on the international level. Here the point is that **citizens and their priorities**, expressed by the Eurobarometer surveys, **have to be considered for shaping the European policies**. As pointed out in the Introduction to this paper, there is the need to **put the European sense of community at the very core of the European Union**. Stressing on its defining elements, including the shelter of democracy and the defence of the rule of law, would let the EU promote a modern, multilateral order. As Lazarou *et al.* (2010, p. 25) stressed, the European Union is

> a promoter of norms and values both internally … and externally … These characteristics qualify the EU as an ideal mechanism of advocacy by its nature, as an actor with a strong degree of power to persuade and to export the principles guiding its action. In the particular case of multilateralism, the degree of persuasion is even stronger as the EU leads by example, having attained the highest and most complex level of multilateralism among its members.

This process is necessary for the future of the European Union, since "[t]he pandemic has accelerated the EU's quest for strategic sovereignty, a goal whose achievement requires a

horizontal approach to policies. The EU has to be more assertive in the protection of its values and the defence of its interests" (Anghel, 2020, p. 10).

Alongside the reinforcement of multilateralism and EU's soft power, there should be an **emphasis on hard power. The implementation of a common defence and security policy is needed: the European Union must be protected effectively, and it has to act independently**. In a globalised world, everything is tangled and clear lines of action in the external fields have to be set up. At their very core, **the values that define the European identity have to be regarded as political issues**. This is why the attachment to the European project is the main factor for an effective international action of the European Union. Without citizens' sentiments, the EU is an empty box. Its values and its own identity are the only response to the international crisis that the world is experiencing.

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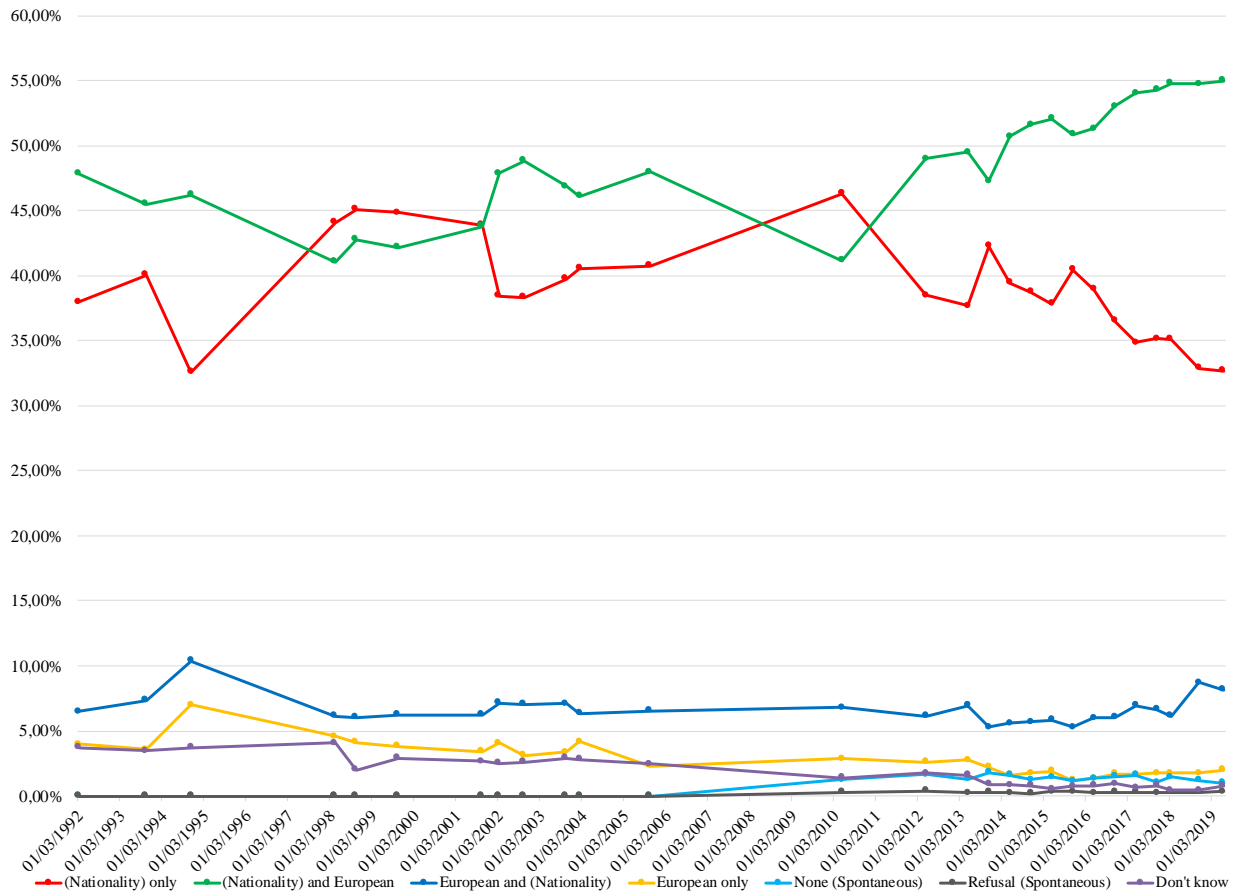
Annexes

Table I. In your opinion, among the following subjects, which are those that create a feeling of community among EU citizens? (EU27, Max. 3 answers)
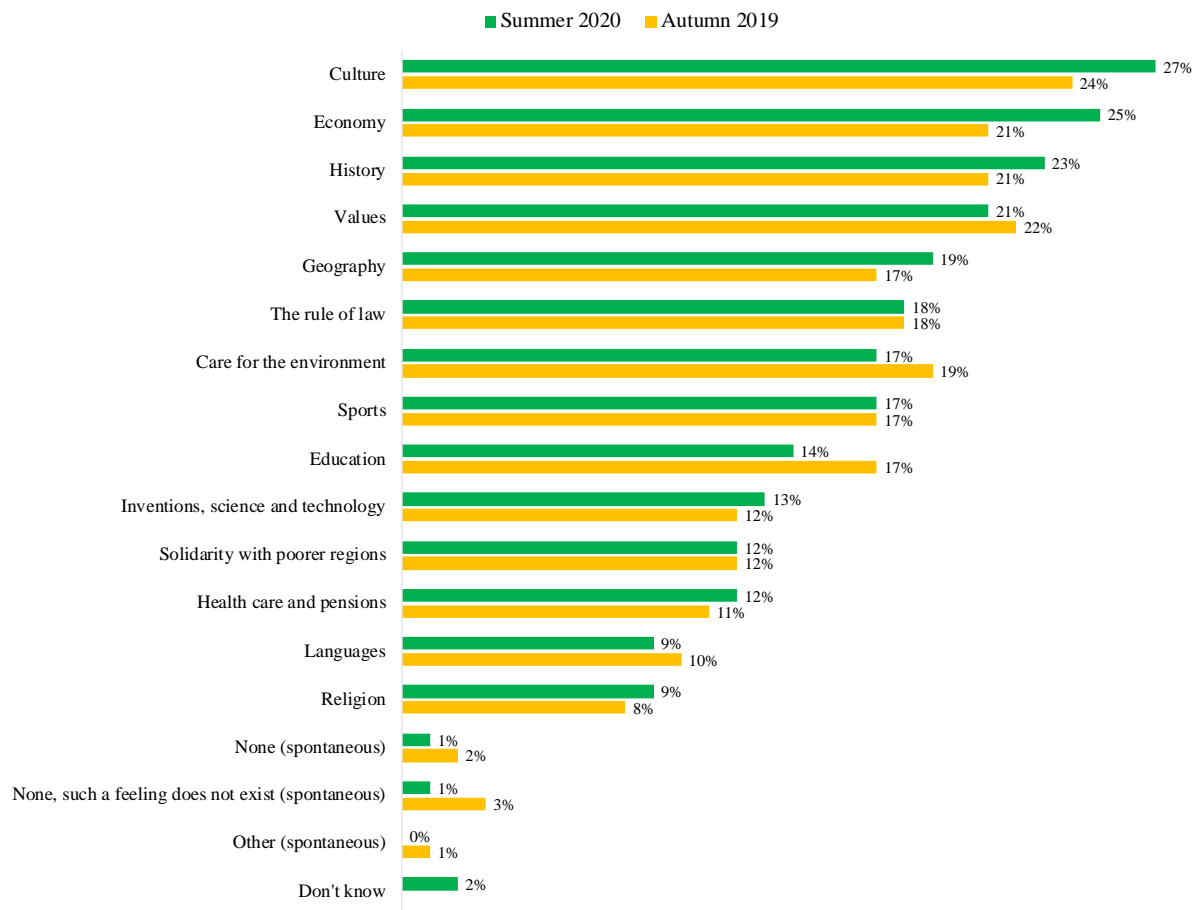
Elaboration: European Commission (2020) *Public opinion in the European Union. Standard Eurobarometer 93. Summer 2020. Annex*. Brussels, pp. 133-136.

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Table II. In the near future, do you see yourself as...?

Elaboration: European Commission (2020) *In the near future Do you see yourself as...?*, *Eurobarometer Interactive*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinionmobile/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/chartType/gridChart//themeKy/41/groupKy /206/countries/EU/savFile/112/periodStart/1992-03-18 00:00:00.0/periodEnd/2019-06-07 00:00:00.0 (Accessed: 5 October 2020). Data referred to 10/2004 were voluntarily excluded from this table.