Reassessing External Images of the EU: Evolving Narratives in Times of Crisis

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The past decade has challenged the EU and its international image. The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, the Ukraine crisis, the so-called irregular migration crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic have all put the EU under severe strain. This article explores if and how the EU's performance in such crises has impacted upon the external image of the EU. The analysis shows that external images have closely followed the EU's actual performance, although filtering it through the powerful lenses of local and regional concerns and sensibilities. While some traditional images have proved to be resilient in the longer run (as in the case of the EU as an economic powerhouse or a frequently divided community), others have been severely weakened by the EU's crisis responses (such as the EU as a bastion of human rights). Our findings contribute to the discussion on the public diplomacy and information strategy of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in shaping locally-resonating positive images of the EU worldwide.

Keywords: external images of the EU, multiple crises of the EU, EU public diplomacy

1 INTRODUCTION

In the ten years since the European External Action Service (EEAS) was founded, the EU has faced a series of significant crises. The economic crisis that started in 2007–2008 lasted for several years in Europe and left deep scars on Member States' mutual trust as well as on the image of the EU as an area of wealth and prosperity. When the EU was just recovering from the wounds of the economic debacle and the EU's neighbourhood policy was about to take another step in the direction of closer relations with Ukraine, Georgia and other countries of the Eastern Partnership, Russia's annexation of Crimea challenged not only the EU's foreign policy, but also its values and principles with respect to international law and sovereignty.

The so-called irregular migration crisis of 2015–2016 also put the EU's internal solidarity under pressure, fed into the political propaganda of right-wing populist movements across Europe and impacted the EU's relations with origin

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and transit countries. Moreover, repeated and condemned violations of human rights allowed by the securitized approach adopted by the EU and its Member States clashed strikingly with the EU's image of a bastion and promoter of human rights in the world. At the same time, a huge challenge arose from within, with the referendum in favour of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, which destroyed the narrative of incremental and unidirectional integration, broadening and deepening, and perhaps stalling, but never going backward. Finally, to complete a decade dense with challenges, the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 has strained internal solidarity and questioned the EU's role in the world governance of health.

All these crises have significantly challenged the European project but also tested the viability and resilience of the EU's foreign policy.[1] Of direct bearing for EU foreign policy is the fact that the crises – taken on their own and in multiplicity – have impacted and challenged external actors' perceptions of the EU, as we will show in this article. These crises put the foundational narratives of the Union and its international roles under pressure: the EU as a wealthy area with significant economic weight in the world; the EU as a 'community', characterized by internal solidarity and thus representing a model to be imitated; the EU as a normative bastion and supporter of human rights; the EU as home to an efficient welfare state, capable of taking care of its citizens; the EU as an ever growing project; and the EU as a champion of peace (the formulation of these narratives is inspired by Manners and Murray).[2] These crises have also invited scholarly considerations of the resilience of the EU, and whether or not it is more capable of responding to crises than other international actors.[3]

The aim of this article is to take stock and track the evolution of global perceptions of the EU, drawing from relevant scholarship in the last decade. We offer input into the EEAS' efforts to 'listen to the world' – efforts that should precede any perception management in shaping/reshaping EU global images. We concentrate on images of the EU which have emerged around the observation of the EU's performance in four of the crises faced in the last decade, all of distinct external origin[4]: the economic crisis, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the irregular migration crisis, and Covid-19. We argue that other critical junctures, e.g. stabilization and integration of the Balkans, the stands-off with the US over the The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

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[1]   For example, B. Fägersten, *The Implications of the Euro Crisis for European Foreign Policy: Lessons from Crisis Management and International Trade*, 19(4) Eur. Foreign Aff. Rev. 483–502 (2014); *The European Union's External Migration Policy: Layers of Justice* (M. Ceccorulli, E. Fassi eds, Routledge forthcoming 2021).

[2]   I. Manners & P. Murray, *The End of a Noble Narrative? European Integration Narratives After the Nobel Peace Prize*, 54 J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 185–202 (2016).

[3]   A. Moravcsik, *Why the EU Wins*, Foreign Affairs, Fall (2020).

[4]   As such, we excluded Brexit.

and Turkey in the eastern Mediterranean, are of lesser *global* visibility if compared to the four crises we have chosen. We are particularly interested in the image of the EU with respect to its international role. There are several review articles on how the EU is perceived abroad overviewing theories, methods, or empirical findings.[5] We do not want to replicate them, but aim to build on the available literature to identify the *evolution* of external perceptions of the EU along the key narratives listed above. This review principle has not featured in the relevant literature. Ours is also one of the first attempts in the field to assess external perceptions of the EU during Covid-19.

We argue that external images of crisis management by the EU will influence the perceptions of EU foreign policy in the world. Our research, focused on attentive listening to how external partners imagine the EU as an international actor, is of direct relevance to the EEAS. Images of the EU depend on what the EU does, how it represents itself and how policies and self-representations are filtered through local cognitive lenses and material interests. The EEAS has a fundamental role to play at all three levels. Its first decade demonstrates that the EEAS can influence and shape images and perceptions of the EU, not lastly through public diplomacy initiatives based on empathetic and systematic listening by EU Delegations. In the rest of the article, we assess how each of the chosen crises have impacted EU external images. We conclude with lessons learned on the resilience of EU perceptions and narratives abroad, and with suggestions on the role of the EEAS in shaping positive images of the EU.

2   THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

The Eurozone sovereign debt crisis impacted the EU's global image on a major scale, not lastly due to the shock to the EU's reputation of a wealthy, economically successful project. Studies demonstrated contestation of the EU's foundational narratives on three levels: (1) the EU as a supranational actor, (2) EU Member States and (3) European citizens.

Perceptions of the EU focused on the image of an economic 'giant' stumbling and underperforming in an issue-area in which it was (stereo)typically seen as invincible and admired. Images of the EU pre-Eurozone crisis carried neutral-to-

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[5]   S. Lucarelli, *Seen From the Outside: The State of the Art on the External Image of the EU*, 36(1) J. Eur. Integ. 1–16 (2014); O. Elgström & N. Chaban, *Studying External Perceptions of the EU: Conceptual and Methodological Approaches*, in *Perceptions of the EU in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa* 17–33 (V. Bachmann & M. Müller eds, Palgrave Macmillan 2015); *Changing Perceptions of the EU at Times of Brexit: Global Perspectives* (N. Chaban, A. Niemann & J. Speyer eds, Routledge 2020); N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *The Ukraine crisis and EU Foreign Policy Roles: Images of the EU in the Context of EU-Ukraine Relations* (Edward Elgar forthcoming 2021).

positive connotations.[6] Public opinion research in the Asia–Pacific region between 2002 and 2009[7] indicated that the top spontaneous associations of the EU before the crisis came with images of its economic might, the successful Euro and its trading power (that may occasionally hurt other international players). Yet, at the peak of the Eurozone crisis in 2011 the Asia–Pacific publics demonstrated a growing negative perception of the EU as an economic and trading actor, with the common currency (previously lauded) perceived as underperforming.[8] The international news media, wired for scandal and drama, was perhaps the most vocal in communicating the EU's financial troubles.[9] They contemplated how the EU may potentially 'infect' the rest of the world with its economic malaise. Elites, on the other hand, did not share these panicked perceptions. Research demonstrated that political and business elites in the Asia–Pacific region did not showcase a major decline in their perceptions of the EU.[10] In contrast, media elites demonstrated a more negative perception (a perception that correlated with the negative media profile discussed above) and reiterated the need to keep media among target audiences of EU public diplomacy. Importantly, as time passed, perceptions registered the fact that the EU has managed not to spread its economic ills to its international partners.[11] Studies of global public opinion also did not observe an irrevocable deterioration of perceptions of the EU as an economic, training, financial or investment actor.[12] The latest multi-country study of perceptions of the EU following the Brexit referendum[13] demonstrated that when it comes to the economy, trade and finance, the EU-27 is perceived as a leading actor, despite a new blow – the loss of the rich and economically affluent UK. Awareness of

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[6]   See e.g. *Global Views on the European Union*, Chaillot Paper 72 (M. Ortega ed., 2004); S. Lucarelli & L. Fioramonti, *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor* (Routledge 2009); *The European Union and the Asia–Pacific: Media, Public and Elite Perceptions of the EU* (N. Chaban & M. Holland eds, Routledge 2008); S. Lucarelli, *supra* n. 5.

[7]   *Lisbon and the Changing External Perceptions of the EU: Visions from the Asia-Pacific* (N. Chaban & M. Holland eds, 3(3) Baltic J. Eur. Stud., Special Issue 2013); *Communicating Europe in Times of Crisis: External Perceptions of the European Union* (N. Chaban & M. Holland eds, Palgrave Macmillan 2014).

[8]   N. Chaban & S. Beltyukova, *Rasch Analysis of the General Public Perceptions of the EU: A Case-Study of 10 Asia-Pacific Countries*, in Chaban & Holland eds, (2014), *supra* n. 7, at 143–172.

[9]   N. Chaban & J. Bain, *Framing the EU in a Time of Crisis: Media Reflections from EU 'Strategic' Partners in Asia-Pacific*, in Chaban & Holland eds, (2014), *supra* n. 7, at 118–142.

[10] N. Chaban & A. Magdalena, *External Perceptions of the EU During the Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis*, 19(2) Eur. For. Aff. Rev. 195–220 (2014).

[11] N. Chaban & S. Kelly, *Tracing the Evolution of EU Images Using a Case-study of Australia and New Zealand*, 55(4) J. Com. Mkt. Stud 691–708 (2017).

[12] PPMI, NCRE & NFG, *Analysis of the Perception of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad* (2015), http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/fpi/showcases/eu_perceptions_study_en.htm (accessed 19 June 2020); *Shaping the EU Global Strategy: Partners and Perceptions* (N. Chaban & M. Holland eds, Palgrave Macmillan 2018); European Commission, *Flash Eurobarometer 450: Future of Europe – Views from Outside the EU* (2017), http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/79589 (accessed 19 June 2020).

[13] Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5 (seventeen countries, including ten Strategic Partners).

perceptions in this issue-area is important to the EEAS. Business stakeholders remain a top target group of EU diplomacy, with business diplomacy being among the leading areas of the EU's external action.

When perceptions focused on the EU Member States, certain EU states commanded extensive attention around the world. These included the countries that suffered the most in the crisis (Greece, Ireland, Portugal, Italy and Spain) as well as wealthier EU states that came with solutions and help (Germany and France). On the one hand, the foundational narrative of solidarity seemed to be reiterated. At the same time however, the austerity measures introduced by Germany, and specifically towards Greece, attracted a share of critical attention and framed EU Member States in hierarchical terms. We argue that this image challenged the solidarity narrative.

News outlets reported this complex crisis with emotional stories about ordinary people whose livelihoods had suffered; as such, these stories challenged yet another narrative of the EU – as the home to efficient welfare states, capable of taking care of its citizens. This was one of the first major EU crises that received significant visual media coverage,[14] specifically portraying the desperation and anger of regular people. The strong emotional charge of such coverage helped make EU news, typically rather dry and technical, not only more visible, but also more 'sellable' and 'relatable' to international audiences, usually detached from the EU's everyday life. This is important for EU public diplomacy when it aims to formulate and project visible and attractive images of the EU in the world.

For external observers, the EU has overcome the crisis, albeit unevenly. Furthermore, it has been noted that the EU has succeeded in not exporting its financial and economic troubles. This has solidified perceptions of the EU as a stable and reliable trading and investment actor capable of dealing with its own problems, not lastly due to a united response. This message was taken on board by the EEAS when its Delegations were engaged in promoting a number of the EU's free trade agreements (FTAs) around the world. We argue that the initial negative effect associated with the economic crisis has been largely overcome with time. This evolution supports the concept of the EU's resilience as argued by Moravcik as well as formulated and projected by the EU Global Strategy.[15]

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[14] J. Bain, N. Chaban & S. Kelly, *Crumbling Giant, Rising Dragon?: Chinese News Media Cartoon Reflections on the Eurozone Debt Crisis*, 45(2) Comm., Pol. & Culture 217–239 (2012); N. Chaban, S. Kelly & J. Bain, *En'vision'ing Europe's Crisis: A Visual and Textual Analysis of the EU Imagery in Chinese, Indian and Russian Business Newspapers*, 20(1) J. Int'l. Commun. 1–20 (2014).

[15] European Union, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign And Security Policy* (2016), http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed 19 June 2020).

3   UKRAINE

The literature demonstrates three distinct 'circles' of external perceptions of the EU in response to Ukraine's crisis: (1) in Ukraine, (2) in the region (including countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and Russia), and (3) globally. We use the three categories to discuss EU perceptions in this section. The literature points to Ukraine – and region-specific perceptions of the EU in the context of the Russia-Ukraine crisis as being nuanced, complex and highly emotive. Perceptions of the EU were more abstract and less emotively charged in locations far away from the theatre of conflict. This invites EU public diplomacy to re-calibrate its messages and initiatives depending on the crisis and its relation to the location.

In Ukraine, highly positive visions of the EU emerged immediately after the Maidan events in 2013–2014. Later, however, a mildly negative dynamic emerged, not lastly due to the ongoing unresolved conflict and the distant prospects for Ukraine's EU membership.[16] Ukrainian elites also showcased ambiguous perceptions of the EU. In their views, the unsolved Donbas conflict demonstrates the relative failure of Germany and France as the EU's informal representatives at the peace negotiation table. At the same time, the international relations cache of Germany and France is seen as instrumental in bringing Russia to the negotiating table.[17] These split views have persisted despite breakthroughs in EU-Ukraine relations – the Association Agreement/the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (AA/DCFTA), the visa-free agreement and a generous aid programme. Positive perceptions of these milestones have been dented by the prolonged negotiations of the visa-free regime and the Dutch referendum against the EU's AA/DCFTA with Ukraine. Both triggered perceptions of the EU as not appreciating the scale of Ukraine's sacrifice for the idea of Europe or Ukraine's determination to depart from its Soviet past, as well as underestimating the status of Ukrainians as equal Europeans. The fact that the EU has still not opened a formal path for Ukraine's membership feeds into these negative perceptions. Importantly, Ukrainian elite respondents understand and criticize Ukraine's slow reform pace and do not demand immediate accession. Perhaps the most concerning have been anxious Ukrainian elite perceptions of the EU as increasingly tired of battered Ukraine, at times when Europe has to deal with its own multiple crises. Another worrisome perception was that the EU does not understand Ukraine properly.[18]

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[16]   For review *see* N. Chaban & M. Knodt, *Perceptions of the EU in Ukraine After 'Brexit' Referendum: Images of Capabilities and opportunities*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5, at 78–95.

[17]   O. Elgström et al., *Perceptions of the EU's Role in the Ukraine-Russian and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflicts: A Biased Mediator?*, 23(2) Int. Negot. 299–318 (2018); N. Chaban, O. Elgström & M. Knodt, *Perceptions of EU Mediation and Mediation Effectiveness: Comparing Perspectives from Ukraine and the EU*, 54(4) Cooperation & Conflict 506–523 (2019).

[18]   N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *supra* n. 5.

Recent literature elaborates these perceptual trends in relation to EU public diplomacy.[19]

Perceptions of the EU in the region are somewhat different. A Special Issue of EFAR on EU perceptions in the countries of the EaP[20] demonstrated that the image of the EU's role in Ukraine emerges through the filters of the perceived threat of Russia, of images of their shared Soviet past, and visions of these countries' post-Soviet relations with Russia and the EU. The EU gets the most attention and recognition when it is seen/expected to benefit EaP locations. Another common trend is an image of a 'disunited' EU with some Member States adopting pro-Russian stances in contrast to other members who are firm in their opposition to Russia. Despite this divisive image, perceptions of the EU in the EaP are still associated more with opportunities, and these are issue-specific. The EU as an economic power is seen as an opportunity, while the EU as a security actor contributing to crisis management and conflict resolution in the region is seen as not up to expectations within all EaP countries.

Perceptions of the EU in Russia have a different profile.[21] While general public views were the most negative when compared to nine other EU Strategic Partners,[22] the public still appreciated Europe's cultural cache. Russia's perceptions of the EU were frequently focused on the EU's internal problems and these were often seen/framed as an opportunity for Russia. Importantly, these discourses often delivered an image of the EU as the 'Other' to Russia by contesting its normative base. They framed European values as opposing (if not inferior) to Russia's 'Eurasian' values.[23] Research notes that the Ukraine crisis has seriously affected the multi-layered architecture of Russia–EU relations.[24] Russia's social research group Levada Centre reported that in the imaginations of Russians, the EU was perceived to be one of the main enemies, but in third position (14%), far behind the US (68%), and significantly behind Ukraine (29%).[25]

Observers far from the theatre of conflict saw this crisis as external to the EU, belonging to 'global'[26] and 'international'[27] contexts. A range of EU sanctions against the Russian Federation following the annexation of Crimea and

19 N. Chaban & O. Elgström, *A Perceptual Approach to EU Public Diplomacy: Investigating Collaborative Diplomacy in EU-Ukraine Relations*, 15(4) Hague J. Dipl. (2020).

20 *The EU and Its Eastern Neighbours – Perceptions and Strategic Dialogue in the Region* (N. Chaban, M. Knodt & J. Headley eds, 23(1/1) Eur. For. Aff. Rev. Special Issue 2018).

21 PPMI, NCRE & NFG, *supra* n. 12; N. Chaban, O. Elgström & O. Gulyaeva, *Russian Images of the European Union: Before and After Maidan*, 13(2) For. Pol. An. 480–499 (2017).

22 PPMI, NCRE & NFG, *supra* n. 12.

23 Chaban, Knodt & Headley, *supra* n. 20.

24 E. Ananieva, *Perceptions of the EU and Brexit in Russia and their Influence on Russia–EU relations*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5, at 61–77.

25 Levada Centre (2018) cited in Ananieva, *supra* n. 24.

26 S. Park & S. W. Chung, *EU Perceptions from Korean YouTube Videos Before and After the Brexit Referendum: A Semantic Network Analysis Approach*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5.

27 E. Lazarou, B. T. Luciano & T. Coutto, *Brazil's Perceptions of the EU After Brexit: A Weaker but Desirable Partner*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5.

unanimously supported by all EU Member States triggered the image of an assertive, confident EU, a worthy counterbalance to aggressive Russia,[28] and with international normative potential.[29] Events in Ukraine were among the 'benchmarks that recalibrated the perceptions held by the transatlantic cooperation partners'.[30] This included views on 'Europe's willingness and ability to assume greater leadership in addressing regional and global challenges'.[31] Critical perceptions also appeared. Many global observers feared that the Union's preoccupation with problems in its immediate neighbourhood may be detrimental to relations with other countries/regions – e.g. the EU would simply lack spare resources to be spent in Asia.[32] In the US, perceptions of the EU were sharpened and magnified by US visions of its own foreign policy priorities.[33] The main message here for EU public diplomacy is that third country-specific factors are often the leading ones that shape EU perceptions around the world.

Perceptions of the EU in the context of the Ukraine crisis have evolved. EU sanctions did not produce the desired effect on Russia. The war in the east of Ukraine has not stopped, but has morphed into a long-term grey-zone conflict. Russia has not returned Crimea to Ukraine but has reinforced its position in the Black Sea basin and continued with aggressive actions against Ukraine (e.g. the capture of Ukrainian navy ships in 2018). Perceptions have registered how the EU's credible global actorness[34] is seen to be constrained by Member States' diverging foreign policy positions.[35] External observers have started to question the EU's capability of dealing with external crises such as the Russia–Ukraine crisis and have suggested that the EU's international influence is slowly waning on its own.[36] This period has also featured what we call a 'distraction effect'. Brexit, Trump's conflicts with the EU and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and not least Covid-19 have overshadowed the never-ending Russia-Ukraine conflict. Research has observed Brexit to be the 'game changer' and 'distraction factor' in this regard.[37] The Ukraine crisis is now one of many crises that plagues the EU.[38] Perceptions of the EU in the context of Ukraine's crisis have

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[28]   Findings from India, Japan, Canada and South Korea in Chaban & Holland, *supra* n. 13.

[29]   Lazarou et al., *supra* n. 27.

[30]   R. Dominguez & M. Larivé, *The Resilient Partner Beyond Crises: EU Perceptions in the United States*, in Chaban & Holland eds, *supra* n. 12, at 235–257.

[31]   *Ibid.*

[32]   Findings from Japan and China in Chaban & Holland, *supra* n. 12.

[33]   Dominguez & Larive, *supra* n. 30.

[34]   Jupille & Caporaso (1998), cited in Lazarou et al., *supra* n. 27.

[35]   Lazarou et al., *supra* n. 27.

[36]   J. Speyer, L. Hähn & A. Niemann. *Increasingly Brittle? US Perceptions of the EU After Brexit and their Impact on EU–US relations*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5, at 99–115.

[37]   Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5.

[38]   J. Ling, & E. Kirchner, 2020 *China's Perception of the EU After Brexit and Its Influence on China–EU relations*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5, at 199–214.

demonstrated a change in cognitive and emotive elements of EU images – a powerful reminder for EU external relations practitioners of the complex architecture of perceptions critical for future perception management.

4   IRREGULAR MIGRATION CRISIS

In 2015, the deterioration of security in the Middle East, the saturation of regional camps for refugees escaping the Syrian war and the expansion of ISIS, produced an unprecedented rise in the number of arrivals of migrants[39] on the European territory (about 1 million according to estimates, more than five times the previous year).[40] The pressure created by an unmanageable level of flows, when Europe was still recovering from the social strain of a severe economic crisis, triggered harsh reactions by several states in Europe. Physical barriers (let alone real walls) appeared at the borders, and controls were also reintroduced at internal borders within the Schengen area, hence threatening one of the EU's most notable achievements. The year that followed saw the attempt by the European Commission to 'save Schengen',[41] by rebuilding solidarity among the Member States, strengthening external border controls and enhancing maritime anti-smuggling activities. Furthermore, the EU gradually enhanced externalization of the management of migration through agreements with neighbouring countries (e.g. the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016, but also the Italy-Libya agreement of February 2017, which got full EU support),[42] or through Partnership Frameworks agreements with African countries, with the main goal of preventing migration flows to the EU.[43]

Critical voices from politicians, non-government organizations (NGOs), international organizations and academia have underlined that these practices further emphasized the securitization of migration,[44] leading to the externalization

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[39]   We use the term 'migrant' to refer to people reaching the territory of a foreign state to stay for a relatively long time. Hence the category is a generic one which includes people who decide to flee their own country for different reasons, included persecution (and hence would be asylum seekers).

[40]   *See* UNHCR's Operational report, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean (accessed 19 June 2020). UNHCR reports that the number of refugees in Europe rose by 43% in 2015, the second highest rise worldwide after the Central African region – +79% (UNHCR, *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015* (2016), https://www.unhcr.org/576408cd7.pdf (accessed 19 June 2020)).

[41]   European Commission, *Back to Schengen: A Roadmap*, COM (2016) 120 final, 4 Mar. (2016), https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/schengen/docs/communication-back-to-schengen-roadmap_en.pdf (accessed 19 June 2020).

[42]   European Council, *Malta Declaration by the Members of the European Council on the External Aspects of Migration: Addressing the Central Mediterranean Route*, Press Release (3 Feb. 2017), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2017/02/03/malta-declaration/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

[43]   CINI and Concord Europe, *Partnership or Conditionality?* (2018), https://concordeurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/CONCORD_EUTrustFundReport_2018_online.pdf (accessed 19 June 2020).

[44]   The argument, was made also before the migrants crisis, *see* C. Timmerman et al., *Imagining Europe from the Outside: The Role of Perceptions of Human Rights in Europe in Migration Aspirations in Turkey,*

of border control, the empowerment of security actors in partner third countries, as well as the diversion of resources from previous development projects to border control.[45] Under particular scrutiny has been the total neglect of human rights and even complicity in human rights violations in the EU's neighbourhood as a result of EU policy.[46] Highly dramatic and negative images were also tracked in media discourses in the ten EU strategic partners.[47]

Scholars have pointed out how European practices of governing migrants have enhanced their precarity as individual subjects[48] and have exposed the EU to an ontological challenge.[49] Non-European scholars from a postcolonial perspective have on the other hand stressed the 'European' character of the perceived migration crisis, linking it with the consolidation of the EU and the strengthening of external borders.[50] Scholars also underline the discursive and practical marginalization of Africa and Africans as a result of EU-engendered 'containment development'.[51] Eventually – it is claimed – Europe's priorities in the management of migration overlook and run against priorities and needs of origin and transit countries.[52]

Morocco, Senegal and Ukraine, in Chaban & Holland eds, *supra* n. 7, at 220–247. Yet the 2015 crisis has worsened significantly the situation.

[45] OHCHR, *In Search of Dignity. Report on the Human Rights of Migrants at Europe's Border* (United Nations 2017), https://s25924.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/InSearchofDignity-OHCHR_Report_HR_Migrants_at_Europes_Borders.pdf (accessed 19 June 2020); Amnesty International, *EU Refugee Crisis: Human Rights Violations and Migrants' Deaths Are Being Ignored* (Amnesty International 2017), https://www.amnesty.ie/eu-refugee-crisis-human-rights-violations-migrant-deaths-ignored/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

[46] Compare Human Rights Watch, *European Union Events of 2018*, 219 (2019),https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/european-union (accessed 19 June 2020); S. Carrera & M. Stefan, *Complaint Mechanisms in Border Management and Expulsion Operations in Europe* (Brookings 2018), https://www.brookings.edu/book/complaint-mechanisms-in-border-management-and-expulsion-operations-in-europe/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

[47] PPMI, NCRE & NFG, *supra* n. 12. For an analysis of different narratives of migration in Europe, *see* S. D'Amato & S. Lucarelli, *special Core 'Talking Migration'*, 54(3) Int'l. Spec. (2019), https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/international-spectator-vol-54-no-3-september-2019 (accessed 19 June 2020). A large debate developed among European Scholars, e.g. *The Securitisation of Migration in the EU. Debates Since 9/11* (G. Lazaridis & W. Khursheed eds, Palgrave Macmillan 2015); V. Squire, *Europe's Migration Crisis: Border Deaths and Human Dignity* (Cambridge University Press 2020).

[48] For example M. Tazzioli, The Making of Migration: The Biopolitics of Mobility at Europe's Borders (SAGE 2019); Squire, *supra* n. 47.

[49] M. Ceccorulli, E. Fassi & S. Lucarelli, *The EU Migration System of Governance: Justice on the Move* (Palgrave 2021); R. Bauböck, *Refugee Protection and Burden Sharing in the European Union*, 56(1) J. Com. Mkt. Stud. 141–156 (2018).

[50] *See* R. Samaddar, *Human Migration as Crisis of Europe*, 50(51) Econ. & Pol. Weekly (2015); A. Mbembe, *Bodies as Borders*, 4 From Eur. South 5–18 (2019); E. Tendayi Achiume, *Migration as Decolonization*, 71 Stanf. L. Rev. 1509–1574 (2019).

[51] L. Landau, *A Chronotope of Containment Development: Europe's Migrant Crisis and Africa's Reterritorialisation*, 51(1) Antipode 169–186 (2018).

[52] For example M. Herbert, *Less than the Sum of Its Parts: Europe's Fixation with Libyan Border Security*, 126 Pol'y Brief (Institute for Security Studies 2019).

As for broader perceptions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (the main area of origin and/or transit of migrants aiming for Europe), the EU's management of migrant flows in 2015–2016 and onwards deepened sceptical views of the EU that had already existed. In the area, the EU has never been perceived as a strong power or a normative power[53]; rather, it has been seen as a hostage of its Member States' interests and priorities, although it has always been recognized as an economic force that could provide benefits to the region.[54] Following the hardening of borders and EU visa policies since the 1990s, the perception of a 'fortress Europe' began to take hold. However, it has been only since the Arab Springs in 2011 that the perception of the EU has deteriorated, as a result of the EU's failure to keep with the promises of facilitated mobility (the 'more for more' policy) and closer attention to local voices.[55]

If perceptions of the EU had already worsened after 2011, what has been the impact of the irregular migration crisis? To attempt to answer this, we can explore the available research on images of the EU in the region. In the context of the project MEDRESET, 169 qualitative elite interviews have been undertaken in Egypt, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Turkey.[56] In addition, the seventh Euromed Survey, the work on perceptions of the EU among Muslims (in and outside Europe),[57] and research conducted in other geographical areas or in relation to specific topics can help us to assess the impact of the migration crisis on images of the EU.[58]

Despite differences among countries, it is possible to make an overall assessment of the perceptions of the EU that can be associated with the migration crisis. In the first place, among elites in the MENA countries, the migration crisis does not seem to have affected the general assessment of the EU's strengths (economic) and weaknesses (political), internal division, nor the negative evaluation of the EU's response to the Arab Springs, or criticisms of its technocratic character. These

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[53]   I. Mujtaba, B. Schlipphak & D. Silverman, *A Troubled Pair? The MENA Region and the EU After Brexit*, in Chaban, Niemann & Speyer eds, *supra* n. 5, at 165–179.

[54]   Compare Lucarelli & Fioramonti , *supra* n. 6.

[55]   *See* Arab Transformations Project, https://www.abdn.ac.uk/cgd/research-projects/arabtrans/; A. Teti, P. Abbott, V. Talbot & P. Maggiolini, *In the Eye of the Beholder: Perceptions of the EU Through Survey Data*, in *Democratisation Against Democracy: The European Union in International Affairs* 291–320 (Palgrave Macmillan 2020); Euromed Survey (2015), https://www.iemed.org/publicacions/historic-de-publica cions/enquesta-euromed/euromed-survey-2015/contents-of-the-6th-euromed-survey (accessed 19 June).

[56]   Project Medreset, http://www.medreset.eu. The interviews were conducted between July 2017 and May 2018. The sample included Governmental actors, experts, Media professionals, Civil society actors, Representatives of NGO, Business people and Graduate students. *The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision: Challenging Eurocentrism with Local Perceptions in the Middle East and North Africa* (A. Görgülü & G. Dark Kahyaoğlu eds, Peter Lang 2020); *Special Issue: What may be Learned About Crime in Europe (and Beyond) from International Surveys of Youth: Results from the International Self-Report Delinquency Study (ISRD3)*, 25(3) Eur. J. Crim. Pol. Res. (2020).

[57]   B. Schlipphak & M. A. Isani, *Muslim Attitudes Towards the European Union* (Routledge 2019).

[58]   *Understanding the scope and limits of EU diplomacy - Connecting strategic narrative to EU external perceptions research (N. Chaban, A. Miskimmon, & B. O'Loughlin eds*, 28 (3) Eur. Sec. Special Issue 2019).

interviews also reiterated the perception of the EU's limited role in crisis manage-
ment (Syria; the Gulf crisis and Israeli–Palestinian conflict), with the exception of
the Iran nuclear deal.[59] What has worsened is the perception of the EU's security
policies and response to migration. Case studies conducted in the context of
MEDRESET underline that local stakeholders perceive 'the EU's increased
emphasis on border control, stability, and migration deterrence'[60] as areas in
which the gap between rhetoric and policies has been particularly evident.
Respondents further criticized the fact that 'the ideological direction of the
Union's policies towards the region is increasingly embracing a "securitizing"
nature'.[61] Fieldwork shows that several local government and international orga-
nizations tend to contextualize migration more within a security and legal context,
while civil society stakeholders focus particular attention on human rights and
criticize the EU for limiting the fundamental right to movement (in Africa) by
externalizing border control. Interviews in North African countries also point to
the fact that the migration *crisis* was actually the result of 'the failure of migrant
integration policies in Europe'.[62] The seventh Euromed Survey conducted in the
summer of 2016[63] reiterated the critical assessment of migration management by
the EU since 2014 (negative assessment over 70% in Turkey and Syria; over 50%
in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco; over 40% in Egypt and Lebanon[64]) as well as
local calls for a de-securitized approach to migration.

　　The EU's performance during the 2015–2016 migrant crisis also damaged the EU's
image in other regions. An analysis of EU representations in eight leading Ukrainian
newspapers in the first half of 2016 showed that the migration crisis was one of the
leading themes and the one treated in the most negative terms.[65] The migration crisis
was described as a 'humanitarian disaster'[66] and 'the EU was sometimes presented as
lacking the rule of law and disrespecting human rights when dealing with refugees'.[67]

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[59]　P. Müller, *Normative Power Europe and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The EU's Peacebuilding Narrative Meets Local Narratives*, 28(3) Eur. Sec. 251–267 (2019).

[60]　A. Görgülü & G. Dark Kahyaoğlu, *Conclusions*, in *The Remaking of the Euro-Mediterranean Vision. Challenging Eurocentrism with Local Perceptions in the Middle East and North Africa* 295–303 (A. Görgülü & G. Dark Kahyaoğlu eds, Peter Lang 2020).

[61]　*Ibid.*

[62]　*Ibid.*, at 14.

[63]　Euromed, *supra* n. 55; and also: https://www.iemed.org/recursos-compartits/pdfs/SET%20OF% 20RESULTS_v1.pdf 807 people from the twenty-eight EU countries (54%) and from fifteen southern and eastern Mediterranean countries (46%) answered the survey. Half were experts from the academic field and think tanks and the other half were actors from the political field (representatives of governments, European institutions and international organizations) and civil society (NGOs, enter-prises, the media). We focus here only on the replies by non-European respondents.

[64]　The only exception being Jordan, with more than 70% appreciating EU policies.

[65]　N. Chaban & A. Chaban, *Communicating Europe Beyond Its Borders: Imagining the EU in Ukraine post-Maidan*, 23(1) Eur. For. Aff. Rev. 119–138 (2018).

[66]　*Ibid.*, at 133.

[67]　*Ibid.*, at 135.

To sum up, it would be difficult to deny the negative impact of the EU's response to the migration crisis (and more generally migration policy) on the EU's external image. However, rather than dramatically changing attitudes towards the EU, the migration crisis has deepened an already existing feeling of the EU as distant, unable to take local needs into consideration and driven by Member States' differing interests and security concerns. This perception persists and presents a challenge for EU (public) diplomacy.

5   COVID-19

Covid-19 arrived unexpectedly and in the time span of a few weeks caught Europe unprepared. Only a few days went by from the first lockdown in Italy to the announcement by the World Health Organization that the world was facing a true *pandemic*.[68] Soon Europe became 'the epicentre of the Coronavirus diseases 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic'.[69] The EU Member States initially showed limited solidarity and the 'mask-diplomacy' of China and Russia (that delivered equipment and provided medical staff to several EU countries) fed narratives of the EU's failure to address the emergency as well as the lack of solidarity among EU Member States in helping each other. However, since the end of May 2020 the EU's response became more solid, and its institutions took a guiding role in matters of travel restrictions, economic recovery and the general management of the pandemic emergency situation.[70]

Although the pandemic is still going on at the time of writing and Europe is back in the position of being one of the world's most severely affected regions, we can try to assess how Covid-19 has affected perceptions of the EU in 2020 What is available at the moment are some preliminary insights from think tanks' commentaries and an opinion poll.

Commentaries on the EU and Covid-19 by leading think tanks in Russia, the US and India point to the EU's lack of internal solidarity. A paper by the Russia International Affairs Council is quite peremptory: 'European unity and solidarity stand at the precipice now: how can the members trust each other in times of a greater peril

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[68] https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19—11-march-2020 (accessed 1 Nov. 2020).

[69] European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council. Covid-19: Temporary Restriction on Non-Essential Travel to the EU* (2020), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0115 (accessed 19 June 2020).

[70] Particularly significant in this sense has been the EU Recovery package presented by Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission. Over summer 2020, an intense debate developed about the EU economic recovery strategy and the so-called EU Next Generation Recovery Plan was approved by the European Council,[1] marking a significant success for the supporters of a more solidarity among Member States. European Council, *Conclusions of the Special meeting of the European Council (17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 July 2020)* (2020), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf (accessed 19 June 2020).

when even during a global epidemic help is forsaken?'[71] The EU is depicted as divided and vulnerable to external penetration. A similar stance is taken by the Indian Observer Research Foundation (underlying particularly the risk of China's interference) and the Indian Council of World Affairs.[72] According to the latter: 'The spread of coronavirus across the European continent has emerged to be the biggest challenge for the EU and its Member States in recent times (…) Its solidarity appears to be cracking because of the unilateral decisions taken by the Member States to mitigate the effects of the crisis. (…) EU Member States so far have appeared to have turn[ed] inwards focusing on national policies and priorities rather than working through the EU to contain the crisis'. Russia's Valdai Discussion Club points to the inward looking attitude of the EU in the Covid era and the negative repercussions for Russia, object of 'mistrust' due to 'the effectiveness of its fight against the pandemic'.[73] Much more positive are the commentaries of the US think tanks the Carnegie Foundation and the Foreign Policy Research Institute, that point to internal divisions, but also to the EU's resilience and value added to world governance: The EU 'can coalesce the positive stories of the pandemic and contribute to global efforts to reform cooperation and governance'.[74]

So far there are no specific polls dedicated to external (non-European) perceptions of the EU in relation to the pandemic, while there are some polls on the perception of the interviewees' own country,[75] on the percep-tion of different states and international organizations (IOs) in European countries,[76] or of the US and China.[77] An opinion poll conducted in the summer of 2020 across thirteen countries (including nine European and four

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[71] Russian International Affairs Council, *Coronavirus Reveals Cracks in European Unity* (2020), https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/coronavirus-reveals-cracks-in-european-unity/?sphrase_id=56825035 (accessed 19 June 2020).

[72] A. Sawhney, *The Potential Fallouts of EU's Collective Response to COVID19* (ORF 2020), https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-potential-fallouts-of-eus-collective-response-to-covid19-65619/ (accessed 19 June 2020); Indian Council of World Affairs, *European Responses to the Coronavirus Outbreak* (2020), https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=2&ls_id=4636&lid=3494&kval=european%20union (accessed 19 June 2020).

[73] T. Romanova, *The Concept of EU Resilience in the Pandemic Era* (VDC 2020), https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-concept-of-resilience-of-the-european-union/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

[74] R. Balfour, *Why Europe Still Matters* (Carnegie 2020), https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/81793 (accessed 19 June 2020). *See also* J. de Weck & D. Valatsas, *The European Union will Survive COVID-19* (Foreign Policy Research Institute 2020), https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/04/the-european-union-will-survive-covid-19/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

[75] For example, J. Wood, *People in these Countries Think their Government did a Good Job of Dealing with the Pandemic* (World Economic Forum 202), https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/covid-19-survey-trust-unity-cooperation/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

[76] I. Krastev & M. Leonard, *Europe's Pandemic Politics: How the Virus has Changed the Public's Worldview*, ECFR Policy Brief (24 June 2020), https://ecfr.eu/publication/europes_pandemic_politics_how_the_virus_has_changed_the_publics_worldview/ (accessed 1 Nov. 2020).

[77] For example, J. P. & J. J. Moncus, *How People in 14 Countries View the State of the World in 2020* (Pew Research Centre 2020), https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/23/how-people-in-14-countries-view-the-state-of-the-world-in-2020/ (accessed 19 June 2020).

non-European ones) reveals that 57% and 64% respectively (median) judged responses to the Covid-19 by the EU and World Health Organization positively; 37% (median) appreciate China's response, while only 15% (median) say the US has done a good job. As for the EU, its response was more appreciated in Europe than abroad (positive views in Japan 34%, South Korea 19%, and Australia 46%), with the exception of Canada (65%).[78]

It would be premature to make any definitive conclusion regarding the external image of the EU in association with its management of the pandemic. Future research will assess these images. What is clear is that the EU's performance during the pandemic has had different phases and the next generation of EU perceptions studies will have to determine whether or not external perceptions mirror the evolution of the EU's performance.

6   CONCLUSIONS

International actors are always wrapped in narratives about their place in the world, identity and policies,[79] but probably none has been formulated and projected in normative terms as much as the EU's narratives. These include the EU as a wealthy area with a heavy economic weight in the world; the EU as a community, hence characterized by internal solidarity and as such a model to be imitated; the EU as a normative bastion and supporter of human rights; the EU as home to an efficient welfare state, capable of taking care of its citizens; the EU as an ever growing project; and the EU as a champion of peace – these are perhaps the most well-known narratives about the EU. The EU's self-visions and self-representations shaped these narratives, but external observers have shared them too, and specifically when they reflected the EU's practices.

The literature argues that a 'perceptual gap' exists between self-representations and external images,[80] and the gap is likely to widen at times when the EU has to cope with crises which make it difficult to 'be noble' (to use the words of an external observer from a study of EU perceptions).[81] The gap presents a challenge to EU public diplomacy strategy that has to engage not only in advocacy and monologue, projecting EU positions towards third countries, but also in a genuine dialogue and collaboration with external partners.[82] The past decade, then, has put a lot of pressure on the EU to live up to its self-representations. Multiple crises have challenged the EU, shown its weaknesses and triggered behaviours (of the EU

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[78]   *Ibid.*
[79]   Chaban, Miskimmon, O'Loughlin eds, *supra* n. 58.
[80]   Chaban & Elgström, *supra* n. 5, at 20.
[81]   Müller, *supra* n. 59.
[82]   Chaban & Elgström, *supra* n. 19.

and its Member States) that have questioned the above-mentioned narratives. The economic crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea and interference in the EU's priority partner Ukraine, the irregular migration crisis and the latest Covid-19 pandemic are among the major critical junctures that have triggered a range of and a change in perceptions of the EU around the world. Our article is one attempt to overview the emerging trends and evolving patterns and discuss their potential impact on images of EU foreign policy.

What we have observed is that external images have closely followed the EU's *actual performance*. Yet importantly, external observers have assessed the EU's performance through their *location* – and *region*-specific perception filters. Initially hit by the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis, the image of the EU as an economic giant has not been damaged in a detrimental way in the long run, thus demonstrating Europe's resilience in the face of the crisis. However, it took almost a decade for the image to bounce back to a more positive outlook. Moreover, the Eurozone crisis was one of the first major events to trigger increasingly ambiguous perceptions of the EU globally. The EU as a community has never had a particularly strong image outside its borders (the EU has been frequently described as divided and/or with diverging members) and the observation of its performance during the economic and migration crises have not helped to strengthen such an image. We argue that the most damaging event for the EU's image was the migration crisis, and in particular its impact on the narrative of the EU as a protector of human rights. This is the issue-area in which the narrative of the EU as a normative power has suffered the most, both among internal and external observers. Adding to this, the EU has not been able to preserve its image as a champion of peace in its immediate neighbourhoods, as the images shaped by the Ukraine crisis and Middle Eastern conflicts demonstrate. As for the narrative of the EU as a harbour of the welfare state and a leader in health governance, more research needs to be undertaken following the Covid-19 experience. This will be a future short-term direction for the ever growing area of EU external perceptions studies. Long-term research into perceptions of the EU will have to consider images of the EU in the context of climate diplomacy, research, science and innovation diplomacy, as well as energy diplomacy. These variants of public diplomacy are increasingly at the forefront of the EEAS and EU Delegations around the word. Moreover, future studies should assess the appeal of EU public diplomacy to youth around the world and its skills in projecting its foundational narratives through social media and in non-Eurocentric settings.

The EEAS has a very important role to play in shaping positive images of the EU worldwide. The first and most important requirement is to contribute via shaping foreign policy actions which are coherent with the EU's self-representation and claimed values. A wide gap between the two is detrimental to the EU's

credibility. Second, the EEAS should promote empathetic listening to and a closer, mutual leadership relation with local constituencies and stakeholders, so as to be able to assess the local net impact of its policies, in reality and perceptions (as in the case of the externalization of migration). Third, the EEAS should continue fine-tuning the EU's external communications, targeting future generations and opinion-influencers from different sectors and using digital diplomacy, with an attentive eye to the local contexts and avoiding conveying abstract and distant messages that do not resonate with local sensitivities.

EFAR's Special Issue 2022 Announcement

As so many special issue proposals are received by the journal, the Board runs a competition where the most suitable proposal is selected from the pool of formal submissions in any one year. In order to consider your proposal, a formal submission must be made and a document outlining in detail the under-lying theme of the special issue and why it is of relevance and importance should be sent to the following e-mail: europeanforeignaffairsreview@gmail.com. This document should also list all likely contributors, a short biographical note on each and the provisional or working title of each paper.

This proposal package must be received at the editorial office no later than **15 July 2021**; the final decision will be announced by **15 September 2021**. Publication will occur in the following year.

Please note that all special issues are required to be topical and interdisciplinary in nature (historical themes will not be considered). They must also remain within the space budget of **150 pages (64000 words)**. The deputy editor can help with this assessment.

Finally, please note that the Editors retain the right to refuse publication of any or all articles in an accepted special issue based on the comments of the independent reviewers.