

# **The Southern Mirror: Reflections on Europe From the Global South**

**Rosa Balfour, Lizza Bomassi,  
and Marta Martinelli, editors**

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# INTRODUCTION

ROSA BALFOUR AND MARTA MARTINELLI

Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine catapulted Europe to the forefront of a global crisis that is testing the continent's aspiration to become a geopolitical actor. In response, the transatlantic relationship has solidified, and some of Europe's allies have mobilized behind it. But the rest of the globe—representing over half of the world's population—has been lukewarm in supporting the transatlantic response or has sat on the fence, with many states abstaining from condemning Russia and few supporting sanctions. From the perspective of the European Union (EU), which sees itself as a champion of multilateralism, a supporter of international solidarity, and the most generous donor of development aid, this reaction begs the question of why Europe has so few loyal friends in the Global South.

Taking an unusual and underexplored outside-in approach, this report uncovers views of Europe's international role through the eyes of the Global South. In the past, the EU has commissioned polls about the way its image is perceived abroad, but the questions asked reflected the EU's own self-perceptions.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship—mostly from the United States, China, Russia, India, Brazil, South Africa, and the EU's neighbors—has unearthed much evidence that shows how perceptions of Europe and the EU vary across countries, regions, and issues and are colored by burdensome historical legacies.<sup>2</sup> The choice of geographies, however, left large parts of the Global South in the shade.

The existing literature reveals that the EU is recognized as three thematic types of actor: a global trade power or a provider of development aid; a political and security actor, supporting regional security through bodies such as the African Union or contributing to security operations abroad; and a normative power, supporting human rights and democracy, regional integration, and multilateral organizations.

This report investigates these issues and a broader range of themes that have recently become prominent. The climate crisis has made an extraordinary rise to the top of the policy agenda, including in economic and normative terms. The digital agenda is an increasingly strong component of the economy as well as a space for geopolitical competition. Migration policies are unquestionably shaping the way the EU engages with the rest of the world. And the coronavirus pandemic has brought health and global governance to the forefront of international cooperation.

The backdrop to these fields was a decade during which Europe underwent crisis after crisis, from the eurozone and migration challenges to Brexit and the rise of populism. These episodes deeply rattled the EU, but little is known about their ripple effects on the union's global credibility. Each field also exposed dilemmas that arose as a consequence of other states and regions experiencing the EU through its external policies. These countries' diverse views of the EU's international role depend on geographic, economic, and cultural proximity; historical legacy; attachment to sovereignty; presence; and engagement.

One challenge in the design of this report was to avoid generating Eurocentric questions that test European self-perceptions abroad, such as “Is the EU a trade power? Or a normative power? Or a global regulator? A model of regional integration?” To avoid confirmation bias, researchers investigated the issues through open-ended questions in seven fields: trade, security, values, climate, the digital economy, migration, and the coronavirus pandemic. They explored questions that compared Europe or the EU—which are often seen interchangeably by less specialized audiences—with other actors, such as the United States, China, and Russia as well as individual European states, including former colonial powers. The researchers investigated general and historical perceptions of Europe by engaging with a variety of interlocutors—government officials, opposition figures, societal groups, business leaders, academics, students, and local community leaders—who were also asked about what they would like to see from the EU.

The result is a multifaceted mosaic of views from seven countries: Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Niger, the Philippines, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe. Each context views Europe through the prism of its own most pressing situations: populism and climate in Brazil; the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia; deforestation and trade in Indonesia; migration and security in Niger; the war on drugs and development imperatives in the Philippines; the political, humanitarian, migration, and economic crises in Venezuela; and sanctions in Zimbabwe. Everywhere, knowledge of the EU's complexities depends very much on individuals' degree of acquaintance with the bloc; civil society representatives and academics who have engaged with the EU display the greatest knowledge. The younger generation, freer of postcolonial legacies and tensions, emerged as having more positive views.

Postcolonialism can be connected to criticisms of double standards and hypocrisy—frequent accusations well known to European decisionmaking elites. But the disappointments over the way Europe has failed to support democratic actors abroad and fallen foul of its own human rights standards in the treatment of migrants and refugees run deep and are of consequence.

In a world that is acutely perceived in all seven countries as one of geopolitical rivalries, Europe stands a chance of casting itself as different, as nonpolarizing. This is where Europe's soft power, however battered, still rests. Yet, by failing to live up to its standards—or by simply lacking an interest in perspectives from the Global South—Europe encourages transactionalism and self-interested pursuit. In Brazil and Indonesia, for instance, Europe's stance on environmental standards is easily construed as a vehicle for globalism or trade dominance; in Ethiopia, Europe's failure to engage has encouraged the government to turn to China for support in its military repression of the Tigray region. Ideological imperialism, double standards, and Eurocentric worldviews that are intolerant of other cultural contexts are accusations that sit side by side with more positive views.

Asking open-ended questions also meant that some of our hypotheses were not validated. In the Global South, Europe is not seen as a regulator and standard setter in the global economy or governance. The EU's insistence on some environmental standards is seen as insincere and protectionist in two countries, having been manipulated by Brazil's populist president and perceived as camouflage for vested economic interests in Indonesia. Europe's role in the digital economy received virtually no attention; nor did its role as a model for regional integration.

Experience of the EU's normative role is very much tied to the degree to which the union has a credible track record of engaging and supporting democratic actors in each of the countries examined. In the Philippines, for example, civil society actors lamented the intensification of government-to-government cooperation to the detriment of human rights objectives. Some of the EU's values are also broadly contested by societies, not just by governments. For instance, opposition to the EU's putative push for LGBTQ rights crosses the usually polarized political divides in Venezuela and is embraced by society at large in Niger. And while there is awareness of Europe's political plights, there is little interest in them. In Zimbabwe, Brexit is even seen as an opportunity for a clean slate with the EU. Europe's greatest stains lie in its treatment of refugees and migrants and its failures to effectively support democracy and human rights.

Expectations of future relations with the EU vary across countries and issues. Requests for the EU to embrace a deeper understanding of societal dynamics rather than focus on relations with governments alone are a common thread. The landscape of actors who work in the Global South on areas where the EU can have some influence—human rights and democracy, climate change, peace building and mediation—includes local communities, civil society organizations, and local leaders. But EU engagement with them is haphazard and subordinate to diplomatic relations between governments, sometimes making the union vulnerable to instrumentalization by autocratic leaders and subject to accusations of double standards. Likewise, health, culture, and education are areas where a greater EU presence is demanded.

In a context of sharpened geopolitical confrontation in fragile parts of the world, well-informed and appropriately leveraged EU soft power can offer alternative prospects for more diversified relations. Viewing the world through the eyes of the Global South could serve Europe's future well.



## CHAPTER 1

# BRAZIL: EU RELATIONS AT THE BEST AND WORST OF TIMES

OLIVER STUENKEL

### INTRODUCTION

In August 2019, relations between Brazil and the European Union (EU) entered their worst crisis since the country established diplomatic relations with the bloc in 1960. In response to several European governments' criticism of Brazil's environmental policies in the Amazon rain forest, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro taunted his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, and former German chancellor Angela Merkel, saying that fires in the Amazon and the deforestation of parts of Brazil's rain forest were an "internal issue" and that "the Amazon belongs to Brazil."<sup>3</sup> To the far-right president and his followers, European criticism of Brazil's environmental policies represented undue interference and smacked of neocolonialism.<sup>4</sup> Earlier in 2019, after the Bolsonaro government had proposed excluding civil society from the management of the Amazon Fund, a multimillion-dollar conservation scheme financed by the German and Norwegian governments, Berlin and Oslo suspended the payments.

Now, over three years into his turbulent presidency, Bolsonaro is shunned by leaders across Europe—with the exception of right-wing leaders such as Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—and it seems unlikely that this scenario will change significantly as long as he is president.

At no other stage since democratization has a Brazilian leader been on such bad terms with their European counterparts. A strategic partnership between Berlin and Brasília, which traditionally involved yearly joint cabinet meetings, has been halted. With the exception of a brief visit to Budapest in February 2022, Bolsonaro is the first Brazilian president in the past three decades not to have undertaken a single bilateral visit to Europe, a continent where he is largely seen as a *persona non grata*.

Yet, at the same time, the Brazilian government's neoliberal faction insists that the president's rhetoric should not derail an ambitious agenda of deepening ties between Mercosur and the EU. In the same way, many Brazilian foreign policy makers and economic elites are eager to accelerate Brazil's accession to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The elites see OECD membership as a seal of approval to attract international investors in a moment of economic crisis and a step that would strengthen the country's ties to both Europe and the United States.<sup>5</sup>

To members of the neoliberal faction, then, Bolsonaro's attacks on Europe should be understood as a domestic tactic to mobilize his most loyal followers and should not imperil a trade relationship of great importance to Brazil's development. To this group, the EU is, above all, a crucial buyer of Brazilian products as well as a partner in the project of modernizing Brazil.

To explore Brazilian perceptions of the EU, this chapter draws on research into how the government's internal factions view Europe as well as semistructured interviews with advisers to government and opposition parliamentarians, representatives of state and municipal governments, members of the military, business leaders, civil society representatives, journalists, and academics.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

Brazilian perceptions of the EU are characterized by frequent misunderstandings about how the EU works and conducts its foreign policy, especially compared with the international strategies of EU member countries. The widespread uncertainty about the EU's workings emerged in Brazil's public debate about the EU-Mercosur trade deal, which was concluded in principle in 2019. While Brazilians perceived Germany as strongly in favor of ratifying the agreement, they saw Macron, who frequently voiced his opposition to it, as far more reluctant.

When asked about how they believed decisions were made in the EU, several interlocutors said Germany and France held a veto power on strategic decisions. But there was also a recognition that, particularly when it came to Latin American affairs, Spain and Portugal punched above their weight in Brussels. Interestingly, interviewees saw this largely as a positive dynamic, describing Lisbon, especially, as more sympathetic to Brazil's interests and thus as indirectly standing up for Brazil in intra-EU debates.

There was no consensus among interlocutors about what the EU actually is or who can speak on its behalf. In general, nonspecialist interviewees did not fully appreciate the number of policy areas on which Brussels decides. With a few exceptions, only career diplomats could name EU officials such as European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, or European Central Bank President Christine Lagarde. Meanwhile, many other policymakers spoke about European countries, national governments, and EU institutions interchangeably, even speaking about the United Kingdom, despite the country's 2020 departure from the EU.

To a country like Brazil, which, despite some progress on regional cooperation in the 1990s and 2000s, remains fiercely protective of its national sovereignty, the EU is an experiment that interlocutors regard as admirable, risky, outlandish, doomed, or simply incomprehensible.

## The EU as a Global Actor

Among Brazil's policymakers and armed forces, perceptions of the EU are framed by the 2019 falling-out between the Bolsonaro government and the EU, which symbolizes, above all, that Brazil and Europe are now diverging fundamentally on four key issues of international affairs. In addition to climate change, which Bolsonaro has described as a communist hoax, his policies differ radically from those of the EU on human rights, migration, and multilateralism.<sup>6</sup> Not only has Bolsonaro called for "human rights for the right humans," repeatedly mocking the term;<sup>7</sup> he also abandoned the Global Compact for Migration and chose as his first foreign minister Ernesto Araújo, an obscure mid-level diplomat who embraced former U.S. president Donald Trump's antiglobalist rhetoric and sought closer ties with the far-right leaders of Hungary and Poland.

Within the Brazilian government, there are three discernible factions, which have distinct perceptions of the EU. For the antiglobalist faction, which includes the president, the EU's defense of environmental norms and criticism of Brazil's human rights record and anti-multilateral stance turned the union into one of the country's most formidable foreign policy challenges. The EU, led by faceless bureaucrats, Araújo charged, had "pasteurized Europe's past."<sup>8</sup> When Germany's foreign minister Heiko Maas invited all of his Latin American counterparts to Berlin in May 2019, Araújo was one of the few not to attend. The decision produced a sense of relief among numerous other participants, given Araújo's habit of peddling conspiracy theories.<sup>9</sup>

Neither Bolsonaro nor his foreign minister has described the EU as a strategic partner, a term used by previous Brazilian governments. Yet, while the crisis in the EU-Brazil relationship is real and may worsen given the growing importance of climate change in global affairs, virtually no Brazilian interlocutor echoed Araújo's negative views of the EU.

Some members of the second, neoliberal or self-styled technocratic faction questioned the EU's commitment to free trade and accused the union of applying double standards on climate change, while others described Europe as a continent in decline; but the vast majority portrayed the Bolsonaro government's foreign policy as excessively confrontational. Even serving diplomats said they believed Bolsonaro was the main culprit behind the deterioration in EU-Brazil ties and observed that the relationship had less to do with the EU and more to do with Bolsonaro's antiglobalist stance, which led to similar tensions with many other countries.

The government's third faction, made up of generals, articulated a more nuanced view of the EU. While Macron's 2019 comments about the Amazon raised concerns, military men are aware that strong ties with Europe will be important in a world increasingly shaped by great-power tensions between Beijing and

Washington. The generals thus see Bolsonaro's anti-EU stance as largely counterproductive.<sup>10</sup> When it looked increasingly likely that Joe Biden would win the 2020 U.S. presidential election, several Brazilian military men worried that Biden's election could lead to the emergence of a transatlantic "environmental alliance" against Brazil.<sup>11</sup> This view was also dominant among most Brazilian diplomats interviewed.

Yet, possibly in a sign of the limits of Europe's geopolitical influence, even diplomatic pressure and the growing risk of consumer boycotts failed to moderate Brazil's stance on any of the issues above. Most notably, the president refused for more than two years to replace his controversial environment minister, Ricardo Salles, whom EU diplomats increasingly saw as a toxic symbol of Bolsonaro's inaction in the face of environmental destruction.<sup>12</sup>

The EU's more limited engagement in Brazil actually predates Bolsonaro's election and is in part due to the permanent political crisis that began to engulf the country during former president Dilma Rousseff's second term. The optimism that characterized most publications about EU-Brazil relations before 2014 has ended. In January 2013, the Sixth Brazil-EU Summit in Brasília was billed under the heading "An Ever-Closer Relationship," and around thirty sectoral policy groups debated ways to deepen ties. Yet, no Brazil-EU summit has taken place since 2014, and there is no sign that the bilateral partnership will be revived anytime soon, given the profound differences between the two sides on issues such as human rights and the environment.<sup>13</sup>

Although Brazil-EU ties have undoubtedly worsened significantly since Bolsonaro came to power in January 2019, it is important to assess this development in the context of the overall transformation of Brazil's relations with the world. Indeed, Brazil's president has used the country's foreign policy to energize his most radical base. Particularly since Bolsonaro chose to abandon some of his signature domestic policies, such as the fight against corruption and the promise not to negotiate with the country's traditional political elite, radicalism on the foreign policy front has been useful to burnish his antiestablishment credentials among his most loyal followers.

Since Bolsonaro came to office, attacking traditional partners such as Argentina, China, or European countries—a move that predictably causes outrage and condemnation among Brazil's political and intellectual elites—has been a reliable way to divert public attention when necessary.<sup>14</sup> The overarching theme of Bolsonaro's attacks has always been to project himself as a defender against outside threats. In the cases of Argentina, China, and Venezuela, Bolsonaro often speaks about the threat of left-wing ideology. In the case of Europe, the perceived threat is mostly in the shape of globalism—a vague, nonscientific, and pejorative term that describes everything from multilateralism to environmentalism to progressivism. In short: a defensive response by a far-right populist nationalist to the EU's role as a normative power.

Yet, while it is easy to be absorbed by the frequent mutual criticism shared on social media between heads of state and government, a far more nuanced picture emerged in interviews with bureaucrats, parliamentarians, and opposition figures. The ideas that Brazilian decisionmakers shared about the EU's reputation were, above all, a product of the bloc's policies on the economy, trade, norms, climate change, diplomacy, technology, and international cooperation—topics that are often so intertwined

that interlocutors did not make a conscious distinction between them. For example, debates about the future of the trade relationship almost always involved comments about climate change and global norms as well.

While policymakers and private-sector representatives tend to have positive views of the EU, this tendency is more pronounced among academics and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), many of whom could be characterized as Europhiles. Several expressed dismay at the United Kingdom's decision to leave the EU and drew parallels between the populist wave in Europe and that in Brazil, which elected Bolsonaro in 2018. The reasons for these perceptions and these interviewees' greater understanding of the EU are manifold but may include previous participation in conferences at European universities, time spent in Europe as visiting scholars or students, and financial support obtained from European funding sources for projects or study in Europe.

In particular, environmental NGOs expressed a firmly pro-EU view and stressed that EU pressure on the Bolsonaro government would be crucial to contain the president's worst impulses in this area. Most agreed that the EU's influence in Latin America did not currently match that of the United States or China.

Among the wider population, the EU continues to be seen in a positive light. According to the Pew Research Center's Global Indicators Database, 47 percent of Brazilians held a favorable opinion of the EU in 2019.<sup>15</sup> As Brazil's economic and political crisis has deepened over recent years without showing signs of subsiding, Europe is seen as an attractive destination for a growing number of Brazilians who are planning to emigrate. Over the past fifteen years, more than 170,000 Brazilians obtained European citizenship, and citizenship requests have increased substantially during the coronavirus pandemic. In 2019, Italy was the foreign country that granted the most passports to Brazilians, followed by Portugal and Spain.<sup>16</sup> Still, the number of Brazilians residing in the United States—approximately 1.8 million—remains far higher than the number living in Europe, thought to be at least 800,000.<sup>17</sup>

Migration played practically no role in interviews and came up only once, when an interlocutor expressed admiration for Merkel's decision to welcome a large number of Syrian refugees in 2015. Interviewees did not mention the digital economy specifically.

## Security and Norms

Security came up in discussions of Brazil's acquisition of the Swedish fighter jet Gripen, and especially in conversations with military men in the context of deforestation, climate change, and Brazil's sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> Several interlocutors were contacted again after Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and the general perception was that the conflict had the potential to strengthen the EU's role in international security. Still, the belief remained dominant that the United States continues to play a crucial role in European security, limiting the EU's remit as an independent player or agenda setter in this area.

Similarly, most interlocutors did not characterize the EU as an agenda setter in the realm of global norms, a concept seen as somewhat abstract. In a more indirect fashion, though, the issue emerged repeatedly, for example in the context of the fight against fake news: interviewees described the German government's February 2022 decision to force the messaging service Telegram to shut down several channels spreading fake news as a potential model for Brazil.

### Trade and the Environment

The EU was Brazil's second-largest trading partner in 2020, after China. While Brazil's trade with the Asian country stood at \$67 billion, trade with the EU was \$28 billion, with the United States coming in third at \$21 billion.<sup>19</sup> However, most interviewees ranked the EU behind both China and the United States in terms of importance.

This low perception of the EU may have two causes. First, while Brazil has a trade agreement with the EU via Mercosur, the bloc does not often appear in official lists of Brazil's major trade partners, which tend to include individual European countries. In the public debate, European heads of state and government remain far more visible than leaders of EU institutions. Second, in the geopolitical realm, Brazilians see the United States and China as more influential than the EU, which may make their economic importance appear somewhat greater than it actually is. Still, "an important economic and trade partner" was the most common definition that interlocutors first offered when asked to characterize the EU from Brazil's perspective.

Given the prominence of the subject in Brazil's public debate, it is not surprising that interviewees mentioned the EU's stance on climate change quite frequently, even though these mentions included both positive evaluations and suggestions that Europe was adopting a hypocritical stance. Indeed, interpretations of Europe's position on the environment ranged widely from Brazilian environmentalists' last hope to criticism of the EU's use of climate change as a veil to defend its economic interests and keep Brazilian products out of the European market, through to complaints about EU meddling in Brazil's internal affairs. Among the armed forces, growing environmental concerns in Europe—for example, the debate about whether ecocide should become an international crime—were seen as a potentially serious threat to Brazilian sovereignty in the future.<sup>20</sup>

These security concerns are hard to manage because they are, to some extent, the stuff of conspiracy theories: no European government would ever consider occupying the Amazon. But that does not make them irrelevant, and from Brazil's perspective there are genuine concerns about the country's capacity to police a tropical forest the size of Western Europe. Given how entrenched the armed forces are in Brazilian politics today, it is very unlikely that these concerns will vanish quickly, even if a candidate with more moderate views beats Bolsonaro in the October 2022 presidential election.

Private-sector representatives naturally view the EU and its relationship with Brazil through the prism of trade and the economy, too. Just like interlocutors in the public sector, they see Brexit largely in the context of what it may mean for trade negotiations and whether the departure of a more pro-trade member of the EU would make the bloc less open to liberalization. Notably, while some chief executives

of large global companies, as well as heads of business associations, have publicly warned that Brazil's negative global image poses a risk for Brazilian firms, interlocutors from chambers of commerce, the financial markets, and international companies were privately less convinced that Brazil's environmental strategy posed any fundamental risk at this stage.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, while many foreign investors have pulled out of the Brazilian stock market and European governments have openly questioned the ratification of the trade agreement with Mercosur, pointing to environmental destruction in Brazil, the dominant perception seems to be that this rhetoric is a fig leaf for protectionism. One observer pointed out that France had always been opposed to ratifying the trade deal and simply used the 2019 Amazon fires to strengthen its case. These remarks are interesting in that part of the Brazilian private sector seems to understand environmental concern as a facet of a more protectionist EU—a bloc that was previously seen in Brazil as relatively open and pro-trade.

Few interlocutors in the business sector believed that the growing political power of environmentalist parties could lead to more serious problems, such as the imposition of sanctions. Since neither the United States nor China has prioritized this issue in Brazil over recent years, it may be natural that the EU is so strongly associated with climate concern.

### The Coronavirus Pandemic

The coronavirus pandemic does not seem to have fundamentally changed the way the EU is seen in Brazil. At the time of writing, China has won praise across Latin America for being the main provider of COVID-19 vaccines, even though Sinophobia has grown in Brazil over recent years, especially among Bolsonaro supporters. The United States was roundly criticized for being slow to share vaccines with other countries, while views on Europe in the context of the pandemic were largely neutral. Interviewees did not mention in detail issues such as debt relief or the EU's role in international financial institutions, although that may change if Brazil's economic situation worsens further as a consequence of the pandemic.

### EU Coherence

The fact that the EU does not speak with one voice is felt keenly in Brazil, in part because of the different ways in which national governments deal with trade and climate change issues. Divisions between France and Germany over how to handle the Bolsonaro government—Macron opted for a more confrontational approach while Merkel preferred a more diplomatic strategy—underline the fact that from a Brazilian perspective, European countries are seen to pursue their own foreign policies, which are not always aligned with those of other European nations.

In Brazil, uncertainty about the ratification process for trade agreements in Europe—for example, whether the opposition of one country is sufficient to block ratification—has created confusion. For instance, when the Austrian parliament voted against ratification of the trade deal with Mercosur and the French president became a leading opponent of the agreement, Brazilian observers struggled to make sense of whether these comments were made for electoral purposes or whether they made ratification impossible.

This confusion may be complicated further by the fact that the Spanish government is sometimes seen from Brazil as a gatekeeper for all things Latin American in Brussels, while Portugal also projects itself as a penholder in Europe when the topic is Brazil. Indeed, Portugal's ambassador to Brazil has referred to himself as the “spokesperson” for the EU.<sup>22</sup>

With the exception of the subset of antiglobalist Bolsonaro supporters, Brazilians largely see a strong and unified Europe as positive both for the global order and for Brazil's national interest. This view is particularly strong in the foreign ministry, where only a small number of diplomats share Bolsonaro's foreign policy views and where Araújo's March 2021 departure as foreign minister was almost universally celebrated.

Brazilians do not generally see the rise of Euroskeptical populists or Brexit as factors that significantly reduce the EU's global influence or relevance. Indeed, while the Brazilian media closely covered the Brexit negotiations, the topic now emerges only in discussions of the possibility of signing a trade deal with London. Most interlocutors viewed the European project as irreversible, and several even expected the EU to gain a more unified foreign policy stance in the future. A minority believed that the rise of nationalism threatened to undo the European project.

### The EU Compared with Other Global Actors

Potentially because of the EU's more limited geopolitical visibility, Brazilians largely see the bloc as less threatening to Brazil than the United States, Russia, or China, although this perception is not universal. Biden's election did not change the overall view that the EU's international strategy is more influenced by the public debate on climate change than is the United States' global strategy.

Interestingly, several policymakers said that managing Brazil's asymmetrical relationship with the EU—Brazil is far less relevant to European trade than vice versa—was easier than handling Brazil's similarly unequal relationships with China and the United States. That is in part because the EU's foreign policy decisionmaking process is less centralized and thus easier to influence through European capitals where Brazil believes it has greater influence, such as Lisbon. Yet, several observers said they believed the debate about climate change and deforestation had the potential to permanently trouble the EU-Brazil relationship, given that the Brazilian armed forces are far more deeply embedded in the country's politics than outside observers appreciate.

Those who described the EU as less threatening than the United States or China welcomed the possibility of a strong and unified EU in the context of growing tensions between Washington and Beijing. That is above all because Brazil, just like the European bloc, has an active interest in maintaining an equilibrium between the United States and China, ideally while preserving strong ties with both.

Indeed, growing tensions between Washington and Beijing produce a geopolitical challenge for Brasília, given Brazil's geographic proximity to the United States, growing economic dependence on China, and historic aversion to long-standing alliances that limit strategic autonomy.<sup>23</sup> This became particularly

visible after the Trump administration pressured Brazil to exclude Chinese tech giant Huawei as a possible provider of equipment for the construction of Brazil's fifth-generation technology (5G) network. At the same time, Beijing made it clear that such a move would be seen as a hostile act and could complicate the future of the bilateral relationship. After long planning to side with the United States, Bolsonaro was forced to perform a humiliating climbdown to preserve ties with China to obtain access to Chinese-made coronavirus vaccines.

When asked which countries could serve as models for Brazil in the context of its 5G network, most interviewees cited European countries, which also have to strike a delicate compromise in the emerging tech war between the West and China.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, while the only viable alternatives to Huawei would have been European firms such as Nokia and Ericsson, the EU played no visible role in debates about the subject. If there is an opportunity for Brussels and Brasília to cooperate in a bipolar order shaped by the great-power rivalry between Washington and Beijing, it so far remains unclear what this cooperation would look like in practice.

Although Brazilians do not see the EU as a declining power, it is worth emphasizing how quickly China has become Brazil's biggest trading partner, making all other regions comparatively less relevant. China did not rank among Brazil's top five trading partners at the turn of this century, but bilateral trade exploded in the following decade, turning China into Brazil's top trading partner in 2009.<sup>25</sup> It is thus no coincidence that pro-China business groups are gaining political influence and that political pressure on Bolsonaro to tone down his anti-China rhetoric has been swift and relatively effective.<sup>26</sup> Brazilian Vice President Hamilton Mourão and Kátia Abreu, the chair of the Brazilian Senate's Committee on Foreign Relations and National Defense, have strong ties to agribusiness and are very well connected in Beijing.

Among Brazil's intellectual elites, the EU remains, together with the United States, a reference point for policymakers who follow international affairs, not only from a cultural point of view but from a political one, too. Brazilian parties across the ideological spectrum look toward the United States to analyze political parallels—as Bolsonaro's use of the term "Trump of the Tropics" to refer to himself and the debate about who could be a Brazilian Biden attest.<sup>27</sup> But at times, policymakers draw comparisons between European and Brazilian political trends or wonder whether political developments in Europe, such as the rise of the Green Party in Germany, will eventually come to Brazil.

In the words of one analyst, "the EU is mostly seen in a positive light [in Brazil], be it as a global security provider, as a trustworthy partner in trade or due to its welfare state, living standards, educational achievements and cultural richness."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, most interviewees doubted the EU's capacity to mitigate the consequences of the return of great-power politics between the United States and China, today a key dynamic in Latin American affairs. While several interlocutors recognized that the EU and Brazil face similar challenges vis-à-vis a multipolar order, there was little clarity as to how this similarity could be explored.

## FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-BRAZIL RELATIONS

Based on the analysis above, five priorities come to mind for the future of EU-Brazil relations. These concern climate change, EU coherence, the war in Ukraine, norms and values, and recovery from the effects of the pandemic.

### Climate Change

First of all, while security has long played no role whatsoever in the Brazil-EU relationship, Brazil's military establishment views European environmental concerns as a potential risk to the country's sovereignty, and the EU would be well advised to find a way to minimize this risk. High-level military talks about the geopolitical consequences of climate change could help mitigate this problem.

In the same way, while it is perhaps rarely expressed openly, there is a lingering belief among Brazilian policymakers and the business sector, especially the agricultural sector, that EU environmental politics is, in part, motivated by protectionist instincts. In Europe, Brazilian concerns are often brushed off as misconceived or the product of nationalist paranoia and limited to a few radicals, but ignoring these concerns altogether is unlikely to assuage them. Fears about Brazilian sovereignty over the Amazon tend to be far more deep-seated than many EU policymakers appreciate, and the two sides should address such concerns explicitly in bilateral talks.

Brazilian environmental movements are vibrant, but they are largely excluded and strongly criticized by the federal government, which often describes environmental NGOs as acting on behalf of foreign powers. Civil society groups, by contrast, see the EU as a vital partner as they seek to resist a government that regards weakening environmental rules as one of its core missions. Finding the right compromise between defending the EU's environmental and economic interests vis-à-vis Brazil will be the most daunting challenge in the bilateral relationship over the coming years. While future Brazilian presidents may embrace a less strident and more constructive strategy on climate change, the EU must not overlook the fact that groups opposed to more stringent environmental regulation are on the rise in Brazil.

Ideally, any shift in strategy should involve reframing the debate away from environmentalism vs. development or environmentalism vs. Brazilian sovereignty toward an approach that does not consider these pairs to be inherently in tension. As long as Bolsonaro's administration frames EU environmental concerns about the Amazon as a threat to Brazil's sovereignty, he will have a strong political incentive to resist outside pressure to adopt a more constructive strategy to combat deforestation. After all, from a Latin American perspective, shaped by a deep-seated concern about the limited capacity of governments in the region to safeguard their borders, even benign comments by EU policymakers about deforestation can come across as arrogant or threatening.<sup>29</sup>

## EU Coherence

On the one hand, Brazilian policymakers' incomprehension of the EU's ratification process for trade deals is, to some extent, inevitable given the bloc's peculiar political decisionmaking structure. On the other hand, perhaps the two sides can do more to explain these realities to the Brazilian public, policymakers, and business community.

Specifically, the more the EU can speak with one voice on matters that concern Brazil, and the more the EU ambassador to Brazil or another leading EU policymaker can come across as an agenda setter in the bilateral relationship, the better Brazilians are likely to understand the EU's decisionmaking structures. To a certain extent, the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine—and the frequent appearances of von der Leyen and Borrell in the Brazilian news media—is likely to have altered Brazil's public and elite perceptions of the EU somewhat in this regard.

## The War in Ukraine

The geopolitical aftermath of the war in Ukraine is likely to have a negative impact on EU-Brazil relations, and the EU needs to handle the fallout carefully. After all, contrary to what Western policymakers may have expected, Brazil has sought to articulate a largely neutral and ambiguous stance on the war. Days before the invasion, Bolsonaro visited Moscow and expressed solidarity with Russia. The president has refused to criticize Russia over the war, and while Brazil has voted in favor of several resolutions critical of Russia in the United Nations General Assembly, it abstained from a resolution that sought to suspend the country from the organization. The Brazilian government also opposes the imposition of sanctions on Russia, and in response to Western calls to suspend Moscow from the Group of Twenty (G20), Brasília maintained that Russia should continue to be part of the group.

Western pressure on Brazil to participate in punishing or isolating Russia is therefore likely to be counterproductive, and economic necessities—above all, Brazil's imports of Russian fertilizer—explain why business elites strongly support the government's neutral stance. Irrespective of who wins Brazil's October 2022 presidential election, policymakers in Brussels must find a way around this structural obstacle and prevent it from contaminating other areas of the bilateral relationship. More specifically, the EU should make clear that it is willing to provide large-scale aid to help developing countries address the negative economic consequences of the war in Ukraine, which have been aggravated by the West's sanctions on Russia.

## Norms and Values

Brazilians recognize the EU's important role in the area of norms, but cooperation on human rights, the environment, and multilateralism is currently very difficult because of profound ideological differences between Brasília and Brussels. Bolsonaro actively sided with Trump and still seeks closer ties with far-right governments whose support for the EU is ambiguous.

Although this situation makes a more ambitious bilateral agenda impossible, there are two ways to work around these obstacles. First, in light of Brazil's radical anti-multilateral foreign policy, governors, mayors, and nonstate actors are seeking to engage internationally not only to mitigate the negative impacts of the federal government's policies but also to ensure that Brazil continues to be part of global conversations on issues from human rights to environmental protection and internet governance. These actors are eager to engage with the EU, and European support for them is vital to help address the erosion of democracy and growing threats to human rights in Brazil.

Second, while the Bolsonaro government is keen to reduce the influence of multilateral institutions it deems threatening to Brazil's sovereignty, outside actors have been able to maintain cooperation on more technical issues that cannot be exploited easily to mobilize the president's core supporters. Particularly on internet governance and the fight against corruption, two issues where the EU plays a vital global role, numerous opportunities continue to exist. For example, when it comes to combating fake news online, the EU and Brazil face similar challenges in finding the right balance between limiting the proliferation of false information on platforms such as Telegram and preserving free speech. Meanwhile, cooperation between anticorruption watchdogs has the potential to expand, particularly if Brazil obtains OECD membership.

## The Post-Pandemic Recovery and External Aid

Finally, Brazil is set to face a long and frustrating recovery after the economic collapse induced by the coronavirus pandemic. A severe mishandling of the pandemic, high infection rates, historically high unemployment, and limited fiscal space for long-term support for the poorest will inevitably increase the risk of political instability. Millions of Brazilians who escaped poverty and joined the new middle class during the commodity boom of the 2000s slid back into poverty in the 2010s and now realize that they may never regain the socioeconomic status they achieved twenty years ago. Across Latin America, poverty rates now stand at their highest in two decades, and ideological divisions make meaningful regional cooperation difficult.

In light of this situation, Brazil—once a provider of development and humanitarian aid—may come to depend more on external support; this has become clear as the Bolsonaro government has struggled to obtain enough COVID-19 vaccines. While deeply unfortunate, the situation offers an opportunity for the EU to project itself as a provider of aid in Latin America, particularly in regions and countries whose populations are not yet fully vaccinated.

In the same way, the EU has the potential to support the region in coping with the ongoing Venezuelan migration crisis, which, despite its size, garners far less international attention than other crises. And calls for Brazil and neighboring countries to do more to protect the Amazon can generate positive results only if the EU and other international actors are willing to provide large-scale aid for the benefit of the environment.

## CONCLUSION

Despite Brazil's multiple political, diplomatic, and economic obstacles, there is no doubt that several of the world's most pressing challenges—such as climate change—can only be tackled with the country's active participation. Likewise, a better understanding of the origins of pandemics reveals that helping Brazil reduce deforestation will be a crucial element of a global strategy to reduce the risk of future pandemics. That is because deforestation and the growing human presence in the Amazon forest increase the risk of a deadly virus, bacterium, or fungus jumping species, possibly sparking a new pandemic.<sup>30</sup>

In the same way, helping developing countries like Brazil to attenuate the negative consequences of the economic fallout of the war in Ukraine—either by offering economic aid or by excluding the purchase of fertilizers and related goods from the sanctions on Russia—will allow the EU to project itself as a relevant provider of global goods. While there are numerous complex political hurdles that prevent ties from regaining their previous intensity, the EU continues to be well positioned to work around these difficulties, mitigate the damage, and engage with Brazil.



## CHAPTER 2

# ETHIOPIA: A CONFLICT AT BREAKING POINT

HAFSA HALAWA

### INTRODUCTION

Across the Global South, the last decade has been defined largely by the prioritization of local over international dynamics. Several political transitions across the Global South—as a result of the Arab Spring that began in 2010 and a domino effect of uprisings across other continents—have resulted in a shift toward nationalist messaging and inherently more charged and politically isolating policies.

Ethiopia is no exception to this emerging pattern. The ongoing conflict in the country resulted from years of political instability, which has reached breaking point. Since the death of former Ethiopian prime minister Meles Zenawi in 2012, the country has fallen into a cycle of power struggles among armed actors, including national and federal authorities. Notably, the rise of Abiy Ahmed to power in 2017 began a slow and steady collapse into heavy nationalism that split Ethiopia along ethnic and regional fault lines. This situation exacerbated already active tensions over competition for resources and historical grievances amid divisions between regional and centralized power, culminating in the tragic conflict that has embroiled the country since November 2020.

Since then, Ethiopia has fallen into a de facto civil war as Abiy's Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), alongside local militias from the Amhara region and the Eritrean Defense Forces, has attacked the Tigray region, looking to unseat the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) from power. The assault on Tigray became protracted following the movement of hundreds of thousands of refugees across the border into Sudan, while an ongoing territorial dispute between Amhara and Tigray continues to fuel the conflict.

European Union (EU) relations across the Horn of Africa have also intensified in recent years. Reflecting both the union's broader migration interests and emerging security threats in East Africa and the Red Sea, the importance of the Horn region has crossed into several geopolitical arenas that tie into EU

foreign policy. Situated in close proximity—in terms of geography and policy—to the EU’s Southern neighborhood, the Horn of Africa poses several questions, threats, and concerns for the EU and its wider interests. Ethiopia, specifically, has become a new playground for regional and international geopolitical interests. This has intensified of late with the conflict that has engulfed the country.

While the conflict and political dynamics are inherently local, Ethiopia and the region hold much international significance. The EU has a long-standing presence in the country, where it works on several development indicators and political transition policies. However, the EU faces significant competition from an expanding China, whose economic investments in the region are engineered to target Ethiopia’s market and development, and from powerful petrostates in the Gulf region, which also focus on Ethiopia as a major recipient of economic investment and support. In addition, over the last decade, Nile politics has reached an inflection point with a continuing dispute between Ethiopia and downstream riparian states Sudan and Egypt over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project.

The EU’s initiatives in Ethiopia span several policy areas and are underpinned by the broader values-based nature of the union’s interventions related to peaceful democratic transition. Such policy areas include trade, security, and migration. In recent years, the EU has developed a targeted climate action policy that seeks to enable partners and actors to respond to climate change and its effects as well as provide support for environmental responses that can promote economic prosperity while avoiding harm to the environment. Africa is the continent most susceptible to the risks of climate change yet is also one of the lowest contributors to carbon emissions. While this has ensured that the Horn region and its leaders are well versed in climate risks, the region continues to fail to respond effectively, as leaders pay lip service to the challenges without backing up their words with material policies.<sup>31</sup>

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

Ethiopians’ perceptions of the EU differ greatly, depending on individual levels of vested interest, informed knowledge, and engagement with EU policies and support for Ethiopia. For civil society and human rights advocates, the EU’s values-based agenda has been tainted since the union’s 2015 migration crisis and its ensuing policies. Among Ethiopian policymakers, the view expressed by one European External Action Service (EEAS) official that the EU “bears the brunt of all the world’s conflicts and crises” reflects the way EU policy has shifted in recent years to become one that is perceived as more defensive and less values based.<sup>32</sup> This, in turn, has contributed to growing negative perceptions of the EU.

Among the general public, however, the EU is generally regarded as a positive influence and a good partner for Ethiopia, with a values-oriented agenda that is respected across communities, despite some lingering misgivings about the EU’s interventions. Overall, Ethiopians see the union as a positive partner on development that helps create needed employment, address climate policies, and counter growing nervousness over China’s role, allowing the EU to bank significant goodwill and trust.

Some observers point to a lack of visibility about EU projects and investments. One example cited in an interview is Ethiopia's Industrial Parks, which are largely funded by the EU but are not widely known to be an EU investment. In addition, because of other forms of investment and the dominant role of state-owned enterprises in the country, EU projects do not necessarily raise people's salaries, so development progress remains slow despite important strides.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, much of the criticism of the EU's trade and development proposals is directed toward the Ethiopian government, which many also accuse of a lack of creativity to support and create middle-class income.

## The EU as a Global Actor

Over the last decade, EU engagement in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa has increased significantly. As a global security partner, the EU has been vital in building a broader Red Sea security policy by engaging several actors in the region. This policy targets dialogue as a means of building peace and preserving security, including maritime security, where the EU has prioritized its interests in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden. The Red Sea region is a priority for Europe as vital to global trade and of paramount strategic importance: in June 2018, the European Council identified "inclusive regional dialogue" as imperative to security policy.<sup>34</sup>

As part of this policy, the EU special representative for the Horn of Africa—since July 2021, Annette Weber—has played an integral role in regional relationships, including in Nile politics and as a *de facto* observer in the GERD dispute.<sup>35</sup> From 2011 to 2021, former special representative Alexander Rondos worked to build strong ties and trust between the EEAS and political actors across the Horn region and the Nile basin. As a result, the EU has benefited from a perception of trustworthiness around its engagement among regional leaders.

Yet, the union's public image is challenged by a legacy of colonialism from certain member states, notably France and—until it left the EU in 2020—the United Kingdom (UK); this historical baggage effectively discourages open engagement with the West as a whole. This difficulty is further complicated by divisions between member states' foreign policies and that of the EU as a whole, as well as more recent political hand-wringing over fears of migration.<sup>36</sup>

While the Tigray conflict has changed the tone of the international community's diplomatic approach to Ethiopia, perceptions of the EU among Ethiopians remain subjective. Over the last twenty years, the EU's role in the 2005 Ethiopian general election appears to have altered opinions of the union significantly, notably among civil society and the human rights community.<sup>37</sup> Ethiopian actors point to mixed messaging at the time from EU election observers, including flip-flopping from individual members of the observation mission over endorsing the opposition, which led to questions about the EU's supposed neutrality. Civil society activists contend that the EU's presence allowed then leader Meles to rally support for himself and his party by politicizing ill-informed statements by the EU mission.<sup>38</sup> One civil society advocate argued that a lack of trust from the wider Ethiopian public in the EU's role in the election resulted in "giving Meles an additional ten years."<sup>39</sup>

More recently, since Brexit, the UK has been building its own foreign policy in the region. While remaining largely aligned to the EU's policy goals and values agenda, the UK's policy is becoming more independent and vocal, particularly in the Horn of Africa. For the most part, observers expect this to grow into a largely "U.S.-plus" policy—that is, heavily influenced by decisions made in Washington—but in Ethiopia specifically, any new UK approach is not expected to detrimentally affect the EU's engagement. Elsewhere, France and Germany have strong national presences in Ethiopia. While this provides opportunities for civic activists to use several diplomatic channels to engage with Europe as a whole, it also reflects the muted and lesser power of the EU's centralized diplomacy.

This situation has been evident in diplomatic engagement over the Tigray conflict. Ethiopians have perceived the EU as weak, notably in comparison to robust U.S. diplomacy, which has been active in trying to mediate the conflict and extricate Eritrean troops from Ethiopia, where they are supporting Abiy's forces. Nevertheless, EU diplomacy has become more prominent as the conflict has progressed, notably on addressing questions of accountability for possible human rights abuses. The EU has also called for negotiations between the Ethiopian central government and the TPLF and for a scaling back of the ENDF presence in Tigray. This call has fallen mainly on deaf ears, however. The EU has been disappointed in recent developments: having had high hopes for the role of the African Union (AU) as a mediator in the conflict, the EU is now struggling to find interlocutors.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the EU invested significant capital in supporting Ethiopia's rapprochement with Eritrea, which, with hindsight, appears to have been at the very least naive and at worst dangerous. The Ethiopian perception of the EU's role is that of a bloc that is not as well versed in the local security dynamics as other actors in the region.<sup>41</sup>

## Migration

In the last few years, EU policy has been dominated by internal discussions and foreign diplomacy centered on the issue of migration. The 2015 migration crisis resulted in immediate diplomatic tensions within the bloc as debates over refugee quotas, budgets, and border policies created various problems, particularly for the EU's Schengen Area of passport-free travel.

Since then, diplomacy among the EU member states has focused on shoring up the bloc through increased attention on migration policies. The EU has implemented security agreements in the Mediterranean to try to prevent those seeking asylum from reaching European shores, while EU leaders have significantly increased the amount of the union's budget allocated to migration.<sup>42</sup> While the coronavirus pandemic has allowed the EU to temporarily adjust its Schengen border rules, the policies in place have not yet created a sustainable pathway to managing migration and refugee flows into Europe.

In Ethiopia, the migration crisis has created a significant amount of animosity toward Europe, where growing racism and xenophobia in domestic politics have alienated Ethiopians. In addition, the sentiment Ethiopians receive from Europe—that refugees are not welcome—has disappointed many who continue

to seek opportunities abroad, including in other countries across Africa where EU partnerships involve stricter migration policies, for example Egypt and Libya. The fear of migration is now a central lens through which Ethiopia views the EU, although paradoxically, it has not diminished Ethiopians' desire to have a partnership with the union.

Ethiopian migration has never accounted for a significant portion of direct migrant or refugee flows to Europe, although Ethiopians—alongside other Horn nationalities—do represent a major share of migrant flows into North Africa; many of these migrants then attempt to reach Europe through the Central Mediterranean.<sup>43</sup> Of late, concerns about increased migration flows have surfaced as a result of the Tigray war, notably as hundreds of thousands of refugees have poured into Sudan.

Migration plays a big role in discussions of EU perceptions, and not solely in Ethiopia. EU policies and statements have negatively affected the union's reputation, notably on rights and freedoms and the values-based agenda the EU promotes. A significant amount of detail in Europe's domestic political conversations reaches beyond the continent's borders and is absorbed by other populations, including Ethiopia's. More generally, the rise of populism in Europe, in the form of growing vote shares for far-right actors with xenophobic and anti-immigration policies, has added to a critical perception of Europe as a whole—and Europe remains synonymous with the EU for many Ethiopians. This has created a sentiment that Europe has abandoned Ethiopia and its future development.

There is also significant confusion at times among the Ethiopian general public about the EU, with little differentiation between the union's member states and its Brussels-based institutions. Ethiopia does not necessarily suffer from the policy challenges faced in other countries, such as internal divides among EU member states over human rights and values or member states acting as spoilers to EU policy; but Ethiopia does suffer from mixed EU messaging, which has been a long-standing challenge for the EEAS as it seeks to place itself among, not instead of, the member states. Observers note that the EU's diplomatic presence in the country is confused as member-state missions interject into EU diplomatic efforts or have higher visibility than them. This trend is increased by the presence of missions that represent multiple nations with overlapping interests, such as at the AU or the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a trade bloc of eight East African countries.

## Climate

Ethiopia, like many of its neighbors, is a country well versed in the effects of climate change, and citizens are largely very aware of how important climate action will be in the near future. However, as is common across other countries with a similar focus, climate action has become synonymous with water security. Ethiopia's significant political, social, and economic investment in completing the GERD—and, by extension, realizing its promise—has completely overtaken any other environmental issue or policy. According to one Ethiopian activist, the dam is “a lifeline for this country. It is the be-all and end-all. At this point [in the Tigray war], it is the only thing keeping this country together and afloat.”<sup>44</sup>

On environmental issues, perceptions of the EU are mixed. There is growing respect for the bloc's domestic climate response, and Ethiopia takes a positive view of the EU's reactions to the climate emergency, notably on emissions and renewable energy. However, there is also disdain in some quarters in Ethiopia for the EU's role in attempting to broker a deal among the countries in the tripartite negotiations on the GERD: Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan. Nationalism is at an all-time high, particularly when the issue of the dam is raised. The EU being seen as supporting or siding with the downstream countries—in particular Egypt, with which Ethiopia has a fraught relationship—has negatively affected Ethiopian perceptions of EU neutrality and positive diplomacy.

## Trade

Development actors and political observers in Ethiopia see the EU as having a comparatively small trading role compared with other countries that have invested in Ethiopia. As the EU gears its progress in this area toward Ethiopia's domestic labor and trade markets, the union's investments will naturally yield smaller results over a longer time frame. However, economists commend the EU's trade policies and promotion of entrepreneurship, particularly compared with increased Chinese investment, which, these experts say, is troubling.

In spite of this, many Ethiopian observers confuse the EU's institutional engagement with member states' bilateral support, whether it relates to security, housing, land, property, or financial services. The EU has a long-standing budgetary support mechanism to aid the Ethiopian economy, opinions of which have been divided since the EU suspended some €88 million (\$107 million) worth of aid in January 2021 in the wake of the Tigray conflict.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, some development experts argue that development support and trade agreements are not being felt domestically, contributing to a bigger malaise among citizens toward international investment. In the words of one Ethiopian journalist, “We don't have enough ATMs in this country, and where we do, they regularly don't work. And people want to talk about us being the emerging economic power in Africa?”<sup>46</sup>

## The Coronavirus Pandemic

Global responses to the coronavirus pandemic have created a significant rise in negative perceptions among Ethiopians toward the EU and wider West. An impression of vaccine hoarding by rich, developed nations has collided with continued anticolonial sentiment and has sent animosity toward European countries and the United States soaring. Ethiopians watch in shock as the West debates new vaccines, booster shots, and further lockdowns while most Africans have yet to receive a first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Meanwhile, the pandemic itself continues to rage as the most recent variants spread wildly across society. The sentiment of “Europeans traveling and living freely while Africans die,” as one civic activist put it,<sup>47</sup> is not exclusive to Ethiopia and has been echoed even by some of the continent's most powerful leaders.<sup>48</sup> This feeling has led to leaders across Africa calling for the continent to manufacture existing COVID-19 vaccines locally and even create its own jabs.<sup>49</sup>

## The EU Compared with Other Actors

In the Horn of Africa, the EU is competing for diplomatic clout in an increasingly competitive region. China's massive economic expansion across the Horn and notable commitments to Ethiopia have crowded out traditional Western allies and partners, particularly where Chinese development assistance and investments are unconditional with no values-based agenda. Beijing is currently the largest investor in Ethiopia, accounting for over 30 percent of all greenfield foreign direct investment projects.<sup>50</sup> In addition, China has built an ideological partnership with Ethiopia, built on Meles's "belief that the neoliberal Western development plan is flawed," in the words of one U.S. academic.<sup>51</sup>

However, that is not to say that Ethiopia's citizens welcome Chinese expansion in the country as the leadership does. Negative depictions of Addis Ababa as a "city of cranes"—as remarked by locals in the capital—represent an increasingly nervous mood toward Chinese investment in Ethiopia.<sup>52</sup> There is also growing concern about overdependence on China, which now holds in the region of 30 percent of Ethiopia's foreign debt.<sup>53</sup> Recent Chinese appropriations of other countries' state assets as a response to defaulting on their debt have raised questions over whether Ethiopia can sustain this level of Chinese investment.<sup>54</sup>

Beijing's presence sits uncomfortably with Ethiopians, who describe their desperate need for basic goods and services, which cannot be solved with mass infrastructure change in the capital.<sup>55</sup> This situation has left a sense of abandonment in Ethiopian regions that have not seen the fruits of such investment, accelerating tensions between regional leaders and the central government.<sup>56</sup> This sentiment remains potent despite Chinese support and funding for the GERD, which is seen not only as Ethiopia's economic lifeline but also as a national, regional, and global confirmation of what one civil society advocate called the country's "Horn hegemon" status.<sup>57</sup>

Exacerbated by the injection of foreign forces, specifically from Eritrea, the Tigray conflict has upended local and regional dynamics. Some Ethiopians who describe themselves as neutral toward the conflict argue that Abiy is being dictated to and manipulated by Eritrea's leader, Isaias Afwerki, who has become a puppet master in the conflict. Ethiopians perceive Afwerki as both an integral contributor to Abiy's survival and the major actor who is impeding peaceful negotiations for a sustained ceasefire and an end to the siege of Tigray, which has prevented aid deliveries and international support. One journalist remarked, "We are on the precipice of deciding Abiy's fate. He cannot make peace with the TPLF and remain a partner of [Afwerki]. Yet, he cannot continue this war and isolate Tigray such that he threatens the nation-state."<sup>58</sup>

The Tigray conflict also comes at a time when U.S. policy in the region has been heavily diminished amid a broader global retreat. Furthermore, the Gulf states, primarily led by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have embarked on a path to gain significant power and control through economic and security policies that encompass the Horn of Africa. Competition for security control of the Red Sea has brought the Gulf regimes to the region, with ideological and economic priorities that influence regional dynamics. The UAE has waded into the Ethiopian conflict directly by providing weapons and support to the ENDF.<sup>59</sup>

Among Ethiopians, the perception is that these countries are “out for themselves, and not seeking Ethiopia’s prosperity based on values,” as one journalist put it.<sup>60</sup> However, these outside players are also seen as bringing sustainable wealth and growth to Ethiopia, even if the UAE’s very specific interventions in the conflict have worked to isolate Tigray, where such operations enjoy no popular support. Nevertheless, little is known locally about the UAE or other Gulf countries, so their interventions do not generally feature in discussions of global actors’ roles in Ethiopia. Even so, this involvement by the strategic Gulf nation has exacerbated the UAE’s own tensions with its allies, Egypt and Sudan, and further entrenched all three nations that continue to face off in the decade-long GERD dispute.

Over the last decade, strategic interventions have become intertwined with one another across Africa, in particular in the Horn. This has deeply affected existing power structures and destabilized the EU’s foreign policy goals tied to migration, security, and the protection of universal rights and practices through values-based support. Competition for resources, influence, and security control from external actors has directly affected both governance and politics in Ethiopia. Support from China and the Gulf states has entrenched central power in Ethiopia, providing Addis Ababa with the macroeconomic success that absolves it of accountability toward the international community.

Furthermore, Ethiopia’s commitment to the GERD, supported materially and financially by states such as China and the UAE, has allowed the Ethiopian government to rally around the dam project and create a sense of national unity. However, this has come at the expense of years of bad governance, poor public service delivery, and little significant economic development for regional and rural communities, while political and social tensions have led to civil war. In particular, the growing level of discord among Ethiopians, notably toward Tigrayans, risks a rupture that would be felt far beyond Ethiopia’s borders.

Meanwhile, the United States has been loud and effective despite its mixed messaging as the presidency in Washington has changed hands. Former president Donald Trump challenged the U.S.-Ethiopia relationship by overtly supporting Egypt’s demands on the Nile. Current President Joe Biden, by contrast, has taken a strict approach to the conflict and to Abiy by suspending all U.S. economic and development aid while appointing a Horn of Africa special envoy to try to defuse the conflict and support a resolution.

In this context, the lack of a prominent EU role is reflected in the way Ethiopians perceive the bloc. The EU remains comparatively absent from the list of growing regional and international influences on Ethiopia’s trajectory. Although, in the first instance, this allows for EU policy implementation to continue behind the scenes, the perception remains that Ethiopia needs a partner such as the EU to take a larger role in the wider diplomatic, political, and security picture. While the EU has long been seen across its African partners as a stabilizing presence, the union now risks being largely drowned out by the interests of other, louder parties.

The EU is handicapped by its deeply bureaucratic and challenging technocratic environment, which often leaves much to be desired when the union is tasked with harnessing its political and diplomatic prowess. By regularly falling back on its default positions that the EU is not a state, has no military, and must prioritize migration, the union risks not only being overtaken by more powerful and more coherent states but also being ineffective in promoting any of its policies, however they may be received.

## FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-ETHIOPIA RELATIONS

Ethiopia's perceptions of the EU provide several opportunities for the union to recalibrate its policies toward the country—although doing so will require a major effort by the EU to reestablish itself in a crowded international arena, where traditional Western power and influence have been significantly diminished. In terms of future priorities for the EU-Ethiopia relationship, four areas stand out: diplomacy, migration, climate, and the coronavirus pandemic.

### Diplomacy

The EU's approach to Ethiopia requires redress and an acknowledgment of the union's weaknesses and potential strengths. The EU must no longer attempt to exercise influence where it does not wield any and must instead work with its member states and allies, including when their voices may have more influence than the Brussels-based institutions or present a comparative advantage over them.<sup>61</sup> The EU's diplomacy in Ethiopia is not as potent as it is in the AU, so diplomatic efforts should focus on the institutions that can yield the most results.

While the EU may not be an effective diplomatic mediator in Ethiopia's current civil conflict or the myriad of wider conflict drivers in the country, it does have significant goodwill and a values-based agenda that—for the most part—Ethiopians perceive positively. The EU can therefore invest in long-term dialogue initiatives that address the root causes of the conflict. This approach requires deep investment that should be maintained over a significant period as the EU seeks to repair broken social ties across communities and regions to promote sustainable reconciliation on a societal level. The EU remains Ethiopia's most trusted partner to invest in such efforts and can do so with the support of its member states, notably those with less of a vested interest in Ethiopia, such as the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries.

More broadly, in dealing with Ethiopia and its neighborhood, there is an opportunity for the EU—and the wider international community—to acknowledge that conflict and strongman politics are spreading instability and weakening security throughout the Horn of Africa. At the same time, authoritarianism is now being questioned through mobilization and protest in countries from Djibouti and Somalia to Kenya and Uganda. In response, the EU and other international stakeholders can work to empower civilian actors and create trust in and support for a pluralist political system based on the values that Europe represents.

### Migration

Ethiopian policy experts who work with or alongside the EU perceive a lack of focus from the EEAS on the Horn of Africa and potential spoiler actors in the wider region. While Europe and the United States have focused much time and effort on China, the international community has, by and large, afforded much less attention to the roles of Iran, Israel, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE. Ethiopia has a specific vested interest in Gulf relations, notably when it comes to economic migration and the plight of domestic workers. Bilateral diplomacy between Ethiopia and the Gulf countries is increasing and will have a direct effect on the EU's presence and policies in the country.

The EU continues to suffer from migration fatigue, both in Brussels and in partner countries and regions. The effect of the union fixating on the migration agenda for the last seven years should not be understated. The EU must work to break away from its migration-obsessive approach and reestablish its values-based agenda, which is rooted in support for democratic norms and the protection of human rights and justice rather than a perceived ulterior motive of “stopping the boats,” as one journalist put it.<sup>62</sup>

The EU and its like-minded partners should also move away from a binary reading of Ethiopia as simply Addis Ababa vs. Tigray. The union should seek to establish continuous contacts beyond the two official warring factions and use the knowledge gained to engage in long-term reconciliation efforts on the ground.

## Climate

Despite perceptions of having a weak presence in Ethiopia, the EU is most successful when using its soft-power status and technical expertise and it should continue to do so in sectors that can benefit both Ethiopia and the EU itself. For example, while regional leaders are climate conscious and aware of climate risks, their words remain mere lip service. The EU should significantly increase its investment and support for communities—rather than leaders—to help climate action initiatives, given how destructive climate change has been to the wider Horn region and local communities, specifically urban ones.<sup>63</sup>

Primarily, the EU’s backing should focus on climate action and environmental efforts. The EU’s experience provides the union with much expertise and goodwill, which it can use to encourage Ethiopia to implement policies that view climate holistically and remove the specter of the GERD. By promoting climate action that complements the hydroelectric project but does not center the climate response solely on questions of water security and energy production, the EU can help build awareness and knowledge on climate change and promote local investment and growth.

Even when policies are not prioritized, they can still be shaped as diplomatic and bilateral engagement that can respond to broader state needs while addressing core issues. That is to say, while regional leaders are climate aware, their priority remains their political and physical survival. Although climate change denial is not a threat to policymaking in the Horn region, including Ethiopia, there is a need to reshape interventions so they respond to immediate needs, such as food and water security, or focus on specific renewable energy policies rather than wider climate action that is vague and, arguably, detached from the lived experiences of ordinary citizens.

## The Coronavirus Pandemic

Finally, the EU must drastically shift its global response to the coronavirus pandemic. To do so, the union must contribute to and encourage diplomatic and economic investment for the region—and Africa at large—to produce locally made COVID-19 vaccines. The international community must remove patents on the manufacture of vaccines to allow countries across the continent to form partnerships for the creation of vaccine hubs.

Furthermore, the EU should do more to support Ethiopian efforts to foster economic growth after the pandemic. The biggest challenge in this context, in light of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, will be food security; to this are added ongoing difficulties with regard to employment opportunities for a growing population, energy diversification and resource management, and post-conflict recovery and reconstruction. A regional coronavirus vaccination drive could promote cross-border engagement as well as local, regional, and international investment. The faster countries like Ethiopia can vaccinate their publics, the faster they can begin their economic recoveries.

## CONCLUSION

What happens in Ethiopia both affects the country and goes beyond its borders. Therefore, EU policy toward Ethiopia and the union's bilateral ties with the country need to be generated and developed in a holistic way that takes into account EU policies and interests in the broader region as well as regional perceptions that complement views from Ethiopia.

The Tigray conflict has challenged the EU's traditional relationship with Ethiopia's central government, as allegations emerge of war crimes committed by both sides in the conflict. That is in addition to Eritrea's tacit support for the arming of nonstate actors and the legal and logistical siege of the Tigray region, which has brought millions to the brink of a food and healthcare crisis. The EU must balance its political and diplomatic engagement with interlocutors, mediating partners, and the international community to help end the conflict and seek accountability for any crimes that have been committed.

In addition, Ethiopia's pursuit of trade and development targets is hampered by injections of funds by other countries that offer relatively unconditional aid, which further impedes EU partnerships while Ethiopia's economy continues to struggle. Behind the headlines of record-breaking sustained growth over the last decade, the fundamentals of Ethiopia's economy do not function effectively, creating challenges to regional security goals and proactive economic partnerships between Ethiopia and its international partners, including Europe. Basic services are poor in urban centers and nonexistent in rural areas. Civilians stand for hours in long lines unable to access cash from ATMs. Air pollution is a growing problem in Ethiopia, and the country's energy crisis has long been documented. Such failures in the provision of basic services can make bigger economic commitments or development goals irrelevant to ordinary citizens, who simply desire more functional public services.

On the foreign-policy front, beyond the stagnating diplomacy over transborder water management, the GERD is a project that is already over a decade in the making. Year on year, the dam suffers from internal complications, disputes, and missed deadlines that mean Ethiopia is still years away from benefiting materially from the advantages the GERD may provide. This is despite the dam's first turbine producing power in early 2022, even as the challenges of an inadequate power distribution network lingered and a negotiated settlement with downstream countries remained elusive. All the while, Ethiopia continues to compete with other states in its neighborhood for relevance and power as its status as a regional hegemon is challenged by ethnic, tribal, and political tensions.

Ethiopia's internal strife is taking place amid a difficult regional landscape. Constitutional crisis has engulfed Somalia alongside Ethiopia, fraudulent elections in Uganda and Djibouti have raised significant questions over the stability of the region, and Sudan's military leaders are attempting to wrest power away from the country's democratic transition, risking civil or regional war. This is all happening while Eritrea continues to dictate a destabilizing policy that empowers those arguably least able to serve their communities fairly, pulling them further away from the EU and the broader international community.

Europe's relationship with Ethiopia should not ignore material regional challenges that affect primary security goals. Nor should the EU engage with partners in the Horn of Africa regardless of nefarious activities in the neighborhood—be they from countries like Eritrea or farther afield in the Gulf. Nevertheless, Europe must reestablish a more material bilateral partnership with Ethiopia that can address core challenges in the country, benefit ordinary citizens, and support democratic norms while strengthening Ethiopia's governance structures. If successful, such positive change can, in turn, benefit security and stability in the broader Horn region.

## CHAPTER 3

# INDONESIA: HOPING FOR MORE ACTIVE EU RELATIONS

EVI FITRIANI

### INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is the biggest country in Southeast Asia in terms of population, economy, and area. It declared independence from the Netherlands in 1945 and went through a bloody four-year war against the European power and its alliance to gain sovereignty in December 1949. A bitter colonial experience and the war of independence have left strong sentiments when it comes to Indonesian perceptions of Europeans, European countries, and the European Union (EU).

In the modern era, relations between Indonesia and the EU have been mixed: the two sides are important and useful partners to one another but can also be adversaries with strained ties. Among Indonesians, there is no homogeneous perception of the EU, as opinions depend on personal experience and knowledge.

This chapter investigates how Indonesians perceive the EU. The purpose is to provide outsiders' views of the EU and explore new ways in which the union can engage with Indonesia and Indonesians in the future. The primary research included in-depth interviews and two surveys: one conducted by the author from March to April 2021 among 300 Indonesian university students, and the State of Southeast Asia 2021 survey conducted by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore among 1,032 respondents, 129 of whom were Indonesian.<sup>64</sup> The student survey presents the views of the Indonesian youth on the EU, while the ISEAS survey reveals the opinions of those working in academia, think tanks, and research institutions. The chapter combines perceptions of the EU from different layers of Indonesian society beyond the diplomatic corps and elites—namely, the business community, journalists, academics, and the youth.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

Indonesian perceptions of the EU do not exist in a vacuum. They stem from knowledge and personal experiences as a result of social and cultural interactions with the union as an organization, with EU officials and entities, and with individual EU member states.

The legacy of European colonialism in Indonesia has left both positive and negative feelings among Indonesians. Many Indonesians seek to overcome the bitter history of colonialism and move on. However, postcolonial narratives may emerge when tensions arise between Indonesia and European countries, and there is a mixed picture regarding the role of history in Indonesian perceptions of the EU. Younger interviewees and students surveyed had a more positive image of the union: no student respondent referred to the colonial era when talking about the EU. The youth also seem to have left behind the historical burden of the EU-Indonesia relationship, as only one out of 300 students associated the union with its colonial past.

In the last two decades, there have been two pressing issues in EU-Indonesia relations. The first was in the early 2000s, when the EU joined other Western powers in condemning and sanctioning the Indonesian military for its oppression of Timor-Leste fighters. Indonesians seem to perceive the EU's condemnation as a double standard, because the Europeans have said little about Israel's occupation of and aggression toward Palestine, and European countries are active arms suppliers for several countries with authoritarian regimes.

The second contentious issue was a 2017 European Parliament resolution on palm oil and deforestation, which led to restrictions on imports of Indonesian palm oil products into the EU and a negative campaign against these goods. Indonesians perceived this EU policy as unfair trade competition, because European olive oil and sunflower-seed oil could not compete with Indonesian palm oil. The import restrictions also put huge pressure on Indonesian exports, as the EU is the second-biggest market for Indonesia, which is the world's largest palm oil producer.<sup>65</sup>

### The EU as a Global Actor

Traditionally, Indonesia had contradictory perceptions of Europe. On the one hand, Europe was seen to represent a group of rich and powerful countries that had obtained their wealth through colonization and exploitation in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and tended to lecture the world about their values and norms while showing hypocrisy. On the other hand, Europe was associated with modernity, advanced technology, development, and high-quality products.<sup>66</sup> This mixed picture of Europe, Europeans, and European countries seems to have spilled over to Indonesians' images of the EU as an organization.

One of the reasons for this ambiguous set of perceptions is a lack of engagement with and exposure to the EU among the Indonesian general public. Indonesians tend to experience the EU through its individual member states in the form of travel, business, or personal connections. EU affairs in Indonesia

are generally the preserve of government officials, diplomats, and a small number of businesspeople and civil society activists. For academics, EU topics are rarely visible, except among researchers and students of international relations, international law, political science, or economics.

Interviews revealed that ordinary Indonesians outside the diplomatic corps are not familiar with the EU, let alone its achievements and problems. Most Indonesians are more aware of individual EU member states, such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands, and not usually for their politics. Indeed, France is more famous to Indonesians as a center of fashion than as one of the five states that have a veto in the United Nations Security Council. Likewise, Germany is known for its advanced technology and strong economy. Nevertheless, all of these are positive sentiments.

For a small number of Indonesian officials and academics, interest in the EU is linked to Indonesia's engagement and role in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This regional institution has been important for Indonesia's foreign policy for the last five decades. As one of the association's five founding countries, Indonesia continues to lead ASEAN's institutional journey, in which the EU has been an inspiration. Yet, despite their similar status as the most recognizable organization in their respective regions, ASEAN and the EU have different cooperative cultures and have not always enjoyed good relations with one another.<sup>67</sup>

In recent years, the most vivid contemporary images of the EU among Indonesians have been the euro and Brexit. The euro is the first major regional currency introduced by a supranational organization, reflecting EU member countries' enormous confidence in their regional integration. By contrast, Brexit, which represented the first case of a national withdrawal from what was perceived as progressive regional integration, revealed difficulties in the European project. Some Indonesians are also familiar with the EU's latest upheavals, such as the 2008 financial crisis, the 2015 migration crisis, and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, but, arguably, these events do not form part of Indonesians' general knowledge because of their limited engagement with the EU.

In the Indonesian media, news about the EU is very rare. Previous studies found that Indonesian news editors did not perceive the EU as an important subject to be covered.<sup>68</sup> Interviews confirmed a continuing opinion among Indonesian journalists that news from and about the EU has little value. One group of journalists at a mainstream media outlet revealed that they chose not to cover EU news because of limited space. In other words, they do not see news on the EU as interesting or appealing to their audiences.

The EU also suffers from low visibility in Indonesian higher-education institutions. Only one Indonesian university offers a master's program in European studies, and its enrollment numbers are lower than for other regional studies programs. In addition, EU subjects are taught and researched only sporadically in international relations or political science departments.

Similarly, young Indonesians seem to have limited views of the EU. In general, Indonesian students have some knowledge of the union, but not a deep familiarity with it. In the student survey, over half of

respondents regarded the EU as an economic and trade power; 20 percent saw it as a social and cultural actor; and just under 18 percent identified the bloc as a science and technology power. Only just over 10 percent saw the EU as a military power.

Nevertheless, young Indonesians have a positive image of the EU as a credible international actor. Many students surveyed held positive perceptions of the EU's power in all its aspects: economy and trade, society and culture, science and technology, the military, and norms. However, there was a degree of nuance within this opinion. Students regarded the EU highly as a promoter and exemplar of sustainable development. Fewer respondents had positive perceptions of the union as a promoter of human rights or as a good example of a tolerant pluralist society. Two out of three students believed the EU was a good example of democratic practices.

Among Indonesians more generally, the EU is not seen as a solid international actor. Few Indonesians are aware of the bloc's role in international relations. The general public tends to mix up the EU and its member countries. What is more, the union's image among Indonesians is constrained by infrequent media coverage of the EU, limited relations between Indonesians and Europeans, and the geographic distance between the EU and Indonesia—all of which lead to few direct interactions.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that only a limited number of people in Indonesia—the elites—are familiar with the EU and acknowledge its presence. Indeed, in most interviews, the EU was interchangeable with Europe or individual EU member states. For Indonesians who are familiar with the EU, the organization is rarely observed as one entity; this phenomenon was obvious for several academics interviewed.

Interlocutors from the business community perceived the EU as a group of fragmented entities, as they rarely did business with the union. Only when they applied for a visa to visit a European country and obtained a Schengen visa, which allows travel within twenty-six European states, did these businesspeople realize that the EU existed and could be useful for their business and travel. One business representative observed that the EU chamber of commerce was much less well known and less active than the chambers of commerce of EU member states, especially those that were active in Indonesia.

## Trade

For Indonesians familiar with the EU, the clearest image of the union that emerged from the interviews and surveys is its role in trade and investment. This view is in line with Indonesians' approbation of the euro and European economic advances. The perception of the euro as a strong currency and an alternative to the U.S. dollar contributes to Indonesians' positive opinions of the EU as an economic actor.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate Indonesian concerns about the EU's frequent tendency to apply nontariff barriers on imported commodities. These concerns were expressed strongly not only by businesspeople but also by government officials and academics. The restrictions on imports of Indonesian palm oil were described both as an example of a normative value—the EU upholding strong environmental standards—and as a case of business competition, as European products cannot compete with those

made from Indonesian palm oil. So, for some interlocutors, the EU's championing of environmental protection and free trade was merely a business strategy to survive amid global competition, especially from emerging economies.

Beyond trade, interviewees less familiar with the EU acknowledged the union as an important power in science and technology. Few interlocutors identified the EU as a security actor, and for those who did, this perception was linked to the bloc's role as a supplier of military equipment rather than as a strategic actor. In the 2021 ISEAS survey, only 1.6 percent of respondents (down from 2 percent in 2020) perceived the EU as having political and strategic influence in Southeast Asia.<sup>69</sup> The Indonesians surveyed and interviewed did not mention the EU's global role in the digital economy.

### Norms and Values

The surveys and interviews revealed a mixed picture of Indonesians' opinions of the EU as a normative power. The youth, who observe the EU from a distance because of their lack of direct engagement with the bloc, mainly perceived the EU not only as a promoter of democracy, human rights, and environmental protection but also as a good example of democratic practices, sustainable development, commitment to human rights, and a tolerant pluralist society. For the youth, the EU's financial crisis from 2008 onward did not damage the union's reputation as a norm setter and defender.

Meanwhile, for those interviewees who had close experience of the EU and its people, the idea of the union as a normative power did not always match the reality, especially with the rise in many EU member states of right-wing, anti-immigrant regimes and the rejection of or discrimination against refugees from conflict-hit countries in the Middle East and North Africa. For these people with greater exposure to the EU, the union's crisis decade did influence their perceptions of it; specifically, they found inconsistencies in the practices of normative values by the EU and its member states. For example, when most of the EU decided to accept refugees from war-torn states in the Middle East in 2015, Hungary adopted a different policy by erecting defenses at its border to push back the refugees.

These interviewees were also more familiar with the challenges and complexities arising from the internal application of the EU's normative power—namely, the fact that regional norms do not always align with member states' interests, which means that different states have different preferences when it comes to collective norm setting.

The EU's role in environmental protection was seen positively, especially by Indonesian civil society activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In the ISEAS survey, 53.2 percent of Indonesian academics perceived the EU's stances on the environment, human rights, and climate change as an asset for global peace and security.<sup>70</sup> Indonesian academics also acknowledged the EU's role as a champion of international law, although the union's severe criticism of human rights practices in Indonesia was sometimes described as a double standard, because there is no significant criticism from the EU of Israeli soldiers' treatment of Palestinian civilians.

Across Southeast Asia, the share of ISEAS survey respondents who were confident or very confident that the EU would “do the right thing” increased from 38.7 percent in 2020 to 51 percent in 2021.<sup>71</sup> Among Indonesians, these percentages were higher: 52.7 percent in 2020 and 59.7 percent in 2021. This is because Indonesians hold positive perceptions of the EU’s positions on the environment, human rights, and climate change; its responsible attitude toward international law; its vast economic resources; and its political will to provide global leadership.<sup>72</sup>

Yet, the ISEAS survey also revealed that for those who have little confidence in the EU, the main reasons for their distrust were the union’s distracting internal affairs, its inability and unwillingness to assume a global leadership role, and the belief that the bloc could use its positions on the environment, human rights, and climate change to threaten Indonesian interests and sovereignty.<sup>73</sup>

Indonesian perceptions in this area are in line with recent EU engagement in Southeast Asia that has focused more on economic interests and the union’s role as a normative actor. The findings also indicate the lack of an EU identity as a strategic and security power in the eyes of Indonesians. In international relations, many Indonesians regard the EU as a major power and a noble defender of multilateralism, a rules-based international order, and international law. Indonesians also admire the EU for its economic strength, technological advances, and modern culture.

### The EU and Other International Actors

Compared with other major powers, the EU is seen more positively in the eyes of Indonesians, who prefer the EU as an international partner over the United States, China, or Russia. Among other leading countries, only Japan is preferable to the EU. In the student survey, 40 percent of respondents saw China as the most threatening country, followed by just under 37 percent who said the same of the United States. Only just over 2 percent of students saw the EU as a threat to Indonesia. Nevertheless, a small number of Indonesians do perceive the EU as a threat to the Indonesian economy because of the union’s criticism of Indonesia’s use of palm oil.

For the youth, the EU is regarded as a soft power that does not pose a military threat to Indonesia. The Indonesian youth much prefer the EU to any other major destination for tourism, study, or work. More young Indonesians want to work for companies from EU member states than for firms from other major economies because of the good reputations of European companies and the benefits they offer their employees. However, EU products are seen as less desirable than those from Japan, the United States, or South Korea.

Meanwhile, China’s impressive growth and tense relations with the United States dominate geopolitical and geoeconomic discussions in Indonesia. Indonesians have long questioned and debated the positions of Indonesia and ASEAN within the competitive relations of the major powers. It is generally accepted that Indonesia maintains an independent and active foreign policy because all major powers are in fact exploitative power seekers. Indonesia has had bitter experiences with the United States, China, and

almost all other major powers. The EU did not feature in these discussions until recent years, when the arrival of French and German warships in the South China Sea was seen as a sign of European support for Southeast Asian countries against China's assertiveness in the region.

Indonesians do not perceive the EU as a political actor in Southeast Asia, but they trust the union more than other major powers. For Indonesians, the EU's political and strategic influence ranks fourth, after that of China, the United States, and Japan.<sup>74</sup> However, while the United States is seen as unreliable and absent as a strategic partner for Southeast Asian countries, the EU enjoys the highest level of confidence from Indonesians, surpassing China by far.<sup>75</sup>

As regards assistance for ASEAN countries during the coronavirus pandemic, the EU has been perceived more positively in Indonesia than in the other nine ASEAN members. In the 2021 ISEAS survey, one in five Indonesian respondents believed that the EU had provided the most help—after China—to Southeast Asia to overcome the pandemic.<sup>76</sup>

The EU has been able to earn credibility from its track record in global forums. Amid supply chain disruptions and business turmoil caused by the pandemic, respondents from Southeast Asian countries chose the United States and the EU as the top leaders on multilateral trade. For Indonesians, the EU is again the preferred actor—over China, ASEAN, and the United States—to provide leadership in championing the global free-trade agenda.<sup>77</sup> In addition, Indonesians regard the EU as the most capable international actor to fill the vacuum in global leadership on the rule of law. Like other Southeast Asian nations, Indonesia has strong confidence in the EU to maintain a rules-based order and uphold international law.

## FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-INDONESIA RELATIONS

Amid geostrategic competition between the United States and China in Southeast Asia, Indonesia perceives the EU as an alternative partner that shares the country's interest in maintaining a fair and inclusive global order based on the rule of law and multilateralism. Going forward, the EU should capitalize on this perception and consider Indonesia more importantly as a future partner.

Given the EU's weak strategic identity and presence in Southeast Asia in general and in Indonesia in particular, the union is not expected to become directly involved in the U.S.-China competition. Instead, the EU should focus on collaboration to combat nontraditional security threats, as this can contribute to the EU's soft power in Indonesia and the region. Specifically, the EU can help promote peaceful conflict resolution, antiterrorism, sustainable development, law enforcement, and multiculturalism.

More broadly, the EU can focus on three priorities to strengthen its partnership with Indonesia: harnessing the union's soft power, going beyond a purely trade-based relationship, and improving the EU's visibility among Indonesians.

## Harnessing the EU's Soft Power

The EU needs to respond positively to the welcoming response it receives from Indonesia by applying more adaptive policies toward the country. While economic interests are understandable and perhaps natural, the EU needs to go beyond these to become a more acceptable international actor. In addition, the EU can transform its normative and economic power into soft power.

Interviewees and survey respondents alike indicated the need for the EU to balance its interests and presence in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. With China's continued rise as the most influential economic actor in the region, the EU needs to consider strengthening its normative and soft power and applying it more consistently. For example, the EU could facilitate more cooperation on education and more actively support technology transfers to Indonesia to combat climate change. Indonesians are keen to see that the EU can establish good relations beyond its economic interests.

Given that young Indonesians generally have more positive impressions of the EU, it is important to consider their views. The EU needs to abandon its traditional approach of lecturing Indonesia and other ASEAN countries about normative values. A more open-minded and inclusive approach is needed to deal with democracy, human rights, and sustainable development in Indonesia and the region. Therefore, it will be important for the EU to support Indonesian efforts to strengthen the country's democracy, human rights practices, and sustainable development through dialogue and collaborative efforts rather than through condemnation and sanctions. It is vital for the EU not to use its normative power to pursue economic benefit, as this will encourage Indonesia and other Asian countries to move toward alternative powers. Indonesians appreciate genuine collaboration based on win-win solutions and mutual respect.

## Going Beyond Trade

Interviewees suggested that to strengthen its soft power, the EU needs a more adaptive approach toward Indonesia and other Asian countries. Indonesian businesses want greater access to the EU market and European technology, while academics expect more EU support for collaboration with European counterparts and technology transfers, especially on environmental protection, climate change mitigation, energy, food, and health.

In short, the EU should not treat Indonesia merely as an economic opportunity and market. Rather, the Europeans should be more genuine in their approach by going beyond economic interests and building more trust in their relations with Indonesia. The EU needs to expand its role in development to promote common agendas on climate change and sustainable development, human security and migration, democracy, energy security, and multiculturalism. Progress in all of these fields can strengthen the EU's soft power in Indonesia and provide a more solid and sustainable basis for a future relationship.

## Improving the EU's Visibility

Finally, most student respondents suggested that the EU should improve its relations with Indonesia in the areas of trade, development, education, technology, and social and cultural matters. They also

recommended that the EU should be more active in public diplomacy and in promoting itself to the public. Despite having a more positive perception of the EU, young Indonesians urged the EU to be not only more cooperative, less contradictory, and less repressive but also more tolerant and less discriminatory toward people from outside Europe, including from Indonesia.

To improve the EU's visibility in Indonesia, the diplomatic representatives of EU member states in Indonesia must reach out more to the Indonesian public, the youth, and universities to strengthen social and cultural linkages. To do this, the EU can work with the Indonesian government to support more programs that can facilitate interactions between young people from Indonesia and EU countries. One strategy is to support collaboration between Indonesian universities and their counterparts in EU member states. This approach can nurture awareness of the EU as a regional organization and educate young Indonesians about the strengths and problems of European integration, the EU's normative power, and the EU's international role.

## CONCLUSION

The EU has low visibility in Indonesian daily life, media, and universities because of its geographic distance and the low level of interaction with and exposure to the EU among the Indonesian general public. Indonesian perceptions of Europe and Europeans almost always link back to colonial experiences, although the younger generation seems to be less influenced by historical problems and perceives Europe and the EU more positively.

For the small number of Indonesians who are familiar with the EU, the predominant image of the EU is that of an economic power and trading bloc, followed by a positive view of the EU as a normative power. The EU's strategic identity and security role appear to be absent in the eyes of Indonesians. Nevertheless, at the global level, Indonesians prefer the EU to the United States and China, with only Japan viewed more favorably. The EU is not seen as a threat among most Indonesians.

In the future, Indonesians would like the EU to be more active in its relations with Indonesia. The union should go beyond economic interests while Indonesia should overcome its tendency to associate the EU with colonialism. Relations between Indonesia and the EU can be improved if the two sides can respect each other's differences in terms of norms and values and engage more in constructive dialogue. It is also important for the EU to be able to present itself as a unitary actor in Indonesia rather than as a set of individual member states. The EU's priorities for the future should include efforts to deepen social, cultural, and educational relationships with Indonesia and reach out more actively to the younger generation.

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## CHAPTER 4

# NIGER: MIXED PERCEPTIONS AMID VARYING AWARENESS OF THE EU

MAMANE BELLO GARBA HIMA

### INTRODUCTION

Niger finds itself in the crosshairs of regional violent conflict and global migration challenges. Meanwhile, the country struggles with its own political, social, economic, and ecological fragilities, which are rooted in a history of colonial exploitation and exacerbated by climate change. Amid inconsistent partnerships, the rise of populism, and changing global governance driven by national self-interest, Niger faces immense hurdles when it comes to fighting infectious diseases, improving the country's security, responding to its migration crisis, and combating the adverse effects of climate change.

The European Union's (EU's) policies and approaches have succeeded in mitigating the Sahel's security, development, and migration crises in general, but problems continue to expand into new areas. All the while, popular frustration with the Nigerien government and its allies is growing. Understanding how the EU is perceived in Niger could provide guidance to correct the union's policies and public diplomacy in the region and contribute to framing expectations of the EU as a global power.

This chapter offers a contextual perspective on Europe and the EU's internal and external policies by highlighting how elites and public opinion in Niger read the EU's approaches and their implications for disease prevention, security, and development cooperation. The chapter draws on fieldwork carried out in January and May 2021 consisting of interviews and focus group discussions with government representatives and agencies, political parties, social scientists, and the general public. The study involved a total of 278 participants. To facilitate the discussions, each group was composed of people from the same background and social situation.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

External perceptions of the EU depend on many parameters, such as colonial history, economic and political capacity, media coverage, demographics, and geography.<sup>78</sup> In Niger, only a few interviewees from the general public differentiated between the roles of the EU and France. Even among the elites and social scientists, the perception was that although the EU is different from France, the union always supports the French position. In general, participants acknowledged the EU as an actor but also remarked that the union does not seem concerned about the lack of transparency in the management of Niger's national resources, such as uranium and oil, where French industries are heavily represented. Indeed, interviewees generally perceived France as an exploiting entity in the extraction of resources, weakening Niger's efforts to benefit from such resources and reduce poverty.

### Economy and Trade

Political elites, social scientists, and the general public in Niger consider the EU to be a relevant actor for development aid but a difficult trading partner because of a lack of opportunities. This perception is unsurprising because EU aid is the only issue linking the union and Niger that appears in the Nigerien national media. Trading difficulties are linked to a lack of local industries capable of transforming natural resources. When interviewed, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) argued that all aid provided by the EU and its member states is for the benefit of a self-serving interest rather than for its own sake. Interviewees reported that aid to Niger is accompanied by strict conditions—such as steps to implement family planning, keep migrants at bay, or locate kidnaped Europeans—and many participants perceive aid as a weapon of neocolonialism.

The EU has gained relevance in African debates because of recent changes in the union's trade policy that have intensified the EU's relationships with African states. In 2018, the EU announced its formal support for the African Continental Free Trade Area and launched the Africa-Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs. Two years later, the EU issued a communication on a comprehensive strategy with Africa, which promised technical and financial support as top priorities.

Despite these steps, CSOs argued that trade between EU member states and Niger is based on a continuity of colonial history, with commercial ties focused on the exchange of traditional goods: uranium from Niger and arms from Europe. Interviewees reported that reliance on traditional trade in raw materials is due to a lack of diversification and industrial opportunities in Niger. The general public classed EU countries as the best partners to trade with for secondhand clothes and cars.

### Security

Niger faces numerous terrorist threats and worrying cross-border crime—trafficking of arms, ammunition, explosives, and people—with enormous political, religious, and economic impacts. The government has struggled for years against criminal and militant groups, including from neighboring states. Interviewees reported insufficient security for people and their goods not only because of Niger's porous borders but

also because of a lack of human, material, and technological resources to effectively control criminal movements. Going forward, security conditions in the country will remain extremely poor because of a combination of bad governance, lagging socioeconomic development, and environmental challenges.

Political elites, social scientists, and even the public consistently referred to the EU as a security power. In particular, the elites perceived the union as a steady and trusted partner. However, opinions differed as to how the EU can help address Niger's security concerns. While most members of the public believed that the EU is not willing to help Niger deal with its security challenges, the elites supported the view that without EU aid—specifically, the EU's training of Nigerien security forces and development activities—the country would collapse. Some argued that EU member states are not listening to Niger's national leaders and experts, making it difficult to achieve peace.

However, some Nigerien political elites reported that they are caught between a rock and a hard place. In their view, they can either cooperate with the EU and appear as traitors in the court of public opinion or listen to the population by expelling EU troops, with the risk that some member states—notably France—will blackmail them or plot a coup against the regime. This dilemma results in a problem of legitimacy and suggests the need for a better balance of interventions at the national and communal levels: communities are more likely to trust local leaders than national representatives, who are seen as corrupt puppets.

As for other global actors, Niger's elites perceive the United States as a powerful country but one that is very difficult to mobilize and convince of the gravity of Nigerien security issues. The elites see the United States as more practical than the EU in providing solutions but find it hard to attract Washington's attention. Meanwhile, the elites regard China as providing only small-scale equipment, such as military ambulances, but having a greater economic presence. Thus, Nigeriens see the EU as far more helpful than China because the EU member states invest in training the Nigerien national army, while China does not.

The elites see Russia as a strong country willing to help Niger with no reservations, but Russia is not fully involved in Nigerien security operations. Turkey is viewed as relatively strong because it is conducting military operations in Syria and Libya. For the elites, Turkey can also be a good economic partner and is investing in Niger. While the EU is much more powerful, Turkey can be more helpful because it has fewer administrative requirements when it comes to providing assistance. As for potential support from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the G5 Sahel, of which Niger is a member, the country's elites believe a military agenda is unrealistic because it would be financially unfeasible.

Independent civil society's perception of the EU is categorical. In the words of one interviewee, "The EU and its member states are part of Niger's security problems."<sup>79</sup> This respondent argued that EU members had brought in high-tech equipment such as drones to combat Niger's insecurity but that the security situation had kept worsening. In short, Niger's civil society perceives the EU as the reason for the country's mess and the creator of terrorism in the Sahel. Civil society representatives argued that terrorism in the region can be traced back to the 2011 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervention in Libya,

in which France played a leading role. According to these interviewees, the Sahel has long been facing a climate crisis, intercommunal violence, conflict between farmers and herders, and group rebellion—but never terrorism in its current form before 2011. Viewing the situation through the prism of France, CSOs in Niger do not appreciate the EU having a security agenda in the region.

For civil society, while the EU is more visible in the region, the United States could be more effective. In the words of one interviewee, “With its strong army, the United States could deal with the Sahel’s security problem in a month. But Washington does not have the will to do so because Niger cannot afford the Americans’ price.”<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, CSOs perceive China as unable to help on security matters because for now, the country’s involvement is purely commercial.

As for Russia, Nigerien civil society sees the country as tomorrow’s military hope in the world. Russia is more powerful than the EU and, for Niger’s CSOs, could be more effective. By contrast, Turkey under its current president is gaining credibility in Nigerien public opinion, particularly on security. If it has the will, Turkey can become more influential than individual EU member states. Finally, civil society representatives dismissed ECOWAS and the G5 Sahel as unions of presidents unable to help on security matters.

## Migration

Niger’s migration crisis is multidimensional and comprises a massive influx of Malian and Nigerian refugees fleeing insecurity in their respective countries; returns and repatriations of Nigeriens and others from Algeria, the Central African Republic, Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, and Saudi Arabia; and ongoing internal (forcibly displaced people) and circular migration.

Interviews with Niger’s political elites showed that the EU is considered the only serious organization capable of providing what is needed for the country to manage its migration crisis—namely, technical support and funding for monitoring. At the regional level, interlocutors argued that ECOWAS policies on migration function well despite some shortcomings, such as the regular collection of bribes from people crossing ECOWAS borders. Thus, in different ways, Nigeriens see both the EU and ECOWAS as useful partners for Niger to respond to migration concerns. However, respondents noted that EU financing to help Niger control migration flows means that the country is acting against ECOWAS policies of regional free movement.

Meanwhile, the broader public, civil society representatives, and social scientists stated that the EU is investing a lot of money in dealing with Niger’s migration crisis because the EU is directly affected by it. As for other actors, such as the United States, China, Russia, and Turkey, elites and members of the public pointed out that to the best of their knowledge, these countries have no specific programs with Niger to address migration issues. As a result, they believe that these states are not helping Niger at all on this subject.

## Climate Change

On the topic of climate change, interviews with social scientists and political elites echoed the findings of many previous researchers.<sup>81</sup> For example, interlocutors argued that the EU is an international leader and can be trusted on climate change initiatives. The EU's role in climate negotiations is considered the most proactive and ambitious of all global actors. However, interviewees mostly associated the EU's leadership role in this policy field with the abdication of U.S. leadership on the 2015 Paris Agreement and, before that, the 1997 Kyoto Protocol.

Members of the public argued that neither the United States, China, nor Russia comes close to the EU on helping Niger to combat climate change. That is because EU countries have funded many scholarships and research exchanges on climate change and related issues, helping to increase Niger's capacity for mitigation and adaptation.

## The Coronavirus Pandemic

Like many African countries, Niger experiences regular outbreaks of endemic infectious diseases, particularly malaria, cholera, meningitis, tuberculosis, hepatitis B, and measles. The responses to these epidemics have generally entailed collaboration among the Ministry of Public Health, the World Health Organization, and other international partners, such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Médecins Sans Frontières, the United Nations Population Fund, and the Red Cross. These partners provide technical and financial support for field investigations and support existing facilities through temporary treatment.

With the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020, the Nigerien government implemented restrictive measures, including curfews, school closures, and bans on public gatherings and travel between urban areas. Political and social scientists acknowledged that many organizations, including the EU, had provided equipment to control the pandemic in Niger—although political representatives expressed the view that they do not consider COVID-19 to be as serious as other diseases. The EU helped Niger with crisis management and modified many of its development projects to redirect funding to support Niger's national strategy to fight the coronavirus.

CSO representatives, meanwhile, argued that the Nigerien government used the coronavirus outbreak to justify political repression, particularly against CSOs, and suspend the rights to freedom of expression and protest. Neither the EU nor any international human rights organization condemned the oppression. CSOs fear that the precedent created by the response to the coronavirus in terms of restrictions on political freedoms could frame future state-led responses to epidemics, especially of new or unfamiliar diseases.

## Norms and Values

To lead as an international actor, one has to be recognized by others as powerful in economic, military, political, and ideational terms as well as credible, legitimate, and able to propose norms that others follow.<sup>82</sup> Interviewees from all categories argued that the EU's values were not representative of their own. Most interlocutors felt that the EU did not have a positive reputation because it dictates its values over local people's ways of doing things on issues from democracy to family planning to human rights. For example, political elites argued that they had received clear and direct instructions from EU member states—specifically France—on how to lead their country, protect human rights, accept LGBTQ people, and manage the opposition and CSO leaders. Meanwhile, interviewees mentioned Russia, Turkey, China, and the United States—in that order—as countries with positive reputations because they push their values less visibly.

## EU Coherence

The promotion of the rule of law and good governance presupposes the existence of an efficient administration with the institutional capacity to define strategic orientations and develop and implement appropriate policies. Indeed, good governance involves far more than state power or political will: it requires an integrated, long-term strategy built on cooperation between the government and citizens.<sup>83</sup> Nigeriens reported that the EU has this institutional capacity, which is made up of a combination of human, financial, and logistical resources.

However, interlocutors perceived the EU's internal and external policies as incoherent. Some elites and civil society representatives reported that even the EU's internal dynamics are controlled by the United States. For instance, they argued that although Brexit did not originate in the United States, it was encouraged by former U.S. president Donald Trump. In addition, there was a sense among interviewees that the EU's functioning is based on Germany's economic power and France's "bad" lobbying power. Other EU countries are considered observers and are known to Nigeriens only for their footballers or tennis champions. Participants also noted an internal incoherence during the Greek government debt crisis that started in 2009, when EU leaders imposed tough measures that had a severe impact on the Greek people, even though they were not responsible for the causes of the crisis.

Niger's elites claimed that the EU's credibility and legitimacy were negatively affected because the union operates with double standards. For instance, when China, Russia, or Turkey implements security or antiterrorism policies that are inconsistent with the EU's values, the union struggles to reach agreement to condemn them or take measures against them; but when it comes to imposing sanctions on Niger or other Sahelian countries by withholding aid or cooperation, consensus is automatic.

Finally, among members of the public, given the low level of knowledge about the EU or Europe, questions were mostly answered with reference to France. Nigeriens' main argument on EU internal policies was that they are coherent because, in the words of one interviewee, "white people from Europe always defend each other, even when they are on the wrong path."<sup>84</sup>

## FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-NIGER RELATIONS

Looking ahead, many interviewees argued that for the EU to be a genuine partner for Niger, it has to stop acting through France, particularly on key issues. More broadly, Nigeriens pointed to migration, security, climate change, healthcare, and trade as topics where the EU could focus its cooperation more closely on Niger's current and future needs.

### Migration

Niger is the largest and most populous country in the Sahel and plays an essential role for stability throughout the region. A collapse of social and political order in Niger could have a major destabilizing effect on the region. The Nigerien government, aware of Niger's role as a transit country, was the first in the Sahel to adopt legislation that strengthens the prosecution of human traffickers and describes migrants as victims of human rights violations.

However, the implementation of this legislation is hampered by weak capacity at both the national and the local level as well as by socioeconomic challenges. The EU and other regional actors should address the challenges of irregular migration through Niger with a comprehensive approach that includes political dialogue with local authorities and communities, long-term development aid, humanitarian assistance, and regional stabilization activities. Coordination on migration is also important within the norms of the African Union and ECOWAS to strengthen continental normative frameworks.

### Security

All interviewees argued that there is a need to fix security cooperation with the EU and its member states. They agreed that given Niger's major structural challenges, the attention of partners, especially the EU, on security issues should not distract from major obstacles to development. These include Niger's poor infrastructure, fragile governmental institutions, inadequate healthcare, low and declining area of arable land, high levels of malnutrition, extremely low education levels, and high gender inequalities. In addition, the country's future is threatened by the effects of climate change.

Some interviewees expressed the view that for the EU to be a successful and accepted security power, the union must revoke France's status as the EU's de facto representative in Niger. Currently, France leads on all aspects of security in Niger and the Sahel, with all security meetings between EU and African leaders held in Paris or the southern French city of Pau, not in Germany or Italy.

The EU should also reinvent its approach to investment in Niger by becoming less tolerant of corruption in the country. Many political elites highlighted that the EU and its member states should prioritize Niger's governance crisis by encouraging the Nigerien government to engage in dialogue not only with rural dwellers but also, potentially, with militants to provide basic social services and adopt development reforms. This is the only way in which military operations can be relevant and effective.

## Climate Change

The Sahel is one of the most fragile ecosystems in the world. Only 12 percent of Niger's land area receives enough rainfall to support agriculture, and the country's government predicts that little or none of this area will be left by 2100. Niger's soil is poor in nutrients, badly managed, and overgrazed, and it loses up to 100 tons of arable land per hectare per year to erosion, according to the Nigerien Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. The amount of firewood used for cooking—estimated at 2 million tons in 2019—is twice the natural rate of replacement.<sup>85</sup> Subsistence farmers have weak links to domestic markets and even less access to imports of improved seeds and climate-friendly fertilizers. It is therefore very important for Niger to develop its market infrastructure to meet agropastoral needs.

The Nigerien public prioritizes dealing with environmental issues over security problems. The argument is that when terrorist activities first emerged, addressing climate issues was an ideological question, but now it is important for economic reasons. Some interlocutors reported that with crops and livestock becoming more scarce because of a variable climate, some actors in the agricultural sector use violent appropriation as a means of survival.

Political elites and social scientists suggested that environmental crises such as floods and droughts are weakening Nigerien institutions' capacity to respond to basic needs and that people felt abandoned. The general perception is that climate crises fuel insecurity by damaging people's livelihoods. Addressing this aspect of climate change should therefore be the priority for Niger and international partners, including the EU.

## Healthcare

The coronavirus pandemic has created fear and generated disorganized responses across the world. In Niger, people mistrust governmental and external responses to the outbreak and are suspicious of targeted efforts to address this pandemic when so many other epidemics of diseases deadlier than COVID-19 have received no such attention.

Interviewees suggested that crisis responses from the EU should encompass support for other epidemics, such as malaria, cholera, meningitis, tuberculosis, hepatitis B, and measles, as well as social and economic needs. Any interventions by foreign governments or the EU should be based on respectful dialogue that engages traditional and religious leaders and on processes of mutual learning that do not dismiss local concerns and beliefs. The Nigerien population's current experience with the state and historic experiences of foreign powers—bad governance and colonialism, respectively—may spur resistance to emergency responses if these are seen to be led by the government or external actors.

## Economy and Trade

In view of the limited trade between EU countries and Niger, elites articulated the wish to build up an exchange of environmentally friendly agricultural seeds and materials, given that the country's economy

depends mainly on agriculture. Elites also expressed the view that cooperation should focus on technology transfers and industrial investments to create jobs and keep the youth from being tempted by migration or violence.

As for the wider public, the main priority is a more general boost in trade. Some interviewees argued that Niger's biggest problem is poverty due to a lack of opportunities, exacerbated by bad governance and bad implementation of EU foreign policies. Most interlocutors believed that in response, there should be more trade and investment from the EU and less French-led security cooperation with the bloc.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing a clear conclusion about Niger's perceptions of the EU and its policies is difficult because a large number of Nigeriens are unfamiliar with the union and its institutions. Indeed, as far as the wider public and even some political elites are concerned, the EU equates to France. Although each person's level of understanding of the EU and the way it operates depends on their education, it is clear that the union's policies are poorly understood in general and are confused with perceptions of France.

Nevertheless, Nigeriens revealed diverse opinions of the EU's global leadership; policies on migration, security, climate change, and development aid; values; policy coherence; and responses to the coronavirus pandemic. The most striking views from the general public were the EU's double standards and the bloc's unwillingness to solve issues unless it bears the direct costs of not doing so. For those who made a clear distinction between the EU and its member states, perceptions also diverged, particularly on security and values. For this group, the EU is considered a genuine partner on climate change and the pandemic response but internally and externally incoherent. Members of this group see the EU as having great potential for economic leadership but very patronizing.

In terms of future cooperation, Nigeriens identify four priority areas. The first is development aid, which should be delivered more effectively to reduce inequalities among citizens. The second is climate change expertise, which is needed not only for environmental but also for security reasons. Third, Niger seeks help to fight ongoing epidemics such as malaria, meningitis, measles, and cholera, which are seen as more serious than COVID-19. Finally, on security, Nigeriens hope to see a greater role for the EU as an entity in itself and not as represented by France or other individual member states.

Future studies on perceptions of the EU should be conducted using large-scale surveys in Niger or the Sahel. Such an approach could provide additional explanations of the variations in perceptions revealed by smaller-scale surveys.

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## CHAPTER 5

# THE PHILIPPINES: POSITIVE EU TIES DESPITE DIVISIVE RHETORIC

FLORISA C. ALMODIEL-LUTEIJN AND ANTONIO G. M. LA VIÑA

### INTRODUCTION

Since the Philippines and the European Union (EU) established formal ties in 1964, the bloc has become a consistent partner of the country, alongside its traditional partner, the United States, and its major Asian neighbors, Japan and China. The EU relationship was bolstered by the partnership and cooperation agreement signed in 2012 and ratified six years later. The accord created new momentum for Philippine-EU relations by enhancing cooperation on politico-security matters, trade, migration, and development, among other areas.

Statistics tell one story of Philippine-EU relations. Through trade liberalization under the EU's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), which the Philippines joined in December 2014, the country generated an estimated 200,000 new jobs and increased exports to the EU by 27 percent in 2015.<sup>86</sup> Exports have grown in particular in the food and agricultural sectors, and local communities in remote areas have been among the major beneficiaries of this trend. In 2020 alone, the Philippines received 23.4 billion pesos (\$457 million) from British, Dutch, and French firms, promoting the country's manufacturing and service sectors and helping them move up global value chains.<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, the EU continues to support the peace process in the Mindanao island group in the southern Philippines. The EU is one of the biggest development partners in Mindanao and in 2019 launched the Mindanao Peace and Development Programme (MinPAD) to promote inclusive growth, peace building, and community-based infrastructure in the region in line with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals. MinPAD had an initial budget of €184.6 million (\$202 million);<sup>88</sup> it received an additional €24.5 million (\$27 million) in August 2020.<sup>89</sup> This financing is on top of continuing EU support for disaster relief and long-term development in Mindanao and the rest of the country.

The numbers tell a success story, but beneath lie murkier waters for the Philippine-EU relationship. The ascent of Rodrigo Duterte to the Philippine presidency in 2016 ushered in heated rhetoric and strained ties between Manila and Brussels. The outspoken populist denounced EU concerns about the Philippines' human rights situation as interference and threatened to expel diplomats and terminate EU grants and aid programs. In return, members of the European Parliament called on the EU to suspend the Philippines' GSP+ privileges in the wake of extrajudicial killings and the suppression of local dissent. Negotiations for an EU-Philippine free trade agreement remain seemingly moribund given the outgoing president's hostility toward the union, with no meetings having taken place since 2017.

The EU's traditional human rights focus in its external action in the Philippines centers on fighting governmental impunity, promoting the rule of law, abolishing the death penalty, supporting an evidence-based approach to illegal drugs, and protecting human rights defenders, among other issues. Such priorities ran counter to Duterte's governance preferences and style, highlighting the divisions and fueling the friction between Manila and Brussels.

Duterte's denunciation of the EU's alleged interference invites an analysis of the way the EU is perceived in the Philippines—if, indeed, the statistics and historical successes translate into appreciation for the EU's involvement in Philippine affairs. The need for such an analysis is all the more compelling as early in his presidency, Duterte called for a realignment of Philippine foreign policy toward China, reflecting his preference for powers that are friendly toward his hardline governance approach.

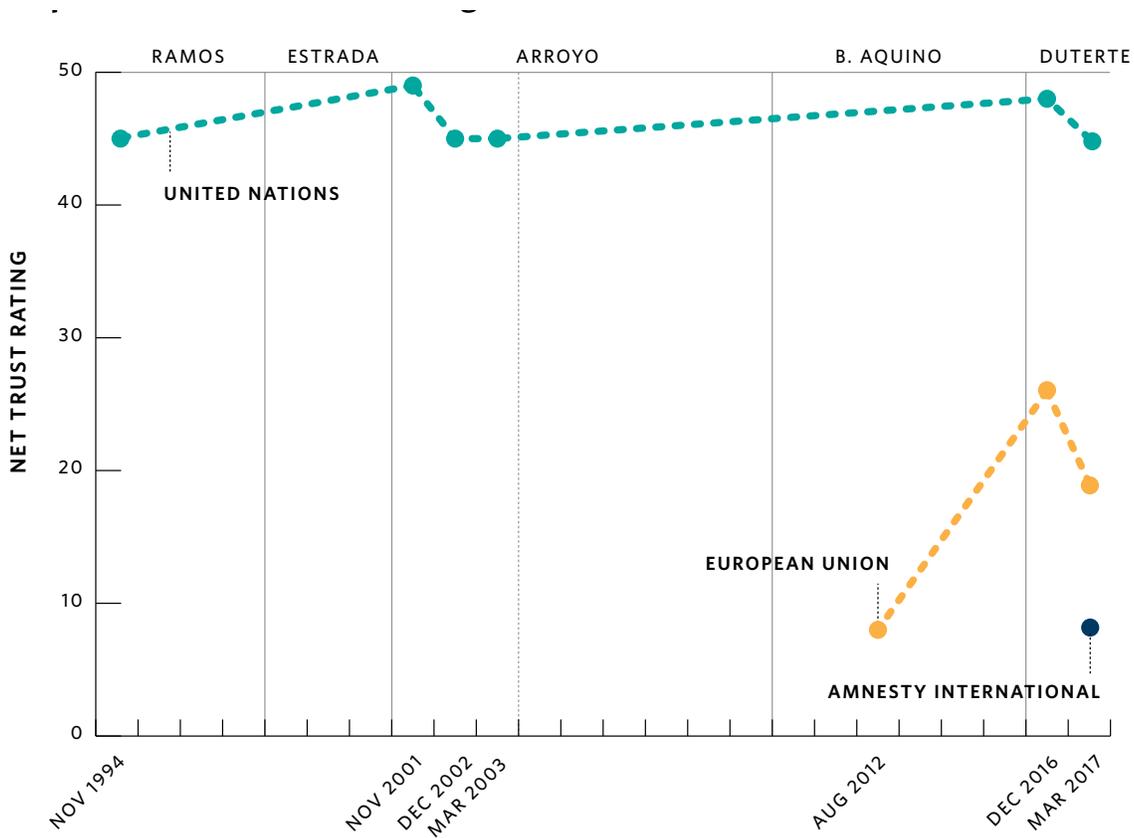
This chapter explores the EU's engagement in the Philippines as perceived by key Filipino stakeholders. The chapter draws on data from surveys, interviews, and, where relevant, the actions and declarations of the Philippine government, its officials, and civil society.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

A 2017 survey by Social Weather Stations, a research institute, revealed that Filipinos had a generally positive impression of the EU as a powerful and influential global actor. The survey found that 40 percent of respondents had a lot of trust in the EU, against 21 percent who had little trust in it, giving the bloc a net trust score—defined as the difference between the two percentages—of +19 (see figure 1).<sup>90</sup> The net trust rating was highest in Visayas and lowest in Mindanao, where Duterte is from. Respondents' levels of education played a role in their trust in the EU: those with a higher level of education were better informed about the nature of the EU and the Philippines' relations with the bloc.

Yet, surveys alone do not capture the nuances in trust levels, and each area of the EU's involvement in Philippine affairs reveals the enduring tendencies—and recent difficulties—in the relationship.

**FIGURE 1**  
**FILIPINOS' NET TRUST IN SELECTED ORGANIZATIONS**



**SOURCE:** “First Quarter 2017 Social Weather Survey: Net Trust Rating ‘Good’ +45 for United Nations; ‘Moderate’ +19 for European Union; ‘Neutral’ +8 for Amnesty International,” Social Weather Stations, May 26, 2017, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcltdispage/?artcsyscode=ART-20170526163038>.

**Trade**

To complement its development aid efforts, the EU supports sustainable economic growth through trade enhancement. GSP+ helps integrate developing countries into the world economy by removing import duties to increase competitiveness, alleviate poverty, and stimulate job creation. Similarly, EU economic partnership agreements not only grant participating countries access to the European market but also assist them in attracting investment and diversifying their economies. Last but not least, the EU’s Aid for Trade strategy supports partner countries in expanding their trade through the creation of infrastructure and investment in the agriculture, fisheries, and service sectors. These mechanisms make the union an attractive trading partner for developing countries.

After obtaining GSP+ status in 2014, the Philippines enjoyed greater market access to the EU, with over 6,200 products allowed to enter the bloc on a zero tariff. Exports to the EU increased by 27 percent the following year and have continued to enjoy healthy growth rates.<sup>91</sup> GSP+ status also contributed to an increase in foreign investment in the Philippines. Manufacturing companies have established operations in the country to avail themselves of the benefits of GSP+, helping generate employment and contributing to the Philippines' development goals. These firms cut across a range of industries, including electronics, agriculture, processed foods, clothing, and home appliances. As of this writing, the EU is the Philippines' fourth-largest trading partner.<sup>92</sup>

Retaining GSP+ status depends on the Philippine government upholding its international commitments to UN conventions on human and labor rights, environmental protection, and good governance. GSP+ was therefore at the center of a battle of rhetoric and resolve between the EU and the Duterte administration. From 2018 to 2020, the European Parliament passed resolutions calling for a temporary suspension of the status due to Manila's failure—or refusal—to rein in erosions of governance and democracy.

The Duterte administration's reaction to these resolutions was mixed. There was initial hostility from the president and his allies and spokespeople, and former Philippine foreign secretary Alan Peter Cayetano described one of the European Parliament's resolutions as “[crossing] a red line.”<sup>93</sup> But there have also been attempts to mend relations and maintain the GSP+ status as well as calls for a resumption of negotiations on a free trade agreement with the EU similar to those enjoyed by Vietnam and Singapore. In February 2021, the Philippine government convened the Sub-Committee on Good Governance, Rule of Law, and Human Rights under the Philippine-EU partnership and cooperation agreement to address human rights concerns raised by the EU.

When the Philippine authorities chose not to invite the EU to conduct an election observation mission to ensure a free and fair presidential election in May 2022, the European Parliament called on the European Commission to “set clear, public, time-bound benchmarks for the Philippines to comply with its human rights obligations under the GSP+ scheme” and to “immediately initiate the procedure which could lead to the temporary withdrawal of GSP+ preferences if there is no substantial improvement and willingness to cooperate on the part of the Philippine authorities.”<sup>94</sup> The government in Manila called the resolution a “misguided attempt . . . to interfere in the Philippine electoral process.”<sup>95</sup>

Outside the government, both business and civil society value the country's relationship with the EU, each for its own reasons. Business leaders highlight the importance of GSP+ to the Philippine economy. By contrast, civil society would prefer the EU to follow through on suspending the status—or at least exert greater leverage on Manila, as Jose Luis Gascon, a former chair of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, explained in an interview:

With the threat to suspend GSP+ privileges remaining just a threat, this has emboldened the Philippine government, and the human rights violations continue.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, many Filipinos view the EU as protective of its members and keen to look after its own interests by securing better trade benefits. The only difference between European nations and other capitalist countries is that the EU tries to balance its trade interests with concerns for the environment, human rights, and sustainable development.

### Development Assistance and the Coronavirus Pandemic

As well as feeling the impacts of official EU relations, Philippine civil society values the EU as a direct development sponsor, whether the union works with the government or independently. An interviewee in the justice-reform sector revealed how the EU can easily adjust funding or realign unused funds in the projects it sponsors to meet other goals for the beneficiary, as in the EU's humanitarian and logistical response to the coronavirus outbreak—at least compared with peers such as the U.S. Agency for International Development.<sup>97</sup> Another interviewee said that this was not enough, however, because in addition to the need to procure COVID-19 vaccines for the Philippines' population of 110 million, EU assistance is needed to strengthen the country's healthcare infrastructure.<sup>98</sup>

The EU is the largest contributor to the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) Facility, which benefits countries including the Philippines.<sup>99</sup> This support is in addition to €2.3 million (\$2.5 million) provided by the EU as part of a joint program between the union and the World Health Organization for general coronavirus response efforts in the Philippines.<sup>100</sup>

Neri Colmenares, a noted human rights advocate and a former member of the Philippine House of Representatives, observed that the EU could have expanded its assistance to civil society as an alternative to intensifying government-to-government cooperation. Colmenares remarked that “no matter how much help the EU gives the Philippine government, the violations [of human rights by the police and the military] would still be there.”<sup>101</sup> If nothing else, this observation represents a lament that the EU's best chances of meeting its development and human rights objectives do not lie with a government whose officials seem to reject those goals. Paco Pangalangan, executive director of the Stratbase Albert del Rosario Institute, agreed with this point and suggested that the EU should engage more stakeholders and gather more representative data.<sup>102</sup>

### Peace and Security

The EU has been a key partner in promoting peace, human security, and development in Mindanao for twenty-five years. While the linkages between poverty and conflict have long been recognized, the EU acknowledged in 2007 for the first time that the outcome of the Mindanao peace process would be a precondition for the EU's development goals in the region, placing peace building at the forefront of the union's external action toward Mindanao. In a 2015 analysis, the European Institute for Asian Studies described the EU's initial involvement as that of “a development and humanitarian actor with a clear focus on poor and remote areas,” which inadvertently led the EU to Mindanao and engagement with the

peace process there.<sup>103</sup> The union's support in the region of Bangsamoro, part of Mindanao, led to the passing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, which created the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2019.

The EU's 2007–2013 and 2014–2020 strategic frameworks for engagement with the Philippines marked a pivot in the levels and kinds of attention the EU brought to the region. The European Commission's 2007 strategy paper for the Philippines committed the EU "to support . . . the Mindanao Peace Process by contributing to the World Bank-administered Multi-donor Mindanao Trust Fund," which was conditional on the "conclusion of a peace agreement or the achievement of decisive progress towards this agreement."<sup>104</sup>

The EU engages with Mindanao at the levels of both the state and society "through regional and thematic programmes and instruments . . . implemented by civil society organisations addressing social issues, [the] environment, indigenous [peoples'] rights, human rights, local governance, peace building, and migration."<sup>105</sup> Engagement with the state comes through EU participation in the monitoring and implementation of ceasefires and peace agreements as well as EU support for capacity building in Mindanao. To that end, apart from the existing facilities and instruments committed to the region, the EU has approved new lines of financing. MinPAD is an economic facility to consolidate and strengthen the EU's political and development cooperation with Mindanao through the normalization of former combatants and conflict-affected communities, poverty alleviation, and support for civil society and rural cooperatives.

At the national level, despite Duterte's animosity toward the EU's criticism, government officials appreciate the union's involvement in and financial support of the peace process. In 2020, then Philippine finance secretary Carlos Dominguez III described the EU as a "long and staunch development partner of the Philippines."<sup>106</sup> Opportunities for greater awareness of the EU's engagement lie in creative partnerships, such as innovative people-to-people diplomacy initiatives. These include the Cartooning for Peace project, which brings together European and Filipino artists to produce artwork that encourages peace in Mindanao and is published in Philippine newspapers.

Whether official or street-level awareness of the EU translates into a broader recognition of Mindanao's strategic importance to the EU is not immediately apparent from official statements or the press, or from the research conducted for this chapter. It is likely that this perception is folded into a more general appreciation for the EU as a normative actor, or as a source of material support to complement the United States, Japan, and China. The direct beneficiaries of EU programs in the Philippines naturally appreciate the financial and technical support provided, especially if the programs involve interactions between EU and Filipino personnel.

## Norms and Values

The Philippines' so-called war on drugs—the government campaign against the illicit drug trade in the country—is a focal point of the EU's external action in the Philippines and a source of friction. The most visible tensions have played out in the press, where the outgoing president or his spokespeople would lay into EU criticisms of the administration's drugs policy and suppression of domestic opposition. At the height of tensions in 2017, the administration vocally declared it would not accept or deal with any EU aid. In 2020, Manila displayed indifference toward the prospect of human rights criticisms leading to trade sanctions.

This tension extended beyond the war on drugs to the government's ostensible drive against a communist insurgency in the Philippines. The administration has long painted local opposition figures and civil society organizations as communists or terrorists, regardless of their actual affiliation with any armed insurgency, to swing public opinion against them and increase support for—or, at least, tolerance of—their suppression. Since 2018, the Philippine state's campaign under the auspices of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict has increasingly used social media alongside official press outlets for such denunciations, which have often led to the deaths of those targeted.

The EU's annual reports on human rights and democracy have consistently focused on the war on drugs. The 2016 report commented that “the human rights situation in the second half of the year has considerably worsened as a consequence of the so-called ‘war on drugs’”—albeit with the caveat that some of the salient features of the situation had been present under previous administrations.<sup>107</sup> The following year's report contained the same findings, stating that “the human rights framework in the Philippines remained fragile.”<sup>108</sup>

As with human rights, the Duterte administration was sensitive to international criticism of its governance approaches, as reflected in presidential rhetoric and reactions from the president's office. Notable examples of Manila's treatment of opposition voices included the arrest of vocal opposition figure Senator Leila de Lima on what were likely manufactured drug-trafficking allegations and the corporate and libel charges filed against journalist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Maria Ressa. Members of the European Parliament called on the Philippine administration to release their fellow parliamentarian and protect journalists.

It is clear that for human rights and good governance campaigners in the Philippines, the EU is “a beacon for the rest of the world,” in the words of Gascon.<sup>109</sup> Colmenares noted emphatically that concern from former German chancellor Angela Merkel and others about extrajudicial killings during the administration of former Philippine president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo had seemed to provoke the government's creation of investigatory bodies to examine the murders: “These statements saved lives.”<sup>110</sup>

The Philippine perception of the EU as an alternative to other world powers, especially the United States and China, is stark. Interviewees valued the EU's role, with ambassadors of several EU states having spoken publicly and privately about human rights issues in the Philippines; these comments have elicited negative public opinions of the government. The Dutch, French, German, and Spanish ambassadors—and their British counterpart—have consistently, regularly, and forcefully spoken out against the Philippines' human rights abuses. These statements have given beleaguered civil society organizations the space and platforms from which to continue operating amid what is practically hostile indifference from the authorities.<sup>111</sup>

It was probably this consistent pressure that led to a slight change of approach from Manila toward human rights issues in the UN Human Rights Council. Previously, the government was defensive of its policies in this area, and its message to the diplomatic community was not to meddle in Philippine affairs. But in late 2020, the government's approach shifted, allowing for the creation of a joint program between the UN and the Philippines to build capacity and enhance technical cooperation on human rights in the country.

## Migration

The Philippines has the ninth-largest number of emigrants in the world, with 6.1 million of the country's population working and living abroad in 2020.<sup>112</sup> Of these emigrants, over 368,000 Filipino citizens were living in Europe.<sup>113</sup> In 2018, the Philippines became the fourth-largest recipient of remittances worldwide. While the Middle East is by far the biggest destination for overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), a 2019 statistical report by the Philippine government showed that EU nations accounted for 7.7 percent of OFWs, placing the bloc fourth, after the Middle East, East and Southeast Asia, and the Americas.<sup>114</sup> The EU also represented the fourth-largest source of remittances to the Philippines in 2017, after the United States, the Middle East, and other Asian countries.<sup>115</sup> The Middle East and emerging Asian economies have drawn the bulk of Filipino migrants who have left their country for work reasons, while the United States is a traditional destination on social or family grounds because of the Philippines' colonial history.

The EU has funded initiatives on migration and development in the Philippines and projects that help Filipino migrants in European host countries. As for perceptions of the EU in this area, economic promise is a primary factor in Europe's desirability as a migration destination. Even during the coronavirus pandemic, the Philippine labor and employment secretary Silvestre Bello III reported Germany and Eastern Europe, as well as Russia and the United Kingdom, as potential destinations for Filipino migrants.<sup>116</sup> The Philippines' labor attaché in Milan recorded similar interest in the EU as an employment destination, especially in the healthcare sector.<sup>117</sup>

Emigrants' decisions are influenced by many factors, some of which might be affected by the EU's migration policy, while others are not. One interviewee suggested that a bilateral approach to the drivers of migration could perhaps make the problem more manageable, as could the EU's involvement in and support for the ratification of the intergovernmental Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular

Migration.<sup>118</sup> Jaime Ledda, a former Philippine ambassador to the EU, saw opportunities for the union to address the issues and concerns of Filipinos in the EU, particularly those with the status of third-country nationals and au pairs, who are not protected by labor laws.<sup>119</sup>

## Climate and Sustainability

EU interventions in the Philippines on inclusive and sustainable growth focus on access to renewable energy and job creation: connecting more poor people to the electricity grid and promoting decent work, particularly by strengthening women’s employment opportunities. One interviewee noted that there is also a link between human rights and environmental concerns as well as between human rights and business.<sup>120</sup>

The environment is one of the more consistent areas of engagement between the EU and the Philippines. The union presents itself as a pace setter and a “leading proponent of international action on [the] environment” and sustainable development.<sup>121</sup> The EU’s 2014–2020 Multiannual Indicative Programme for the Philippines showed how environmental matters are integrated into the union’s external action and support for the country’s development. The program affirms that EU support for Philippine initiatives is “subject to standard EU environmental and climate screenings in view of addressing pro-poor environmental and climate change concerns in project/programme formulation and implementation.”<sup>122</sup>

It is no accident, therefore, that EU support focuses on disaster relief and resilience and renewable energy as the key elements of inclusive growth. The linkage of energy and economics is not accidental, either, as it aligned with former Philippine president Benigno Aquino III’s agenda of inclusive and widespread access to energy. The EU program’s emphasis on Mindanao, apart from the priority of peace building, also reflects the region’s vulnerability to climate change, energy shortages, and natural disasters.

This approach aligns with EU policies of support for climate change adaptation, energy diplomacy, and business promotion. The union has declared that grant funds in the energy sector can be used to leverage more loans to amplify the impact of EU assistance. This continues to be evident at the national level, with a recent infusion of funding under the Access to Sustainable Energy Programme—a joint initiative of the EU and the Philippine Department of Energy—to support the country’s efforts in “making energy efficiency and conservation a national way of life,” according to the EU’s chargé d’affaires in the Philippines, Thomas Wiersing.<sup>123</sup>

## FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-PHILIPPINE RELATIONS

Interviewees were in agreement that the EU could be a good security partner both in the traditional sense and in the nontraditional digital sphere, where cybercrime is increasingly posing serious security threats.<sup>124</sup> In the words of Pangalangan, “having the EU or European countries as strategic partners in security and defense will show that the Philippines is not tied to the United States or China.”<sup>125</sup>

Interestingly, the results of an online survey by the authors suggest that young Filipinos would like the EU to be more involved in norms and values—human rights, democracy, and the rule of law—and less involved in economic matters, especially the digital economy (see figures 2 and 3).<sup>126</sup>

### Norms and Values

Human rights advocates worry that greater EU involvement in the Philippines on trade and economics may overshadow or compartmentalize human rights and democracy. While the government in Manila values GSP+ as a necessary economic boost, democracy advocates value the status because of the conditions attached to it. Interviewees in the latter group expressed the view that the EU could or should leverage the suspension of GSP+ to encourage greater compliance with these conditions.<sup>127</sup>

For some members of the business sector, the EU's role in human rights and democratic norms could be an attractive feature for the Philippines. In the words of Coco Alcuaz, executive director of the Makati Business Club,

In the past, we had faith in the United States as a “main promoter of democracy,” but because of the Trump administration, I welcome the EU as an equal and complementary partner to the United States. It need not be just a U.S. game . . . The EU can bring to the table stability in policy and execution just by the fact that it is made up of various member states and is unlikely to shift course.<sup>128</sup>

This sense of EU stability was shared by human rights and democracy advocates. Gascon agreed that “the EU at least tries to be more consistent and coherent in [its] critique of the human rights situation, which is good [when it comes to] norms and values since [the Europeans] influence U.S. policy for transatlantic relations.”<sup>129</sup>

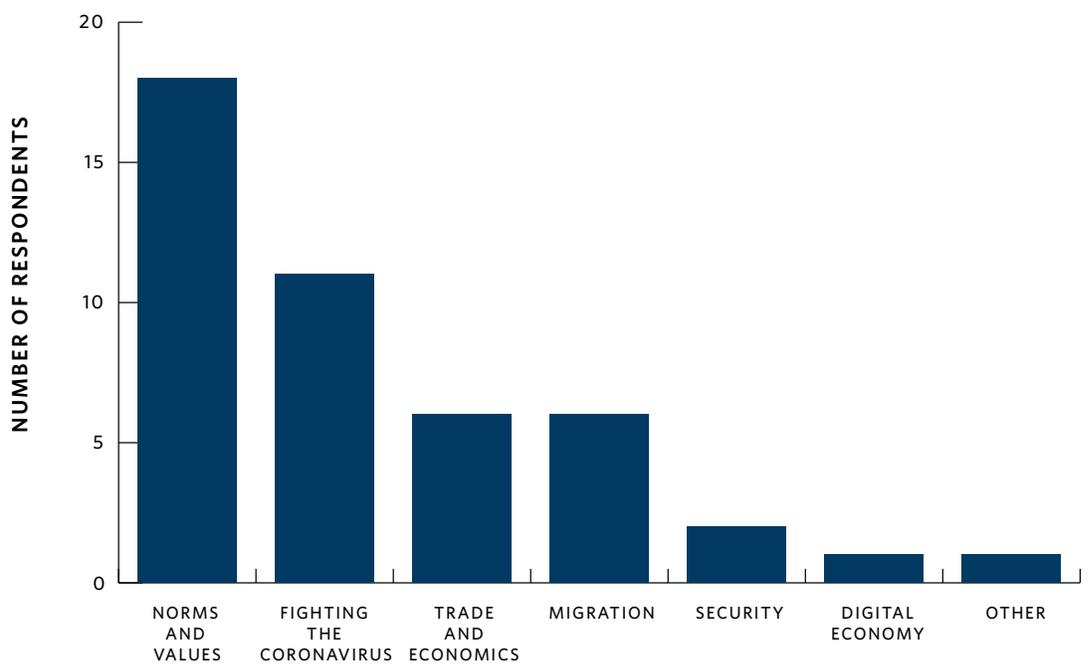
### Healthcare

In the wake of Duterte's accusations of the EU hoarding COVID-19 vaccines, EU assistance in strengthening healthcare infrastructure in the Philippines and the region would be much appreciated. There is also a need to promote health education and encourage support for clinical trials, given that the cause of most Filipinos' vaccine reluctance is the 2017 Dengvaxia controversy, in which a dengue fever vaccine was found to increase the risk of severe disease for some people who had received it. The mass hysteria surrounding the controversy was made worse when populist elements used the episode to portray the previous administration in a bad light.

### The Digital Economy

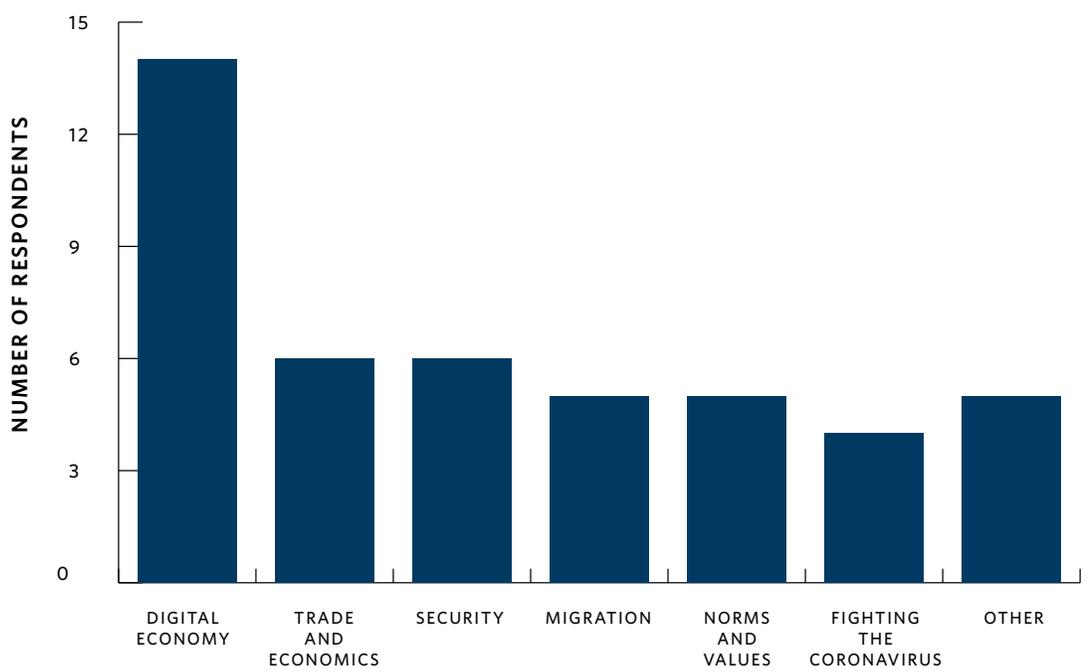
As someone working on digital rights and tools, Pangalangan pointed out that the EU is way ahead in this field. The challenge lies in translating the EU's good practices, particularly on data, transparency, accountability, and protection, into the Philippines' local context.<sup>130</sup> Colmenares admitted that he was

**FIGURE 2**  
**AREAS FOR MORE EU INVOLVEMENT**



**SOURCE:** Author survey among students at Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City.  
**NOTE:** Question asked was “Which areas would you like the EU be involved in?”

**FIGURE 3**  
**AREAS FOR LESS EU INVOLVEMENT**



**SOURCE:** Author survey among students at Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City.  
**NOTE:** Question asked was “Which areas would you like the EU to be less involved in?”

unfamiliar with the digital economy, yet he agreed on the clear need to advance data protection and privacy standards in the Philippines. He went on, “A pressing concern is the phenomenon of online trolls that have shaped policies and minds here in the country. The EU is seen as the right partner that can help set standards on how to deal with the overwhelming force of the trolls. [But] can trolls and bots be arrested? When do you curtail the freedom of expression?”<sup>131</sup>

## ASEAN

Indicative of the EU’s growing credibility is the fact that the bloc has moved up to the level of strategic partner for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), an acknowledgment of the cooperation that exists in a wide range of areas. If the EU wants to be a steadfast partner in the region, a parallel track for EU-ASEAN defense cooperation and procurement would be a way forward.<sup>132</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From the perspective of Filipino stakeholders, the EU presents itself as a valuable partner both materially (in finance, technology, and skills) and in terms of ideas as a beacon for the rest of the world; but this has been consistent since the mid-1980s. What has changed in recent years is Duterte’s ascent to the presidency. Even if differences between the EU and the Philippines existed before his administration, especially on human rights, Duterte’s penchant for heated rhetoric and forceful action marked the start of a sharper divide between Brussels and Manila.

Duterte’s populist rise also signaled a clear break from the Philippines’ previous official and popular consensus on liberal governance—even if certain past administrations only paid lip service to this consensus. Yet, Duterte’s presidency did not end the support of the Philippine government or civil society for liberal democratic norms, and these constituencies still value the EU’s role and engagement in the country. Nor did recent divides derail EU-Philippine relations, the EU’s participation in programs and initiatives that benefit the Philippines, or cooperation in other key areas, such as the Mindanao peace process and climate change.

What has changed for these constituencies is a new sense of urgency: first, because the liberal consensus was so rapidly reversed; second, because the space for liberalism is shrinking in this new environment; and third, because the casualties of the outgoing government’s approach are growing. Gascon even worried about similar trends emerging in the EU itself—as seen in the backsliding of “EU member states not committed to norms and values, such as Hungary and Poland,” which could compromise the EU’s role as “a bulwark [for democratic norms] for the rest of the world.”<sup>133</sup> This ideal, together with the union’s economic and socioenvironmental initiatives, is what differentiates the EU from alternative supporting powers, such as the United States and China. It is the EU’s leadership role on norms and values that defines the union’s appeal to liberal constituencies and sets the EU apart from powers that are friendlier toward authoritarian governance styles.

Following the victory of Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos, Jr., known as Bongbong, in the Philippines' May 2022 presidential election, with Sara Duterte, the daughter of the outgoing president, elected as vice president, the EU will face tough challenges in balancing its trade interests with the need for consistency when it comes to norms and values. In 2021, the Philippines took over a three-year role as the coordinator of dialogue relations between ASEAN and the EU, making the country the first port of call for Brussels in its dealings with ASEAN until 2024. As such, EU contact with the new administration in Manila may become a matter of economic necessity.

Amid all this, the EU remains engaged in and committed to the Philippines. The EU ambassador in Manila, Luc Véron, has his work cut out for him: he must be tougher in calling out any lapses, missteps, or infractions by the new administration in the area of democratic norms and human rights. This challenge also applies to the EU as an organization and to its member states if they are serious about their commitment to human rights. Now is the time for the union to be more resolute, save lives, and preserve democratic institutions. If that is the lasting impression of the EU among Filipinos, it will be well aligned with the bloc's strategic priorities and treaty obligations.



## CHAPTER 6

# VENEZUELA: PERCEPTIONS OF EUROPE FRAMED BY DOMESTIC CRISES

RAÚL STOLK AND GABRIELA MESONES ROJO

### INTRODUCTION

Venezuela is a country with four intertwined crises: a political conflict, a complex humanitarian emergency, mass migration, and economic woes. The political struggle, spearheaded by the government, led to the disappearance of Venezuela's means of production through expropriation and economic controls, which ignited the humanitarian emergency and caused a wave of mass emigration. All Venezuelans have been directly impacted by these events, and their views of the world are affected by this impact. At the same time, these realities influence the country's diplomatic and commercial relationships with the international community. Therefore, all Venezuelan actors assess foreign stakeholders—countries, regions, or organizations—in terms of their involvement in these four crises.

Venezuela's isolation has been increasing since 2018, when President Nicolás Maduro was reelected in a vote that violated the process established in the constitution. After the National Assembly declared the absence of a legitimate president in January 2019 and fifty-five countries, including most members of the European Union (EU), recognized the president of the legislature, Juan Guaidó, as the caretaker president of Venezuela, the Maduro government severed relations with part of the international community.

With this lack of international recognition for Maduro's regime came stringent sanctions, including those imposed by the EU. This is a fundamental issue because the general public perception in Venezuela regarding international relations is directly linked to the sanctions, for two reasons: first, the sanctions have been a key element of the government's narrative to explain the country's economic collapse; and second, the measures have been essential leverage for the opposition to position itself as an actor important enough to participate in political negotiations.

This chapter aims to bring about a better understanding of how the EU is viewed from Venezuela, and how these insights can inform policies for a more realistic and effective relationship with this crisis-torn country. There is little literature on Venezuelans' views of Europe—as opposed to the way Venezuela

is and should be viewed from abroad. That is why this research focused mainly on interviews with informed voices from different parts of civil society. Venezuelan experts were interviewed on politics, history, economy and finance, diplomacy, and humanitarian aid. While most interviewees shared similar thoughts about the EU, their respective areas of expertise and political stances influenced their opinions. Two interviewees asked to remain anonymous for security reasons, especially when surveyed about their opinions of EU and U.S. sanctions against Venezuela.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

The fundamental perception of Venezuelans not only toward the EU but toward the world in general is that external actors have little visibility beyond the urgent issues that affect Venezuelans' lives. As Omar Zambrano, chief economist at ANOVA Policy Research, put it, "Venezuela is isolated from any discussion at the global level. The only relevant Venezuelan issue is the predicament between democratic transition and the consolidation of the Chavista dictatorship."<sup>134</sup> (The Chavista regime started with the 1998 election of former president Hugo Chávez and departed from democracy with the unconstitutional 2018 election held by Maduro.)

As to why the EU is not on the radar of the general public, the research revealed that many Venezuelans do not understand the impact the EU's work could have on their country's political crisis. That is why the uninformed parts of Venezuela's population may consider the EU a marginal organization, or even be entirely unaware of its existence.

### The EU in Venezuela's Political Crisis

The most profound insights of the research relate to how people in Venezuela view the EU's role and participation in the country's political and humanitarian crises. In 2021, the union became more active in the political conflict. The Venezuelan government went from kicking out the EU ambassador at the beginning of the year to receiving an EU election observation mission (EOM)—something that had not happened since 2006—to watch over the November regional elections. These were deemed controversial because of the questionable validity of the electoral authority and because some opposition parties and candidates were unconstitutionally blocked from running. The main opposition coalition agreed to run in the elections, and the EU's involvement through the EOM was considered a safeguard—although there was also a risk that it could legitimize unfair elections.

More than the EU, however, it is perhaps Josep Borrell, the union's foreign policy high representative, who garners the most attention in Venezuela. Many Venezuelans see him as the bloc's top authority, and some of his opinions are perceived as the unanimous views of the EU member states. Indeed, because of the way the EU is generally covered in the Venezuelan media, there is an incorrect perception that Borrell usually speaks on behalf of the EU as a whole.

The most common media narrative about the EU in Venezuela obliterates the complexities of the organization, confusing the European Council with the European Parliament. Venezuelans also frequently use the former name of European Community to refer to the EU. Supranational entities like the EU are not part of Venezuelans' general political experience, despite the country's membership in the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) or its suspended membership in Mercosur.

The EOM deployed by Borrell's office in late 2021 has been at the center of political controversies sparked by both the government and the hard-core opposition. In October, the Venezuelan government lashed out against Borrell for saying publicly that "if the opposition decides to go [to the elections] and that is a path that helps . . . achieve a greater institutionalization of the opposition, am I going to say that I'm not going to send an election observation mission because the elections are fraudulent?"<sup>135</sup> The government framed this statement as proof that the EOM would not be independent and dragged this narrative out for a couple of weeks.

Borrell was also the target of comments from opposition figures who opposed the elections. They said the high representative had overlooked the recommendations of an EU exploratory mission, which had concluded that the EOM posed a risk of legitimizing unfair elections.<sup>136</sup> This criticism echoes the feeling about Borrell that prevails among opposition leaders, pundits, and ordinary citizens, both in Venezuela and among the Venezuelan community in Spain, who see Borrell as too close to the current Spanish government and to former Spanish prime minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Zapatero has been hired as a mediator in previous negotiation attempts and is widely considered a close ally of Venezuela's Chavista government. As far as this sector of public opinion is concerned, the perception of Borrell as a politician who leans toward Chavismo can be extended from the high representative to the entire EU.

To monitor how the EU is presented in social media, ProBox, a Venezuelan monitoring organization, has been tracking ongoing debates and trends on Twitter since January 2020. According to ProBox, there are four main actors in debates on Venezuelan social media: the regime, the opposition, civil society, and anonymous accounts. "The EU is mainly mentioned by the opposition, despite the regime . . . leading the trending topics through inorganic activity," explained ProBox Executive Director María Virginia Marín.<sup>137</sup>

ProBox also contextualized the EU's presence on social media: the union was widely mentioned in February 2021 after its ambassador to Venezuela, Isabel Brilhante Pedrosa, was expelled from the country in a televised event in which the Venezuelan foreign minister formally delivered her letter of expulsion. However, neither the EU's sanctions, its humanitarian work, nor the EOM was a subject of debate on social media until the recent spats with Borrell—and even then, the EU did not trend on Twitter in Venezuela.

In the context of Venezuelan perceptions of the EU as an actor in Venezuela's political crisis, a group of researchers conducted an experiment to measure people's intentions to vote in the November 2021 regional elections according to whether the international community would be involved.<sup>138</sup> Two studies targeted a specific municipality in Caracas. The first described the international community as "the United States, the European Union, etc." and the second as just "the European Union." In the first study, which mentioned the United States, respondents were 12 percent more likely to vote in elections if the international community were involved. In the second study, which referred only to the EU, there was no variation. Of course, the results of this experiment can only be taken as a set of individual preferences in a specific location, but they are consistent with other research findings.

Even though the EU has been involved in international cooperation with Venezuela for a long time, there has been little acknowledgment of it in the country, said international relations expert Luisa Kislinger: "I don't think the problem is the EU, but the nature of the process, the actors, and the regime. That's why I believe [the Europeans] have a limited role; I don't think they will be allowed to do more than what the authoritarian and despotic nature of the regime will allow them to."<sup>139</sup>

The EU's stance as a global influence and a possible intermediary in the Venezuelan political crisis is distinct from the roles of the United States, China, and Russia because of the EU's fundamental international profile of a civilian power or a nonmilitary superpower. This profile is based on a distinctive set of principles, which, in the words of one researcher, emphasize "diplomatic rather than coercive instruments, the centrality of mediation in conflict resolution, [and] the importance of long-term economic solutions to political problems. All of these are in contradiction to the norms of super-power politics."<sup>140</sup> Or, as Zambrano dubbed it: soft power.

A recent example of effective European soft power in Venezuela is that of French Ambassador Romain Nadal, who became a social media darling because of his involvement in humanitarian programs and cultural activities that were promoted by the French embassy. For example, in September 2021, he flew to Zea and Tovar, two small towns in the state of Mérida that had almost disappeared under mudslides, to provide humanitarian aid with the nongovernmental organization (NGO) *Cáritas Venezuela*.<sup>141</sup> The impacts of these activities were widely covered in independent media, although they were associated with France rather than with the EU. An interesting anecdote about the French ambassador's popularity in certain Venezuelan Twitter circles is that on April 25, 2022, the day after Emmanuel Macron was reelected president of France, several people celebrated the fact that the French election result meant that Nadal would remain in his post.

### EU Cohesion

According to historian and political scientist Guillermo Tell Avelledo, there is notable incomprehension among Venezuelans in general regarding the workings and diplomatic capabilities of the EU as a bloc and a global actor. This may lead not only to unmet expectations from those who are relying on the international community to oust Maduro but also to misinformation from the government. "The

government uses the lack of understanding of the differences between the EU as a bloc and the stances of individual countries to promote the narrative that the opposition is alone, divided, and without solid support from the international community,” Aveledo said.<sup>142</sup>

Mariano de Alba, a Venezuelan lawyer specializing in international law and a senior adviser at the International Crisis Group, believed that what makes the EU a relevant global actor is its market and geographic location. But de Alba and Aveledo agreed that the EU’s biggest strength is also its biggest handicap: the fact that the EU is composed of twenty-seven member states makes it strong but at the same time slow, as bureaucracy and the need to align many different views make it hard to create actionable items.

Betilde Muñoz-Pogossian, director of the Department of Social Inclusion at the Organization of American States, concurred with the view that Europe has a prominent role in the world because of geopolitics and a long history of policies that have paved the way for international agreements and conflict resolutions. But she also worried about the EU’s stance as a global leader. “Whereas in the past I saw the European Union . . . as a more strategic player, I don’t think that’s really the case anymore,” Muñoz-Pogossian explained. She went on,

The EU is ever more at risk of disintegrating (Brexit and similar sentiments in other European countries exemplify this), and because of these threats, the EU has lost power. European countries which used to be seen as leaders in most fields, and leading the conversation on human rights and economic prosperity, have so many internal problems that they have also lost some credibility.<sup>143</sup>

## The Economy and Sanctions

Since 2018, the EU has escalated sanctions against Maduro and members of the government elite—a measure intended to encourage democratic solutions to bring political stability to the country and pressure the government to address the urgent needs of Venezuelans. The targeted economic sanctions are flexible, reversible, and intended not to harm the Venezuelan population. According to an EU press release in November 2020,

The decision [to extend sanctions] was taken in light of the ongoing political, economic, social and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, with persistent actions undermining democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights. The measures include an embargo on arms and on equipment for internal repression, as well as a travel ban and an asset freeze on 36 listed individuals in official positions who are responsible for human rights violations and/or for undermining democracy and the rule of law.<sup>144</sup>

Interviewees shared the opinion that Europe has been effective in imposing sanctions and measures to pressure the Maduro regime but ineffective in enforcing them. An example of this mixed performance is an episode in which Delcy Rodríguez, Maduro’s sanctioned vice president, was allowed to fly to Spain and meet a government official to discuss political matters. This type of inconsistency, which was heavily covered in the Venezuelan media, gives the EU an image of weakness.

Among the general population, sanctions seem to be fairly unpopular, even though the president's popularity is below that of key opposition politicians, who have alarmingly low ratings as well, and even though many recognize the government as the main cause of Venezuela's economic collapse. According to an August 2021 survey by consulting firm Datanálisis, 76.4 percent of respondents believed sanctions had a negative impact on their lives without effecting real political change.<sup>145</sup> Although most Venezuelans identify sanctions with the U.S. government, this finding does not translate into anti-Americanism. EU sanctions, which target specific individuals, are rarely brought up in the public discourse.

Interlocutors highlighted in many instances how they view the EU as an important global economic actor. De Alba believed that Europe's most important strategic advantage is its commercial role. In his opinion, through the EU's regulatory capacity and the need of other actors to access that market, the union has been able to export standards in multiple areas. Muñoz-Pogossian concurred: "The European market is a precursor to most of the agreements that seek to encourage trade between nations. [The EU has] contributed greatly to governance on world trade issues, apart from being an open market and serving as a model [for the] exchange of goods, services, [and] products between countries that can be a win for all."<sup>146</sup>

As for the Venezuelan economy, after the bolivar lost purchasing power in 2016 because of hyperinflation and a dramatic shortage of banknotes, the population started relying heavily on electronic transactions and foreign currency. Day-to-day purchases now depend mainly on people's ability to access electronic bolivars or U.S. dollars in cash. This is fundamental because, as economist Henkel García explained, most local commercial transactions in Venezuela are handled in cash dollars, and the monetary mass of the bolivar—including the digital and physical currency—is equivalent to only \$500 million.<sup>147</sup>

Although Venezuela has adopted other forms of electronic payment, just a small fraction of the population has access to them, since most people depend on integration into the international financial system—namely, a dollar account in the United States. These other forms include resources such as Zelle, Venmo, and PayPal. Also, the use of cryptocurrency to send remittances from abroad to people in Venezuela is not uncommon. That said, interviewees did not express any relevant comments about the European digital economy.

### **Migration and Humanitarian Aid**

Since 2018, the EU has allocated €156 million (\$169 million) in emergency humanitarian aid to help Venezuelans locally and in neighboring countries, especially Colombia.<sup>148</sup> The aid targets the most vulnerable groups, such as children under five years of age, pregnant women and new mothers, the elderly, and indigenous communities. It usually focuses on the provision of vital healthcare, food and water, sanitation and hygiene, and education in emergency situations. The EU also supports humanitarian coordination and the improvement of local emergency response capacities. This assistance is facilitated by aid organizations and coordinated by the Humanitarian Logistics Network and the Red Cross.

Yet, although it has created more than 5.6 million refugees and migrants, Venezuela's migration crisis remains one of the most underfunded emergencies globally.<sup>149</sup> According to Feliciano Reyna, a humanitarian activist and director of anti-HIV/AIDS organization Acción Solidaria, underfunding is one of the biggest impediments to protecting a large and vulnerable population already fleeing a life-threatening humanitarian emergency. Reyna said,

When you study the global migration financing tracking service, of the thirty-four countries with humanitarian response plans submitted for funding, Venezuela ranked thirty-four as a funding recipient. There is a political situation that has not been handled properly by many international donors, and despite the contributions and donations mobilized, the money destined for the Venezuelan crisis is far below what is required.<sup>150</sup>

Despite Reyna's criticism of international funding for Venezuelan migrants, he underlined the relevance of the work of the European Commission's Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO). ECHO started documenting migration, hyperinflation, political persecution, and restrictions on economic liberties in 2013—a year before national and local NGOs began raising the alarm about Venezuela's humanitarian crisis. Reyna said, "Acción Solidaria benefited from ECHO's resources to study and record the economic, social, and political crisis in Venezuela. This task helped us summon the UN humanitarian system, which remained completely silent until 2016, stating that their research—based solely on official government information—did not reflect a humanitarian crisis."<sup>151</sup>

However, humanitarian activists' positive views of the EU's work are not reflected in the Venezuelan media, where the bloc rarely makes the headlines. What is more, the EU's late public acknowledgment of the crisis gave an initial impression of indifference on the part of the union.

Nevertheless, Jorge Guzmán, a political scientist and former adviser to the Colombian ambassador to Venezuela, thinks the EU is the global power with both the will and the capacity to promote peaceful and sustainable solutions for a population in critical conditions.<sup>152</sup> EU institutions have reacted to events in Venezuela by increasing humanitarian aid and promoting dialogue among opposing political factions in the country. Borrell has highlighted the need to provide funding for the Venezuelan migrant crisis, which, before Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, was considered by many international organizations and cataloged by the EU as the worst displacement crisis the world had seen in recent history.

Indeed, in May 2020, Borrell said, "The European Union has never forgotten the Venezuelan people. Today we mobilized the international community to deliver further assistance to millions of displaced Venezuelans and those countries in Latin America that host them."<sup>153</sup> European Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič said that "the EU's humanitarian support will help focus on getting emergency assistance to around 5 million Venezuelans who have been forced to leave their homes."<sup>154</sup>

Overall, however, the EU commitment to Venezuela still pales in comparison with the responses to other migration crises of a similar magnitude. The Ukraine crisis is too recent to provide a comparison, but total global funding for Syrian refugees has been over ten times higher than that for Venezuelans in per capita terms.<sup>155</sup> The union has the capacity to mobilize further assistance for Venezuela: even if it does not provide additional financial support itself, the EU could call for greater efforts from Canada and the United States.

Interviewees also highlighted the way in which the EU has handled fundamental aspects of the migration crisis faced by member states as recipient countries for migrants and refugees. Muñoz-Pogossian underlined that the EU has a strategic role in setting standards of respect for human rights and support for receiving countries: “I also think the EU has to acknowledge that the Americas are innovating much more in terms of responses to migration, and should support Latin American countries [financially and politically] in those responses and emulate many of the responses to migration.”<sup>156</sup>

Meanwhile, Reyna pointed to the efforts of countries like Germany, which has tried to handle the impacts of a growing migration crisis from the Middle East from a human rights angle rather than a security perspective. “Examples like Germany should lead as role models for other countries in the EU and [offer] important values to export to Latin American receiving countries,” he said.<sup>157</sup>

### The Coronavirus Pandemic

In humanitarian terms, the EU has approved many resources to help Venezuela in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Yet, health journalist Luisa Salomón explained in an interview that at least in 2021, the country’s media coverage of the EU had little to do with the pandemic and was more focused on politics. However, this was not directly linked to the EU’s actions: although the coronavirus has had devastating effects on the Venezuelan population and the virus is far from under control, the pandemic has lost traction in the media because the political crisis grabs all the attention.

Only two months after Venezuela’s first confirmed case of COVID-19 in May 2020, the EU and the Spanish government convened the International Donors’ Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants with the support of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration. The EU and its member states donated €231.7 million (\$251.7 million) in grant funding, while the European Commission pledged €144.2 million (\$156.6 million) for immediate humanitarian assistance and conflict prevention—but with a focus on medium- and long-term development aid. The European Investment Bank announced €400 million (\$434 million) in additional loans to the region to help battle the pandemic.<sup>158</sup>

Yet, despite the EU’s recognition of the effects of the pandemic on a hyperinflationary economy suffering from shortages of general public goods and services, food insecurity, and growing extreme poverty, Reyna questioned the effectiveness of the humanitarian aid provided to fight the pandemic: “The EU hasn’t achieved a common approach to provide the help needed. I’m not aware of changes in this matter during the pandemic. Funding has been mobilized for the humanitarian emergency, not for the coronavirus pandemic.”<sup>159</sup>

Looking ahead, Muñoz-Pogossian believes the EU's global focus should be on "prioritizing the EU's involvement in the fight against the coronavirus and working on the world's economic recovery, migration as a common denominator for Europe and the Americas, and support for norms and values aligned with human rights, democracy, and protection of the environment."<sup>160</sup>

## Norms and Values

Interlocutors saw the EU as a positive force in the fight for democracy and admired the union's efforts to balance its values between respect for individual rights and collective well-being. Most interviewees agreed that the EU is the embodiment of democratic, multicultural, and pluralist values and a trustworthy, respectful ally in the fight against dictatorship in Venezuela.

In this sense, the EU's loss of credibility has to do mainly with its limited capability to put words into action. Interviewees did not dispute the EU's place as a stalwart of human and civil rights. Aveledo put it simply: "Europe seems to be the most polished face of civilization: more finished societies, more open, anchored in traditions but not defined by them." He also highlighted the EU's importance as a developer of civil rights-based politics: "It's hard to imagine [former German chancellor] Helmut Kohl discussing the rights of minorities, LGBTQ people, or ethnic[-minority] populations, because the nature of those political systems was different. But now we find an opening in democratic systems that leads in that direction."<sup>161</sup>

On values, however, the research revealed that these could be seen as a handicap to the EU's efforts to reach more conservative and traditional Venezuelans, who are predominantly Catholic. They see Europe as a promoter of progressive politics that does not connect well with the general Venezuelan population or with many politicians who have a strong political agenda focused on human rights but without a civil rights perspective. A point of agreement over the years between the government and the political opposition, for example, has been the lack of interest in legislative discussions of the LGBTQ community and women's reproductive rights.

## Climate Change

Regarding the climate crisis, interviewees perceived the EU as a positive force that has been more present than other international actors in the search for solutions. Muñoz-Pogossian stressed that she sees the EU's role as more crucial in pushing for reform to combat climate change since the United States disappeared from this conversation in recent years.

At the same time, there was little awareness of the EU's participation in promoting initiatives to address Venezuela's significant environmental crisis. However, with climate change, the general public took a similar attitude to its position on civil rights: the population is so concerned with its day-to-day survival that these conversations have only secondary importance.

## The EU and Other Global Actors

There is a sense among Venezuelans, as stated by political scientist and journalist José De Bastos in an interview, that the EU plays a secondary role to other international actors. Indeed, three players—the United States, China, and Russia—are key to the way Venezuelans view the world as they have been the main political, economic, and military stakeholders in Venezuela for the past fifteen years. The United States is deeply intertwined with Latin America, but the U.S. stance toward Venezuela is often tense because of the pressures of migration and the drugs trade. China tends to impose its economic interest in the region, especially when it comes to sources of raw materials. And Russia has become quite aggressive in its drive to increase its geopolitical influence.

Indeed, a repeated criticism of the EU has to do with its diminishing role amid the geopolitical strategies of Russia. It is too soon to say whether European support for Ukraine in its ongoing war with Russia will change that perception. Meanwhile, in economic terms, as Zambrano put it, Europe is a decaying global power that is losing influence to China—a view with which most interviewees agreed.

According to Rafael Osío Cabrices, a Venezuelan journalist based in Montreal, a key aspect of the EU's image in Venezuela is the contrast between Europe's moderate foreign policy and the foreign policies of other actors in the region. Given the consensual nature of EU positions and the political cultures of modern European states, the EU tends to appear more impartial toward Venezuela's political actors, more cautious in its pronouncements, and more vehement about choosing dialogue and negotiation over confrontation. In this sense, the EU speaks to Venezuela more like the UN secretary general does than like other governments in the region, which could have political reasons to maintain a harder stance and explicitly support either the Maduro government or the opposition.

In Osío Cabrices's opinion, Europe has lost influence to China, Russia, and the United States since the last decades of the twentieth century. Correspondingly, there has been a lack of European interest in Latin America, which is more worried about its relationships with regions that have more direct impacts on the continent: Africa and the Middle East. Osío Cabrices contrasted the United States' geopolitical relationship with Venezuela with that of the EU, saying,

There's a series of commercial and financial ties with the United States that are natural due to geography and history that resist even [geopolitical] isolation. Geography works in favor of the United States as a more influential actor in Latin America than Europe. By way of example, I give you Cuba: even with important European investment, in the end the transactional [currency] is the dollar.<sup>162</sup>

Perhaps the main difference between Venezuela's views of the United States and of the EU was nailed down by Avelledo, who said that Washington may have more credibility than Brussels in Latin America because there is a sense among the Venezuelan population that the EU has significant international authority but limited space of execution: no one expects to see the EU leading an armed intervention in the region. And although the United States is suspected of having a more obscure agenda than the EU,

possibly driven more by internal politics than by a real concern for the Venezuelan people, Venezuelans see the country as more credible in terms of execution. In general, interviewees gravitated toward the opinion that the EU sometimes follows the lead of the United States.

García saw Europe as an important commercial partner and a “huge market” for Venezuela.<sup>163</sup> But he recognized how relations with Europe have been deteriorating in recent years. Turkey, Iran, Russia, and China have gained ground in their commercial ties with Venezuela, mostly for political reasons. Historically, however, both Europe and the United States were more natural markets and business partners for Venezuela. If there is a turn in the political tide, García believes the full potential of these relationships could be easily reestablished. He also noted that Spain is still very active in trade relations with Venezuela, including in the oil industry.

Commercially, the presence of China and the United States is deeply felt and recognized among the Venezuelan population. Venezuela has an economy that is highly dependent on imports, and Chinese and U.S. products have flooded the market in recent years. The Venezuelan economy is relatively new to digital purchases and services, which have sprouted quickly and aggressively because of the coronavirus pandemic. Still, Venezuelans’ buying habits remain focused on the local digital economy and U.S.-based entertainment services, such as streaming and education platforms.

In terms of security, De Bastos believes that internally, the EU is quite effective, but that externally, it relies too heavily on the United States, citing conflicts such as those in Syria, Libya, and even Bosnia and Herzegovina. Zambrano described a similar situation, where the EU’s actions are more symbolic than effective, which he believes is worrying because, as he said before Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, “Europe remains the wall that contains Russian authoritarianism.”<sup>164</sup>

## FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-VENEZUELA RELATIONS

In general, the experts interviewed hoped for more EU involvement in commerce, migration, values, the environment, security, and the fight against the coronavirus. Venezuelans see Europe as a positive influence, and if there is any criticism of the bloc’s role in these areas, it is that the EU should be more involved and more present.

For the general population, the EU’s influence is barely felt in Venezuela, and there is a belief that the union could help tip the balance in favor of promoting peace and democracy in the region, especially in Venezuela, and counteracting the nondemocratic influences of Russia, China, Cuba, and Iran.

Going forward, several actionable items emerged for the future of EU-Venezuela relations. The EU’s help on these items would not only be useful to tackle various aspects of Venezuela’s current crises but also provide good opportunities to bolster the union’s exposure in the country.

## Democracy Promotion

Regarding the union's role in promoting democratic values in Venezuela, it would be interesting to see the EU working more closely with the United States, unifying efforts to act under a more organized agenda and with the same objectives. Some of the problems of the past relate to a lack of communication between Brussels and Washington, and the fact that the two capitals communicate with different Venezuelan interlocutors on the same side of the conflict. The Venezuelan opposition is divided into different groups that tend to look for pathways that may earn them more power or a more convenient position if any kind of transition occurs. These small moves within the Venezuelan political spectrum create great rifts that end in time-consuming internal negotiations. Both the EU and the United States could take a role in helping prevent these situations by adopting a unified strategy with which to approach these groups.

## Investment

The EU should find ways to promote more commercial exchanges with Venezuela. European investment in the tourism sector could be well received as a source of employment and economic development. Quality employment is badly needed in Venezuela, and European companies that can provide it would see their efforts appreciated by the population, as long as European governments can negotiate with the Maduro administration to secure the necessary conditions to protect investments, repatriate dividends, and remain protected from expropriation.

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It is also important for the EU to engage directly with the private sector, especially small companies and individual entrepreneurs. Any investment in Venezuela requires a plan to promote the financial independence of the Venezuelan population and oversee such investment to protect it from government corruption. It is key that European companies and governments do not repeat mistakes of the past, such as some of the deals with the regime in Cuba, where the EU made significant investment in a tourism industry that excludes Cubans from both the business successes and the enjoyment of those services. While a big part of the responsibility for successful economic relations depends on the good faith of the Venezuelan government, and Brussels should maintain cordial relations with the Maduro administration, engagement with private actors may produce effective short-term results.

Other forms of economic exchange are likely to return to Venezuela, as international actors, including the EU and the United States, have shown varying levels of openness to reviewing and relaxing their sanctions regimes. Observers can expect to see more engagement in the oil sector and other state-controlled industries, although relations in these areas will likely be influenced by the political crisis and have only an indirect effect on the Venezuelan population.

## Cultural Activities

The EU should make greater use of its active diplomatic corps, which has established good relations with different sectors of Venezuelan civil society despite the recent impasse with the government. Cultural initiatives, such as the vast range of activities in which the French embassy is involved, are a relevant part

of European influence and resonate with the communities they impact directly and with certain well-informed stakeholders who can amplify these activities in social media and the press. This sort of activity, in parallel with different forms of humanitarian aid, can provide significant visibility through actions that will get less pushback from the Maduro government.

## Migration

Finally, the EU should promote the mobilization of funds to aid Venezuelans in critical conditions both in and outside the country. The union should also work on providing a more accurate classification of Venezuelan migrants to improve access to appropriate resources for such a large displaced population. As it stands, Venezuelan migrants are not protected under any special international classification, as many are seen as individual migrants pushed to the diaspora for economic reasons. Humanitarian categories such as “displaced person” or “refugee” do not usually apply to Venezuelan migrants because these labels have specific criteria. For example, the definition of “refugee” established in the 1951 Refugee Convention fits those who can prove they have been victims of political persecution: political prisoners and victims of repression who have obtained asylum in countries that have ratified the convention, including most Latin American states. But as explained by Osío Cabrices and journalist Kaoru Yonekura, this concept “doesn’t fit the large majority of Venezuelans who left as a result of violent pressure that can’t be proven, or simply because they understood that if they didn’t leave to find work in another country, their kids would starve to death.”<sup>165</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Overall, Venezuelans take a positive view of the EU as a global actor and a party to Venezuela’s political crisis, even if the general public’s knowledge of the bloc and its functions is lower than when it comes to other international actors. As a point of convergence, interviewees saw Europe as a positive force in the fight for democracy and admired its efforts to balance its values between respect for individual rights and collective well-being.

However, EU sanctions on Venezuela are hardly discussed in the country, where they are seen as less harmful than those imposed by the United States and in tune with a bigger diplomatic strategy by the EU to regain political stability in Venezuela. Most interviewees agreed that the union has been losing ground to China and Russia in the economic and political spheres. Some also highlighted that internally, the EU is quite effective, but that externally, it relies too heavily on the United States.

Venezuelans see European countries as leaders in most fields and in global conversations on human and civil rights and economic prosperity. Still, Brexit and nationalist sentiments in other European states create the perception that the EU is slowly losing its place as a strategic global player and that these internal problems are causing the bloc to lose credibility. Another handicap of the EU is its slow bureaucracy and its need to align many different views from member countries, making it hard to create actionable items.

In terms of the EU's response to Venezuela's humanitarian emergency and migration crisis, Venezuelans appreciate the work of ECHO in documenting the origins of the crisis in a timely manner and helping create a study basis, which contributed to pressuring the UN and other international organizations to recognize the humanitarian emergency. However, underfunding is highlighted as one of the most pressing matters in international aid for Venezuela.

Interviewees underscored the way EU member states have handled their own migration crises as recipient countries for migrants and refugees to set standards of respect for human rights and support for destination countries. But humanitarian workers claimed that even though the EU had mobilized special funding for aid during the coronavirus pandemic, they had seen no improvement in the EU's humanitarian response during 2020.

In sum, Venezuelans regard the EU as an adequate partner and an important nonpolarizing force in their country's political crisis. Looking ahead, Venezuelans hope for more EU involvement in all aspects of the relationship. It is now time for the bloc to go further in promoting peace and democracy in Latin America and countering illiberal influences in the region.

## CHAPTER 7

# ZIMBABWE: THE LONG SHADOW OF SANCTIONS

CHIPO DENDERE

### INTRODUCTION

For a long time, most Africans viewed the European Union (EU) only in terms of their countries' relationships with former colonial powers, notably the United Kingdom (UK) and France. The UK has been the primary European influence in Zimbabwe because of the colonial history between the two nations. The reality is that most Zimbabweans have not always fully understood the structure of the EU or the organization's influence in their country.

However, in recent decades, the EU has gained a spotlight—along with the United States—because of the sanctions placed on Zimbabwe after the land-reform program in the 1990s and years of human rights abuses. One might say that sanctions are the focal point of Zimbabwe-EU relations. Yet, while EU representatives, like their UK and U.S. counterparts, have claimed that the sanctions are targeted and do not hurt ordinary citizens, this message has not landed well among Zimbabweans.<sup>166</sup> The Zimbabwean government continues to send the message to the country's citizens that sanctions are to blame for the failing economy. Indeed, a mantra of opposing sanctions has been the main campaign message of the ruling party for nearly twenty years.

While the Zimbabwean government has been adamant about pursuing its land-reform program, which seeks to alter the ethnic balance of land ownership, and blaming Western states for Zimbabwe's failures, the country needs aid. Since the death of former president Robert Mugabe, President Emmerson Mnangagwa has been eager to normalize Zimbabwe's relationships with Western countries. To that end, the late foreign affairs minister, Sibusiso Moyo, and the finance minister, Mthuli Ncube, aggressively pushed the message that Zimbabwe was open for business and limited reforms. Moyo emphasized that Zimbabwe was incredibly open to reengagement with the EU.<sup>167</sup>

Meanwhile, EU diplomats in Zimbabwe have been keen to differentiate the EU from the UK and create a more active presence in the country. The union has moderately increased its humanitarian aid work and normalized trade relations between Zimbabwe and EU member states. Brexit has had a positive impact on the EU's standing in Zimbabwe: as both the EU and the UK seek new ways to engage with Zimbabwe, Brussels has been more successful in articulating its position independently of London.

This chapter draws on in-depth interviews conducted over WhatsApp with the EU ambassador to Zimbabwe, with an EU official who has served in Zimbabwe for over a decade, and with eight individuals from the ruling party, the opposition, and civil society. In addition, the research involved conversations with academics, journalists, lawyers, and other professionals, as well as Zimbabweans in the United States and Zimbabwe. The conversations occurred between December 2020 and March 2021.

## CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE EU

Zimbabweans' perceptions of the EU are inextricably linked to Western sanctions. Beyond the immediate impacts of the punitive measures on daily life, sanctions have also colored Zimbabwean views of the EU on issues such as development, democracy support, and healthcare.

### Sanctions

The deterioration in Zimbabwe-EU relations can be traced back to the early 2000s, which marked a shift in Zimbabwean politics from a young democracy to a highly repressive state. The formation of a new opposition party led by activists, professionals, and trade unionists presented a real challenge to the one-party dominance of the Zimbabwe African National Union—Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF). Ahead of the 2000 legislative election, several regional and international organizations, including the EU, sent observer missions to Zimbabwe. ZANU-PF officials argued that the Zimbabwean government showed goodwill by allowing these missions into the country.

The EU mission, headed by Pierre Schori of Sweden, issued its final report on the election on July 4, 2000.<sup>168</sup> The report found that the body responsible for managing elections had not been adequately trained and lacked resources. More than twenty years on, this is still true and perhaps even worse. The EU report also noted high levels of violence, coercion, and intimidation before and during the election. Again, this continues to be a major problem with Zimbabwean elections. At the time, ZANU-PF officials felt that the report was one-sided and aimed at tarnishing the country's image. Opposition leaders and other activists have different recollections of the time: they feel that the 2000 election was the most open contest to date.

In conversations with current and former ZANU-PF officials, it was clear that the 2000 report by Schori's team is still a sore subject. Soon after the report's publication, the EU, the UK, and the United States issued warnings against the Zimbabwean government. In retaliation, Harare decided to ban all Western observers from the highly anticipated 2002 presidential election. As a result, Schori and his team of thirty observers were asked to leave the country in February 2002, just a month before the poll.<sup>169</sup>

In response to the 2000 election, the EU did not initially impose sanctions but instead issued a statement condemning the violence that had taken place. The EU tried to engage the Zimbabwean government via article 96 of the Cotonou Agreement, a treaty between the EU and African, Caribbean, and Pacific states, emphasizing that aid to Zimbabwe would be conditional on good governance.<sup>170</sup> However, the continued violation of human rights and the 2002 expulsion of the EU observer mission convinced the European Council that restrictive measures targeting government officials were justified.<sup>171</sup>

The sanctions against Zimbabwe passed by the EU, the United States, and the UK have been a significant source of contention in Zimbabwe ever since. The sanctions are limited and directly impact officials of the ruling party, their families, and anyone responsible for human rights violations. Under the restrictive measures, specific individuals are banned from traveling to Europe and the United States, and their foreign assets are frozen. Under the Cotonou Agreement, the EU also suspended all direct development cooperation with the Zimbabwean government. However, because of manipulation by ZANU-PF, some citizens perceive the sanctions as the primary cause of Zimbabwe's declining economy and the reason why they individually are poor. Some citizens also think that the country has failed to make strides on the global economic stage because sanctions prevent Zimbabwe from exporting goods.

Opposition politicians and pro-democracy activists in Zimbabwe have a slightly different view of the sanctions. Those in opposition have hoped that the Zimbabwean government would be motivated to open up the country's political space if doing so would lead to a relaxation of some of the sanctions. But the ruling party has continued to use sanctions to excuse its multitude of failures. Relations between Zimbabwe and the EU have continued to deteriorate over the years. ZANU-PF has since labeled civil society organizations and Western nations "traitors" and "change agents."

## Development

Government officials argue that the sanctions have stifled development. Zimbabwe is barred from getting much-needed loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Perhaps more pressing for the government is that the sanctions have tainted the country's image. One government official said that sanctions are like a "death mark" because no one wants to do legitimate business in Zimbabwe.<sup>172</sup> After all, potential investors fear that the West may retaliate by blacklisting their countries' governments for having worked with Zimbabwe. Although there was no evidence of this retaliation, the fear of it is real enough.

The government also maintains that although the EU and other Western counterparts claim that the sanctions are targeted, their impact is not. Government officials and, indeed, most regular citizens interviewed believed that the struggles of ordinary people are directly tied to the sanctions. Citizens of various ages and education levels all shared the belief that while the intention of the sanctions is targeted, their effect is universal.

A big challenge for the EU with respect to the sanctions narrative in Zimbabwe is that the messaging has never been clear—or rather, that the EU, as one former diplomat said, has lost the "messaging battle," with profound unintended consequences.<sup>173</sup> For example, some Zimbabwean companies have faced

difficulties when trying to do business in the United States and EU countries. The EU as a donor is within its rights to sanction officials in an attempt to hold the Zimbabwean government to account for its well-documented human rights abuses. The real issue is not whether the EU should use its influence to enforce human rights but rather how the EU can best achieve this without punishing ordinary citizens.

Brian Raftopoulos, a leading political scientist, reported in an interview that European diplomats had pointed to many missed opportunities to reengage on the topic of sanctions and development. For example, during the 2008–2013 Government of National Unity, in which ZANU-PF and opposition parties shared governance after the contentious 2008 presidential and parliamentary elections, the EU could have extended an olive branch to support the efforts of pro-democracy initiatives. However, instead, most EU countries closed their embassies in Zimbabwe. As the embassy staff left, the number of donors and the amount of aid available in the country shrank. Some in the opposition felt that the EU was quick to embrace ZANU-PF during the Government of National Unity and again more openly in the period immediately after the 2017 Zimbabwean coup.

A former UK representative to Zimbabwe stated in an interview that in 2017, most diplomats had been ready to move on from two decades of troubled politics and support the new Zimbabwean government. At the time, the UK representative was the most prominent European diplomat in Zimbabwe, and citizens generally saw the UK position as representative of the EU as a whole.

### **Democracy Support**

Civil society and opposition leaders agree that democracy in Zimbabwe would have suffered even more without EU aid. Assistance provided by the union and other donors, such as the United States and Scandinavian countries, kept the lights on for pro-democracy organizations. Specifically, doctors who provided care for activists reported that most of the medical aid given to Zimbabwe was made possible by generous contributions from donors. Of course, this engagement between donors and civil society is not well regarded by the ruling party. According to ZANU-PF officials, the fact that the EU was willing to work with groups they call change agents is evidence that the union did not respect Zimbabwe's independence.

Civil society representatives and individuals active in political spaces are very knowledgeable about the EU and its various programs in Zimbabwe. Three directors of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) interviewed were direct beneficiaries of funding from the EU or from EU member states like Sweden; most of this aid has gone toward healthcare projects and community awareness. At the same time, those in the civil society sector reported that funding for community partnerships had declined in recent years. The United States has also been providing aid to community organizations, but that aid, too, is dwindling.

Civil society activists attributed this shift to a change in the relationships between Zimbabwe's ruling party and Western embassies. These activists feel that as the EU has warmed to the Mnangagwa government, the Europeans have become more reluctant to provide funding. EU officials, for their part, claim that their relationship with Zimbabwean NGOs has not waned and that they are committed to supporting

pro-democracy initiatives. When asked whether they had warmed to the new government, the EU officials said that the relationship was evolving. Indeed, the EU has been eager to normalize relations with Zimbabwe and has welcomed the political promises of Mnangagwa's government a bit too hastily and without real progress on the ground.

Opposition politicians and activists also share the concern that funding for pro-democracy initiatives is on the decline. A civil society leader reported that over the last five years, Western partners had reduced their support for pro-democracy organizations by about 50 percent.<sup>174</sup> In the weeks leading up to Zimbabwe's 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections, the United States pulled funding from critical organizations working on electoral transparency, including in Zimbabwe, and another group that provides healthcare for victims of political violence.

The EU has traditionally tailored its behavior to that of the United States in the sense that Western partners tend to work on similar projects, and it appears to Zimbabwean civil society activists that the EU follows the U.S. lead in this area. There is also a sense among nonstate actors in Zimbabwe that EU member states and other partners have not done enough to push the government in Harare to include them in discussions on moving the country forward.

An EU official in Zimbabwe admitted that the type of EU aid that goes to nonstate actors was bound to decline. It is understandable that Western officials are concerned about complaints from their citizens about overspending in foreign countries, but perhaps the issue has to do with how aid is framed back home. Like most African countries, Zimbabwe is still recovering from the legacy of colonialism, although the authoritarian nature of the current government has not helped. There are many reasons why Zimbabwe's main opposition is weakened, including poor structural organization, infighting, and threats from the ruling party, but chief among them is a lack of funding. There is a sense from members of the opposition that donor partners have shut their doors.

Therefore, while EU countries might seek to reduce overseas aid to cater to dissenting voices at home, this strategy has its problems. The declining level of EU aid and the conditionality attached to it present a challenge for the union as China is already invested in Zimbabwe and is willing to work with the government without putting any pressure on the state to improve its poor human rights record. Western nations cannot afford to push for economic partnerships while ignoring political stability.

## Healthcare

Unlike activists focused on governance and democracy issues, interlocutors in the health sector depicted a different picture and seemed pleased with EU engagement. They generally recognized that the EU had been influential in providing much-needed funds for local institutions.

On the coronavirus pandemic, second and third waves of the virus have been particularly detrimental to African countries. Many interviewees had lost at least one family member to the coronavirus or secondary causes related to pressures on Zimbabwe's healthcare system.

There is concern among Zimbabweans that Western partners, including the EU, have not done all in their power to help developing nations like Zimbabwe acquire coronavirus vaccines. In terms of vaccine procurement, China has been a more loyal partner than the EU to African countries. Zimbabwe is one of few African states with an advanced vaccination program, yet the only available vaccine in Zimbabwe is from China. Although most Zimbabwean citizens do not trust the Chinese vaccine, there are no other options available, as Western countries have been slow to approve the sharing of vaccine patents. Perhaps if there were more choice, more Zimbabweans would take up a coronavirus vaccine, thereby increasing community protection against the virus.

The pandemic was an opportunity for the EU to strengthen its relations with Zimbabwe by providing much-needed healthcare relief and engaging in partnerships on healthcare access and vaccine delivery, but this did not happen. Zimbabwe's healthcare system was already weak before the pandemic and is in a much worse situation now.

## **FUTURE PRIORITIES FOR EU-ZIMBABWE RELATIONS**

Within the framework of the EU-Zimbabwe relationship, there are opportunities for the Europeans to revitalize their approaches toward Zimbabwe on a range of issues, from education and work to agriculture and trade through to climate change and human rights.

### **Education and Work**

Zimbabwe, like most African countries, has the advantage of a young population. Young people interviewed had a better understanding of the EU as a separate entity from its member states. Young people also saw many opportunities for engaging with the EU. The youth primarily argued that they would like to see the EU create more study exchanges between member states and Zimbabwe like those established by the United States, the UK, and now China. Young Zimbabweans interested in the health sector or technology could benefit from attending European universities.

While it is true that many Zimbabweans who emigrate for study do not return home immediately after completing their studies, it is also true that they tend to be gainfully employed in their host countries and their remittances have a positive impact on the livelihoods of families left behind. At the same time, the UK and the United States both offer time-limited study programs that incentivize foreign students to return to their home countries. There is an opportunity for the EU to do the same.

Interviewees also suggested that the EU might consider short-term immigrant worker opportunities to boost sectors in which EU member countries do not have a sufficient workforce. For example, Zimbabwe has a large population of trained nurses and other healthcare workers, while the EU has an aging population with a high demand for health professionals. EU member states could establish agreements with the Zimbabwean government to allow part of an employee's salary to be remitted directly to Zimbabwe. Two

Zimbabwean nurses based in Germany mentioned in interviews that they had seen a growing need for their expertise, and countries like Germany are well equipped to enable such professional relationships.

Meanwhile, a truck driver based in Victoria Falls suggested transportation as another area for possible engagement. Zimbabwe has a surplus of trained truck drivers, while Western countries are in need of individuals with this skill set. Therefore, this is an opportunity for short-term guest worker programs.

## Tourism

EU Ambassador to Zimbabwe Timo Olkkonen said he hoped to see more Zimbabwe-EU partnerships in tourism. Many Zimbabwean respondents shared the same sentiment. In recent years, the number of EU tourists going to Zimbabwe has declined. The loss of tourism revenue is felt especially in Victoria Falls, where locals depend heavily on tourism for their day-to-day living.

A local chief who runs a cultural village noted that whereas in the past he would have as many as twenty tour groups a day, now he is lucky if a handful show up in a week. Part of this decline is no doubt due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, the chief also felt that miscommunication by the United States, the UK, and the EU about sanctions had contributed to negative publicity about Zimbabwe and the subsequent decline in tourism. At the same time, Zimbabwean government officials claim that the West's language on sanctions has created the image that Zimbabwe is a war zone, which is far from an accurate representation of the situation in the country.

The decline in tourism is one of the unintended consequences of the poor framing of Western sanctions. Many foreign tourists are unable to access their bank accounts while they are in Zimbabwe because the banks are operating in a country under embargo. While such issues can be quickly resolved over the phone, they create a hostile tourism environment. Zimbabweans would like to be better informed by European representatives about which entities are affected by sanctions to reduce the negative impacts on regular citizens.

## Agriculture and Trade

In addition to tourism, Zimbabweans see opportunities in the agricultural sector. Zimbabwe was once considered the breadbasket of Africa. While the hurried land-reform program caused serious havoc in the sector, there have been significant improvements, especially from younger and more innovative farmers. For example, Clarence Mwale, a young entrepreneur whose company assists farmers in meeting EU regulations, said that there were many products from Zimbabwe that could be of great value to the EU. Beyond traditional exports like horticulture, Zimbabwean farmers have been heavily investing in organic food.

However, small farmers face many barriers to entering the European market because of trade imbalances. Export costs for Zimbabweans are too high, and the requirements for their goods to enter the EU are

needlessly cumbersome. Zimbabwean farmers also complained of being jilted by European counterparts. For example, one horticulture farmer interviewed chose to dig in an entire field of flowers after his EU buyers cut the purchase price by more than 70 percent.<sup>175</sup>

Zimbabwean traders reported that in their attempts to circumvent the challenges posed by the sanctions against Zimbabwe, they sometimes end up dealing with dishonest Europeans who promise to help them process the necessary export paperwork. For instance, the same horticulture farmer said that poor EU regulation left African farmers like him at risk of dealing with predators. He explained that he once sold his produce via a European third party who had promised to help him get around the sanctions. The party ended up swindling him of both his produce and his money.

Misinformation about sanctions also plays a role in limiting exports of Zimbabwean produce to the European market. More clarity and better communication on sanctions, aside from countering political manipulation, could benefit Zimbabwean exporters and ensure that European consumers have access to a broader range of organic food products. EU diplomats in Zimbabwe mentioned that they would like to see more trade engagement between Zimbabwe and the EU, so clearly, there is an understanding that this relationship is beneficial to both parties.

However, in September 2020, the EU said it would not renew its funding in support of agricultural activities in Zimbabwe.<sup>176</sup> Meanwhile, the U.S. Agency for International Development gave nearly €83 million (\$86.9 million) between October 2019 and March 2020 to improve food security in Zimbabwe, and China has donated agricultural equipment.<sup>177</sup> Agriculture remains the backbone of the Zimbabwean economy, providing employment for at least 70 percent of the population, with 60 percent of raw materials and over 45 percent of the nation's exports originating in the agricultural sector. Much of Zimbabwe's trade is anchored in agriculture as either raw materials or secondary products.<sup>178</sup>

Greater European investment in agriculture would directly benefit the millions of Zimbabweans employed in the sector and strengthen people's resolve to make political choices that are not influenced by their desperate need for food. Additional support for Zimbabwean farmers would also benefit the EU, especially given the devastating impact of Russia's war in Ukraine—one of the world's leading producers of grain.

### Climate Change

Zimbabweans in the agricultural sector would also like to see more engagement on climate change-related issues. Zimbabwe has experienced extreme weather changes, resulting in floods and droughts. In 2019, in response to Cyclone Idai, the EU donated over €12 million (\$13 million) to the three affected countries of Malawi, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.<sup>179</sup> Individuals involved in the relief efforts said that every donation made an impact in terms of saving lives and rebuilding homes.

Thinking ahead, farmers and academics said that EU-Zimbabwean relations could be strengthened through the sharing of knowledge and expertise and farmer-exchange programs. Additionally, the EU has a lot of experience to share on maximizing space, managing waste and water, controlling pollution, and creating smart cities.

## Aid

Young Zimbabweans also pointed out that the EU and other Western donors tend to have a rural bias in their aid programs, leaving the urban youth vulnerable to poverty. The excessive focus on providing food aid to rural areas leads, perhaps unintentionally, to the bolstering of the ruling party, because it often gets the credit for rural programs that perform well. Interviewees suggested that if the EU invested in the urban youth, they would be better positioned to find sustainable employment, which would address some of their social challenges. In addition, the creation of more opportunities for the youth would help mitigate Zimbabwe's massive problem of drug addiction among its young population.

By increasing its urban-focused programs, the EU would also boost its visibility in Zimbabwe and could create opportunities in areas such as the digital economy. EU support in 2021 of over €3 million (\$3.2 million) to address food insecurity among urban Zimbabweans was a step in the right direction.<sup>180</sup> However, this aid could be improved with direct grants to support employment creation, so that people can have an income to buy their own food. Solving food challenges is a sustainable, long-term strategy for dealing with conflict and political manipulation by the ruling party.

## Human Rights

Finally, the EU's strong position on human rights, while admirable, must show flexibility in areas that can empower ordinary Zimbabweans. That is to say, the EU should give equal attention to Zimbabwe's economic needs. A more robust economy would support the growth of a solid middle class, which would be empowered to demand better governance and would therefore be good for democracy. Organic demands for reforms from a self-sustaining population are likely to have a greater and more durable impact than efforts imposed from outside.

## CONCLUSION

The EU has been a consistent partner of Zimbabwe for many years. However, the way the EU operates and its impacts are not clear to ordinary Zimbabweans—or even, at times, to the educated elites, although there is some nuance among civil society actors. Quite a few interviewees confused the EU with the IMF. Through its delegation in Zimbabwe, the EU could do more to invest in a visibility campaign. Part of the challenge here is that several EU member states as well as non-European countries are active in Zimbabwe, making it difficult for the average Zimbabwean to differentiate them.

Given some Zimbabweans' past tendency to confuse the EU with the UK (and its heavy colonial baggage), one of the unexpected benefits of Brexit is that it has freed the EU from the UK's shadow. Recent EU delegations have done an excellent job of engaging with Zimbabweans on social media and increasing the EU's visibility; however, since only a small proportion of Zimbabwe's population is active on social media, such efforts have a limited impact.

The most critical issue stalling EU-Zimbabwe relations, though, has to do with the sanctions on the country. The moral reasons behind the measures are valid, but the messaging on them has failed in both Zimbabwe and Europe. This has led to adverse unintended consequences on ordinary people, affecting trade, tourism, and other areas of development. To address this shortcoming, the EU needs to invest in better messaging on sanctions. As things stand, Zimbabwe's ruling party seems to be winning the propaganda war as it continues to use the sanctions as an excuse for its failures.

A note of hope comes from Zimbabweans, especially the youth, who see room for collaboration on trade, tourism, migration, and investment to address climate challenges. EU citizens can benefit from Zimbabwean agriculture and tourism while Zimbabweans can gain from knowledge sharing and educational opportunities. The coronavirus pandemic opened new avenues of virtual collaboration. Looking ahead, there is hope for better relations between Zimbabwe and the EU.

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