Conclusion: External Perceptions of the EU and EU Foreign Policy Making at Times of Brexit

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Conclusion: External Perceptions of the EU and EU Foreign Policy Making at Times of Brexit

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Abstract: The Brexit vote of June 2016 has prompted global audiences to look at the EU afresh. These perceptions of the EU post Brexit referendum have been investigated in the contributions to this volume. This concluding chapter reviews the country-cases presented in this volume and summarizes their results with regard to the three guiding research questions. The chapters reveal a limited change to the global perceptions of the EU following the Brexit referendum. Beyond the economic realm, Brexit has had little independent effect on the images of the EU as a global actor. However, Brexit is seen to add to the pre-existing crises of the EU that keep undermining the EU's global appeal. With regard to the changing policy priorities of third countries, we discern some common trends as well as some differences between the various country perceptions. This underlines that the interplay of the three types of factors – *exogenous* (EU specific), *endogenous* (third country domestic) and *global* – has a significant role in shaping perceptions of countries' policy options *vis-à-vis* the EU in the post-referendum period. We conclude by working out policy recommendations for EU foreign policy makers for the time after the UK's exit from the EU.

Introduction

The Brexit vote of June 2016 has prompted global audiences to look at the EU anew. Contributions to this volume, guided by the common conceptual framework and informed by a range of methods (see Introduction by Speyer, Chaban and Niemann2020), reveal a varied and nuanced picture of external perceptions of the EU that faces an exit of a major member state. In our concluding chapter, we draw together the main results of the cases featured in the volume and discuss them through the lens of our leading research questions: (1) How do third countries perceive the EU after the Brexit referendum? Have these perceptions changed and if so, in what way? In how far does the country in question perceive Brexit to impact on the EU's legitimacy, credibility and/or coherence? Do perceptions differ, when different types of Brexit (hard/soft/no deal) are assumed? (2) What foreign policy options do

these countries consider as a result, also with regard to the bi-lateral relationship with the EU? (3) What impact will this have on EU external policy? Which lessons can be derived for practitioners?

Perceptions of the EU after the Brexit Referendum

Our volume chose to track perceptions of the EU in the countries that belong to regions singled out and prioritised by EU Global Strategy (European Union 2016). Our analyses of perceptions and information flows in these strategic locations demonstrated that the decision of the UK to leave the EU has *not* been perceived as a detrimental blow to the images of the European integration project. Research cases that build this collection also evidence that the perceptions of Brexit – and of the EU affected by it – are not universal. In every location, a unique combination of *exogenous, endogenous* and *global* factors shapes the EU's image. The comparative analysis undertaken in this Conclusion, however, allows us to identify several common influences.

Globally, Donald Trump's taking office in January 2017, six months after the Brexit referendum, and his unilateralist policies have overshadowed the turmoil in the EU in the eyes of external observers. Moreover, Trump's election and policies have improved the perceptions of the EU by comparison. Trump's victory and Brexit have signalled a turn away from the rules-based world order, while the EU-27 is seen to re-assert its position as a firm supporter of multilateralism.

We also have identified several common factors influencing EU perceptions in *endogenous* terms. The course of a bilateral relationship between the EU and a third country influences country-specific perceptions of the EU significantly. The recent conclusions of partnerships and free trade agreements with the EU were conducive to positive perceptions of the EU in Canada, Japan, Mexico and South Korea (Dominguez 2020; Endo 2020; Hurrelmann 2020; Park and Chung 2020 respectively). Those countries that favour bilateral relationships with EU member states (e.g. India (Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020)) communicated a different perception – namely, the need to redirect their attention from the UK to France and/or Germany, but not to switch it to the supranational EU. In addition, we can distinguish

between countries that perceive the EU as a partner in economic terms predominantly (the Asian countries in our volume) and those countries that recognise the EU's political profile as an influential determinant to their bilateral relations.

A third country's ties to the UK are the second *endogenous* factor conditioning the image of the EU and relations with it. Particularly interesting in this regard are countries with a British colonial legacy -- see analyses on Canada, India, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand (Hurrelmann 2020; Kelly and Mochan 2020; Kotsopoulos 2020; Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). The visibility of Brexit is undeniably high in the Commonwealth countries. Brexit is a salient issue for them, not least because of the fact that the UK's accession to the EEC in 1973 had affected their economies profoundly. Intertwined with historical memories, cultural ties and demographic links, the images of the UK in the context of Brexit bear an impact on the perceptions of the EU in these locations.

On the intersection of *global* and *endogenous* lies a country's self-image of its own global importance. A more assertive image in this regard seems to relate negatively to the perceived legitimacy of the EU. While rising powers such as China, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Brazil, acknowledge the importance of the EU, they contrast their own national models of development against the supranational goals of the EU, and see the latter goals as illegitimate (see Ananieva 2020; Jin and Kirchner 2020). In a somewhat different scenario, India communicates a sustained reluctance to engage with the supranational EU, preferring bilateral partnerships with powerful member states instead (Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). This also applies to the US conservative/republican position exemplified by Donald Trump (Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020). In contrast, countries of moderate global importance – and some of them "middle powers" – hold stable and often more positive perceptions of the EU (see chapters in this volume by Chaban and Knodt 2020; Dominguez 2020; Park and Chung 2020; Hurrelmann 2020).

Brexit is itself an *exogenous* factor influencing EU perceptions. Significantly, Brexit is rarely seen as a stand-alone crisis in the EU context. It is recognised as a part of a larger chain of EU crises which have

dented the EU's external image for more than a decade (e.g. Chaban and Holland 2014; 2019 Chaban and Elgström 2020; Chaban, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin 2019). Research presented in this volume supports this perception (see cases on Mexico (Dominguez 2020); the MENA region (Isani, Schlipphak and Silverman 2020); China (Jin and Kirchner 2020), Ukraine (Chaban and Knodt 2020)). Despite the drama of Brexit, the EU continues to receive a somewhat limited visibility in the eyes of external observers (see e.g. Kotsopoulos 2020). This modest profile echoes the findings of low visibility of the EU by earlier studies on EU perceptions (Chaban and Holland 2008; Lucarelli 2014).

Perceptions of the EU as an 'economic powerhouse' continue to be among the most typical, especially in Asia. This lingering perception observed at times of uncertainty highlights an often pragmatic external view of and approach towards the EU. Rising economies in Asia (India, China and South Korea) demonstrated an additional perception: Brexit is sometimes seen as an opportunity for them as it enhances their own negotiation clout *vis-à-vis* the UK and the EU. Many global partners see Brexit as weakening the UK rather than the EU (e.g. country-cases of Ukraine by Chaban and Knodt 2020; Australia and New Zealand by Kelly and Mochan 2020; South Africa by Kotsopoulos 2020; India by Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). Yet, the concern that the EU might engage in navel-gazing (and perhaps even protectionism) as a result of Brexit is also widespread (e.g. Jin and Kirchner 2020; Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020). The loss of a member state that highly values liberal economy and free trade is seen to affect the EU-27 negatively.

The post-referendum period highlighted perceptions of the EU as a political ally or an important global political actor. This is more the case for the countries with British colonial legacy (excluding India in this volume) as well as the countries neighbouring the EU to the East and South.[1] Images of the EU's political and global importance are nuanced. While some country-cases reported that the Brexit development did not cause any major difference to the perceptions of the EU's political power (e.g. MENA (Isani, Schlipphak and Silverman 2020), Ukraine (Chaban and Knodt 2020), Mexico (Dominguez 2020) or South Africa (Kotsopoulos 2020)), it was different in Australia and New Zealand (Kelly and Mochan 2020), Russia (Ananieva 2020) and Turkey (Alpan and Şenyuva 2020).

For countries in the latter group, the prospect of Brexit has affected negatively the images of the EU's legitimacy and its global engagement in particular. And, as mentioned above, Brexit is also seen as an extension of the EU's other crises which have affected the EU for more than ten years. In those countries where the governing elites support nativist and nationalist visions (especially China, Russia and the US under the Trump administration), Brexit is seen as a proof for a worldview which cherishes national sovereignty. Hence, in these countries the (pro-government) elites foresee a further process of disintegration fuelled by the EU's lacking internal legitimacy (Ananieva 2020, 7-8; Jin and Kirchner 2020, 14; Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020, 8-11). In contrast, other countries (especially Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Japan, Ukraine, as well as the current opposition in the US) grapple with a profound confusion about the UK and its Brexit decision, which they see as irrational and damaging the UK's interests (Chaban and Knodt 2020; Endo 2020; Kelly and Mochan 2020; Kotsopoulos 2020*;* Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020).

The cohesive stance presented by the EU-27 in the negotiations with the UK was perceived positively. For some, this cohesion attenuated fears of further disintegration (e.g. Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020, 10; Jin and Kirchner 2020, 24). Nevertheless, the feeling of uncertainty induced by the prolonged negotiations and the repeated postponements of the actual exit date have dampened the EU's images (e.g. Park and Chung 2020; Kelly and Mochan 2020). For some, the post-referendum confusion and ambiguity may prompt a turn away from the UK as countries cannot "afford to wait to see what direction a post-EU UK takes" (Kelly and Mochan 2020, 18).

The logic of geopolitical regions has guided the structure of this volume. Identified by the most recent EU Global Strategy (European Union 2016), these regions did exhibit some intra-regional coherence in their perceptions of the EU. This can be observed in the Asia-Pacific, the Wide Atlantic and among EU neighbours to the East and South.[2]

As for the Asia-Pacific region, pragmatic economic perceptions of the EU were paramount, with the possible exception of Australia and New Zealand (Kelly and Mochan 2020). These two countries

reported a broader set of perceptions, mostly due to their intensive cultural and historical ties to the UK. While reflecting on the EU at times of uncertainty, countries under study in this region explicated self-images of rising self-esteem and confidence. They emphasized perceptions of their own gains and interests (in economic and political terms) rather than images of looking up respectfully to the European model (see Endo 2020; Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020; Jin and Kirchner 2020; Park and Chung 2020). The examined cohorts in the Asia-Pacific expressed most of their concerns about the economic impact of Brexit. Importantly, the prospects of Brexit cause them neither panic nor fear. Moreover, they perceive certain opportunities: Brexit may help them to further their own (economic) position in upcoming negotiations with the EU and the UK, as discussed above.

For the Wide Atlantic, the most striking finding is the polarization of EU perceptions in Canada and the US (Hurrelmann 2020; Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020). In both countries, the conservatives' perceptions of the EU are deeply impacted by Brexit. They tend to prioritise a special relationship with the UK, while disregarding, or even slandering, the EU. The liberal-progressive discourse on the other hand appreciates relations with the EU over the UK and warns of the negative effects of Brexit. This politicization of transatlanticism can be attributed mainly to the historically strong cultural, economic and political relations of both countries with the UK. With the UK leaving the EU, both sides of the political continuum in the US and Canada are facing a sudden perceived choice between the EU and the UK, which did not exist while the UK was a member of the EU. In contrast, the contested vision of the two forms of transatlantic relationships is not that strong in the case studies covering Latin American countries. Its relationship with neither the EU nor the UK has been as historically charged as in the Anglo-Saxon part of the Americas (Dominguez 2020; Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020).

Finally, the EU's neighbours to the East and South stand out due to their emphasis on political rather than economic visions of the EU. For Turkey and Russia, Brexit is an extension of the EU's crises that triggers a serious deterioration of EU perceptions. In those two important neighbours to the East and South of the Union, Brexit highlights the image of the EU in terms of faltering legitimacy and

entrenched hypocrisy (Alpan and Şenyuva 2020; Ananieva 2020). Ukraine, however, is different. For it, Brexit is not the "worst" EU crisis. It is not seen to damage the EU's perceptions as a political or economic partner for the country. Ukrainians continue to see the EU in terms of strong capabilities and promising opportunities for Ukraine on its road towards Europe and during the ongoing violent conflict in the East of the country. As such, the post-referendum EU continues to enjoy the image of a credible and legitimate partner to Ukraine (Chaban and Knodt 2020).

To summarise, answers to our first research question reveal limited change to the global perceptions of the EU following the Brexit referendum. Beyond the economic realm, Brexit has had little independent effect on the images of the EU as a global actor. However, the Brexit vote and the uncertainty that ensued in Europe afterwards has added a negative 'buzz' to the EU's image already dented by the multiple crises in the past. It is this *combined* impression that keeps undermining the EU's global appeal post Brexit referendum. Moreover, the Brexit phenomenon yielded new support to countries and leaders around the world who argue for nativist/nationalist scenarios for their states.

Foreign policy options concerning the bi-lateral relationship with the EU

With regard to our second research question, we discern some common trends as well as some differences between the various country perceptions. The interplay of the three types of factors – *exogenous* (EU specific); *endogenous* (domestic); and *global* – has a significant role in shaping perceptions of countries' policy options *vis-à-vis* the EU in the post-referendum period.

As for *exogenous factors* and Brexit in particular, several contributions tracked a 'business-as-usual' pattern in terms of perceived policy options instead of a dramatic change of course in the wake of the UK's departure from the Union. Isani, Schlipphak and Silverman (2020) described the MENA region as largely insulated from the British exit from the EU. The uncertainties concerning the type of Brexit ('hard' or 'soft') have motivated countries like Brazil to continue "as before", not least because they could not detect evident opportunities from the Brexit process for themselves (Lazarou, Cuotto and

Theodoro Luciano 2020). This type of policy route is, to a lesser extent, also reflected in the overall assessments of the Brexit situation by other countries, such as Japan, South Africa or Ukraine (Chaban and Knodt 2020; Endo 2020; Kotsopoulos 2020).

This does not mean however that Brexit has not influenced policy options in most of the countries analysed in this volume. Perhaps the most noticeable trend emerging from the country-cases concerns trade and investment policies of individual states and companies. For many of the countries analysed in this volume, the UK has served as a 'gateway' into the EU and its Single Market. With Brexit – especially in its 'harder' versions – the UK is increasingly seen as no longer being in a position to serve this function. As a result, China, India, Japan and South Africa are exploring other markets and consider shifting their business headquarters from London to the European continent (Endo 2020; Jin and Kirchner 2020; Kotsopoulos 2020; Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). In addition, a number of governments, including those of China and Brazil, seem to be wary of a more protectionist EU after Brexit (Jin and Kirchner 2020; Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020). In the light of these perceptions, Brazil lobbied for the conclusion of the EU-Mercosur trade agreement before the UK exits from the Union (Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020).

When it comes to the question of future trade relations with the EU and the UK, most of the domestic elites tend to emphasise that both partners are important to them. Respondents in some countries are keen to move on with a completion, progression or modernisation of their respective bilateral (free) trade agreements (or trade relationships) with the EU and consider a trade agreement with the UK after Brexit takes place. Yet, this parallel-track strategy is not appealing to all. Decision- and policy-makers in Mexico, Japan, South Korea, Ukraine, Australia and New Zealand express their priority to advance their new or modernised/upgraded agreements with the EU first (Chaban and Knodt 2020; Endo 2020; Dominguez 2020; Kelly and Mochan 2020; Park and Chung 2020). The current US government seems to be an outlier here (Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020). For the Trump administration, a free trade deal with the UK has a preference over a deepening of trade relations with the EU.

This brings us to *endogenous* (domestic) factors. Our discussion above pointed to some regional/local differences in terms of policy options, and they are, to a large extent, due to domestic particularities. Due to the polarization and politicization of the political debate in the US and Canada, policy choices around Brexit and the EU depend on the particular side of the political divide. While US Democrats and Canadian Liberals tend to prefer strengthening ties with the EU, US Republicans and Canadian Conservatives are more reserved on this, with segments of the establishment (especially in the US government under Trump's administration) being openly sceptical about a closer cooperation with the EU. As a result, the longstanding foreign policy consensus on (the importance of) flourishing relations with the EU seems to be undermined in both countries. The oscillating foreign policy preferences, depending on the particular government in power in both countries, may result in more volatile relations between the EU and these two North American partners (Hurrelmann 2020; Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020). By contrast, political elites in other countries clearly envisage enhanced relations with the EU in the future. However, this trend is less pronounced in the analyses of EU perceptions in Turkey and Russia (Alpan and Şenyuva 2020; Ananieva 2020), and it seems to be on the decline in Brazil (Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020).

A change of government as an *endogenous* factor may affect the perceptions and policy options on the EU in a significant manner. One powerful example comes from the US, where Trump's administration's 'America First' policy, its unilateral, protectionist and illiberal tendencies, and its sympathy for state sovereignty, leaves little scope for the prospering EU-US relations (Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020). A similar evolution in the outlook on the EU may take place in Brazil. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro who came to office in January 2019 supported a swift conclusion of the EU-Mercosur agreement. Yet, his scepticism concerning important principles and aspects of global governance make future Brazilian policy positions likely to counter those of the EU, for example on topics such as climate change and human rights (Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020). In other instances, changes of governments may lead to the improvement of relations. For example, EU-South African relations had deteriorated during the years of President Zuma, partly due to his advocacy for the participation of the former President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, at EU-Africa

Summits. Under the new South African President Ramaphosa, who actively supports the implementation of EU-SADC Economic Partnership Agreement, bilateral relations have been revitalised (Kotsopoulos 2020). The Maidan revolution 2014 in Ukraine and the subsequent Ukrainian leaderships that stand on a pro-European position are other examples (see Chaban and Knodt 2020). This concerns both post-Maidan presidents – Petro Poroshenko and Vladymyr Zelenskii. In contrast to the previous pro-Russian administration under Yanukovych, the new governments firmly uphold Ukraine's "European choice" as an official narrative for this Eastern European state. The goal to enter the EU is now entrenched in the Ukrainian Constitution. In this context, Brexit is not seen by Ukrainian elites to divert Ukraine from its relations with the EU (Chaban and Knodt 2020).

In some cases, the prospects of Brexit have encouraged some domestic actors to consider alternative routes of engaging with the EU/Europe. Turkey, for example, developed a view that Brexit will lead to a privileged partnership between the UK and the EU-27 in the future. Increasingly, this option is seen as a legitimate model of differentiated integration and it may gain currency over time. Such an arrangement is perceived as a "face-saving" and an acceptable solution for future Turkey-EU relations (Alpan and Şenyuva 2020). In some circles in Russia, an improvement of EU-Russian relations is tied to the idea of "Greater Europe" – in turn leading to "Greater Eurasia" (Ananieva 2020). And as Hurrelmann (2020) suggests, the strong preference of both the US administration and most Canadian Conservatives for a comprehensive post-Brexit trade deal with the UK may open up possibilities for a trilateral US-UK-Canada trade agreement. This would revive an earlier idea of the "North Atlantic Triangle". Arguably, these perceptions are triggered by *endogenous* factors.

Global factors also have an important bearing on shaping countries' policy options *vis-à-vis* the EU during the post-referendum period. Above all, the advent of the Trump Presidency has prompted many countries – including China, India, Japan and Mexico – to look favourably towards the EU for defending a rules-based multilateral international order, and particularly free trade principles (Dominguez 2020; Endo 2020; Jin and Kirchner 2020; Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). In addition to economic rationales, there are also geo-political and security considerations for pursuing closer

relations with the EU. For China balancing the hegemonic US influence seems to play a role. For India, an unreliable US, in the wake of Brexit, makes France a more attractive partner in terms of security and defence policy than the UK. Another important global factor is the rise of China. This development has made Japan more inclined to look towards Europe (and especially France) for security cooperation (Endo 2020). And even in Russia, a stronger China seems to have triggered thoughts of exploring opportunities in Brussels (Ananieva 2020).

Impact on EU external policy and lessons for practitioners

What do our findings imply for the EU's external relations and foreign policy practice? In the following section, we propose several answers to this last question that guided our volume. Our main reference here is the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) (European Union 2016). The document that formulates and projects the key positions of the EU's foreign policy was released by the EEAS shortly after the Brexit vote. Conceived in response to the changing global environment characterised by contestation and competition against the background of growing inter-connectedness, the EUGS outlines three objectives for the EU as a global actor: 1) to aspire to be a meaningful pole in the emerging global governance structures; 2) to facilitate resilience inside the EU and among its neighbours; and 3) to practice principled pragmatism, i.e. to look at the world as it is, through pragmatic lenses, while continuing to live up to its principles. The urgency of achieving these objectives is undeniable, and the opening section of the EUGS is a testament to that: "We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned" (European Union 2016, 7).

New aspirations and objectives of the EU's external action come with a vision that highlights the importance of mutual understanding and listening to external partners while facing new challenges. The EUGS states that the EU's foreign policy is not "to export our model, but rather seek reciprocal inspiration from different regional experiences" (European Union 2016, 32). The EUGS rejects

scenarios where the EU provides "neat recipes" or aspires to "impos[e] solutions elsewhere" (European Union 2016, 17). The findings of our volume aim to provide empirically-informed input to this vision at times of uncertainty and change.

To begin with, the EU's external action will benefit from systematic (and urgent) consideration of the evolving external dimension of Brexit, and our volume addresses this gap. The EU has thus far understood Brexit primarily as an internal challenge (see also Hurrelmann 2020). We bring together our recommendations for EU external policy-makers and practitioners under the three rubrics of *global governance*, *principled pragmatism* and *resilience,* in parallel with the key concepts of the EUGS.

Global governance

Relevant literature argues that we are witnessing an evolution of the world order -- from unipolar post-Cold War design to a multipolar architecture. The vision of the 'world order in flux' was reflected in the perceptions tracked in our country cases.

Keeping in mind that perceptions help IR actor to diagnose the situation and make choices in behaviour and policies, one particular image of the EU stood out in our volume. This is the image of the EU-27 as a global champion of a rules-based order. The post-Brexit Union of 27 "transmits a sense of a cohesive and coherent EU with a clear rules-based approach *vis-à-vis* the UK" (Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020). EU external action may build on this perception and focus on the formulation and projection of messages of consolidation of a rules-based order *in cooperation* with certain third countries (see also Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020).

We argue that there is potential for such cooperation on different levels. Large trading actors depend on multilateral trade frameworks and free trade, and external partners perceive the EU as a leader in this area (Jin and Kirchner 2020). And even smaller trading partners feel certain security in striking trade deals with the EU. Research in our volume revealed that smaller partners appreciate that all potential agreements have to be discussed and agreed by all member states and approved by the

European Parliament. It seems that for some external partners, the EU continues to signal the world the "importance of trade liberalisation in the face of the global trend towards populism and increased border restrictions" (Kelly and Mochan 2020, XX). Yet, other partners (see case-studies on China, India, Japan and the US under Obama's administration) fear that Brexit could mean a more protectionist EU. A perceived protectionism will present the EU with a challenge – "fortress Europe" in trade is a rather well-known and entrenched stereotypical image of the EU which is easy to evoke.

Principled pragmatism

One of our main findings is the leading and lingering perception of the EU as a powerful economic actor. Respectively, in the post-Brexit period, the EU's external action should not neglect projections of the EU's ongoing economic successes, yet be strategic about it. According to Isani, Schlipphak and Silverman (2020), such strategic communication should start with the identification of countries which are more strongly connected to the UK, particularly those more dependent on the UK's purchasing power and expendable capital (whether through FDI or tourism receipts, or as an export market). Importantly, EU external practice should deal with these countries differently than with those countries that do not depend on the UK economically. It is critical that the EU outreaches to the former group in a special way (through multiple channels and with creative solutions), acknowledging their difficulties through an open dialogue and demonstrating that the EU is 'on their side'. Here, the EU should show its external partners that it does everything possible to ensure that a third country's relations with the EU and the UK are not perceived as mutually exclusive (a message from the analysis in Canada by Hurrelmann 2020).

With the EUGS calling for the pragmatic course of external action, our findings also invite the EU to map and monitor the "UK track" of policies and actions in third countries (see also Dominguez 2020). All cases in our volume reported that a parallel-track strategy is emerging, but with a different intensity and speed. It is crucial for the EU to follow how the "UK track" is developing in each country, map its evolutions, communicate with local stakeholders involved in the "UK track", and regularly compare it with the "EU track".

Brexit is also bringing more attention to third countries' interactions with the EU member states. Higher visibility of member states *vis-à-vis* the EU is yet another long-term trend in the external perceptions of the EU, and research profiled in this volume confirms it. A tendency of national elites to focus on individual Member States and not on the EU as an entity was observed in Australia, Brazil, Japan, India, New Zealand, Russia and the US (by the current administration). Our recommendation for EU external action is to embrace this perception and use it cleverly. As discussed in the two previous sections, the prospects of Brexit have increased India's interests in two partners in the EU – Germany (who remains India's largest European trading partner) and France (considered by Indian defence experts as their most natural European partner in military and security issues) (Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). In the eyes of Japan's elites France will become a more prominent partner for Japan post-Brexit (Endo 2020). The Brazilian government prefers this bilateral mode of interactions with individual member states to the Brussels-oriented one, not lastly due to the growing scepticism towards multilateralism (Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020). While motivations are different in each case study, we argue these preferences still bring third countries closer to Europe, and often through member states that are present-day 'engines' of European integration. For some external partners, the trend towards greater bilateral ties will continue after Brexit takes place. Some will invest into it even more. And some may consider these ties a credible basis to extend the relations with the EU on a supranational level. The task for EU external action practice is to map the preferences among the leading partners and continue examining the perceptions on the ground to understand the motivations behind those preferences.

We argue that the post-Brexit EU may benefit from an invested dialogue with a wider range of third country actors. Our recommendation for EU external action is to engage regularly with third country players across the political spectrum. For example, conservative and liberal forces in Canada and the US have their own stakes in the Brexit process (see Hurrelmann 2020; Speyer, Hähn and Niemann 2020). Another recommendation is to target actors on the sub-national levels, and specifically to keep in mind the logic of domestic regions. Speyer, Hähn and Niemann (2020) concluded that the EU

should proactively seek ways to intensify its cooperation with individual US states (specifically those that express their willingness to do so). Such cooperation already happens in the realm of climate change, but it could potentially be a model for other policy areas. Chaban and Knodt (2020) noted how EU perceptions continue to differ in the western and central regions in Ukraine vs. the southern and eastern regions (views are more positive and pro-European in the former case). In a different study, Canadian elites recommended that the EU extend and nuance its public diplomacy outreach to the provinces and territories (PPMI/NCRE/NFG 2015; Chaban and Knodt 2020).

While the EU is grappling with the period of uncertainty following the Brexit decision, the EU's relations with third countries may gain from focusing on concrete aspects perceived by these countries to influence their strategic priorities and goals. Following our research, we recommend a careful and precise mapping of evolving strategic visions among external partners as the first step in this process. In our volume, Jin and Kirchner (2020) argued that Trump's issuance of trade sanctions *vis-a-vis* both China and the EU and his withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accord and the Iranian nuclear deal affected the interests of China and the EU simultaneously. These US moves solidified the perception of and impetus for a strengthening of China-EU cooperation on those issues. In a different example, the respective free trade agreements between the EU and New Zealand and Australia are seen to increase trading relations as well as cooperation in other priority fields (e.g. development in the Pacific, environment and innovation) (Kelly and Mochan 2020).

Resilience

External perceptions of the EU in the context of Brexit also reflect on the Union's resilience in the face of an existential challenge. The cohesion demonstrated by the EU-27 in negotiations with the UK over the withdrawal agreement has strengthened rather than weakened the EU's external image (Jin and Kirchner 2020). External observers have not generally linked the Brexit process to a serious deterioration of the EU's perceived legitimacy, credibility and coherence. This has definitely been the view in the countries with the prospects of EU membership (see the cases of Turkey (Alpan and Şenyuva 2020) and Ukraine (Chaban and Knodt 2020)). In the case of the US, Speyer, Hähn and

Niemann (2020) reported lingering images of the EU as a credible and legitimate partner, if sometimes incoherent and crisis-ridden among segments of US political elites. Even in the places with a lower degree of sympathy towards the EU (e.g. in the Middle East and North Africa (Isani, Schlipphak and Silverman 2020), Russia (Ananieva 2020), Turkey (Alpan and Şenyuva 2020)), the Brexit situation has caused only a marginal erosion of perceived legitimacy or credibility. The narrative of the 'coherent EU-27' that emerged through the years of EU-UK 'divorce' negotiations adds to the image of a 'resilient EU'. This image may form the core message of EU diplomatic and political communications with external partners in the years following the UK's exit from the Union.

The investigated cases also demonstrated resilience and resistance of the EU's images under the pressure of uncertainties. Contributions to our volume reported that images of the EU remain "entrenched" (e.g. the case of South Africa by Kotsopoulos 2020), with no major negative changes (the case of Ukraine by Chaban and Knodt 2020), characterised by a "business-as-usual" attitude in the MENA (Isani, Schlipphak and Silverman 2020). Country cases in this volume revealed that the Brexit vote and prolonged EU-UK negotiations did not cause a 'tidal wave' of change of the EU's external images. Little, if anything, was said about the perceived diminishment of the EU as an international actor (perhaps, with exception of Russia and Turkey in this volume). IR scholars agree that human beings resist changes to mental images (Elgström 2000; Jönsson 1990; Jervis 1976). In this light, a potential delay in the image change gives a chance for EU external action to capitalise on enduring positive images of the Union, and devise and implement innovative outreach and communications.

Nevertheless, the perceptions of a resilient EU should not be exaggerated. According to Kotsopoulos (2020), Brexit is arguably about many things – immigration, a deep history of euroscepticism and anti-establishment forces – but it is economics which has become the focal point of perception among many EU external partners. The EU should expect some loss of economic clout in the eyes of external partners (see Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). Some external partners foresee the EU being hit by additional expenses related to more negotiations in the future as external partners will want to re-

negotiate FTAs with the EU and the UK to minimize the negative impact of Brexit on their economies (see Park and Chung 2020). Others revoke a well-established image of "fortress Europe" – partners who tend to perceive the EU through the lens of trade are wary of the post-Brexit EU as potentially more protectionist (Lazarou, Cuotto and Theodoro Luciano 2020; Jin and Kirchner 2020). Our recommendation here is an honest open diplomatic dialogue of the EU with representatives of decision-, policy- and opinion-making cohorts in third countries (this follows opinion expressed by third countries' elites surveyed in this volume).

Practitioners should also be aware of the negative impact of the *multiple* crises in the EU on how the world perceives the EU. As noted by Chaban and Knodt (2020), Brexit is only one of several crises in the eyes of external observers. And while it is not seen as the most detrimental to the EU's images overall, it adds to the vision of the *combined* impact by many crises. This perception can affect the image of the EU's capabilities and opportunities for third countries in the long run.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, we reiterate the concept of *relational* perceptions in IR (see Chaban and Knodt 2020) – i.e. it is useful to think about images of the EU factoring images of Self and Others as well as assessing them through *location-* and *issue-specific* filters (Chaban *et al*. 2013; Speyer, Chaban and Niemann 2020). There is no one universal 'perception of Brexit' around the world. Contributions to this volume demonstrated varying interpretations of the EU affected by the period of uncertainty following the 2016 UK referendum. Third country's perceptions of the EU are not only influenced by developments inside the EU, i.e. *exogenous* factors, but necessarily influenced by *endogenous* domestic factors as well as *global* changes. Importantly, the three types of factors are not mutually exclusive. Contributions to this volume tracked their complex interplay. Without exception, local priorities, conflicts and divisions were found to put their unique stamp on the images of the EU facing the uncertainty of Brexit. This leads us to our main conclusion - attentive listening to third countries' self-visions *vis-à-vis* regular accounts of the EU's external images is a prerequisite for the EU's meaningful dialogue and interactions with its global partners post-Brexit. The changing EU will have

to re-tune itself to the changing world. To succeed it will have to "focus on more flexible and result-orientated approaches" and "pool resources whenever relevant, notably in policy analysis across the member states and at EU level" (Lisbonne de Vergeron 2020). These pragmatic approaches will safeguard the EU's common interests of actors on different levels and assist in the strategic formulation and projection of EU external policies in a more united way. In the eyes of its international observers, the post-Brexit EU of 27 has a sound opportunity to relate to its external interlocutors as a credible, legitimate and coherent partner.

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[1] Mexico is an exception. It does not possess either characteristics. Its sustained positive perception of the EU as a political ally can be attributed mainly to the country's conflictual relationship with its immediate neighbour, the US. President Trump's hostile rhetoric toward the country has been a particularly strong global factor reinforcing "the shared perspectives between the European Union and Mexico" (Dominguez 2020).

[2] This volume comprises only one study on sub-Saharan Africa. Thus conclusions are incomplete for this region.