

## BETWEEN PATRONAGE AND DONORSHIP: GLOBAL GATEWAY AND ITS VIS-A-VIE IN EURASIA

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### Abstract

This article examines geoeconomic leadership as a narrative of the EU foreign policy towards different countries. The article analyses the European discourse of leadership, which is associated with sovereignty/autonomy as the management of interdependence. The ongoing debate has not yet reached a consensus on its exact objectives and scope. However, it describes systemic pressures and competing interests of the EU Member States as the main variables in the leadership narrative in the EU political system. The EU's Global Gateway strategy aims to improve ties with countries around the world by adopting a pragmatic approach to sectoral cooperation. The article criticizes the Global Gateway strategy as a new approach, but raises concerns about its viability in the Eurasian space. It is evident that the EU seeks to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative and other influential players in both the regional and global arenas in order to regain its global position. However, the Global Gateway strategy appears to reflect the evolving discourse around EU sovereignty at the national level. The article provides a comprehensive overview of the Global Gateway strategy in a broader macro-regional context, with a particular focus on the challenges and inconsistencies between the immediate and long-term objectives of EU foreign policy.

**Keywords:** *Global Europe, neighbourhood, strategic autonomy, geoeconomic leadership, interdependence, donorship policy, economic security, Russia, China, interregionalism.*

### Introduction

The EU is the most developed regional integration association, interacting both with individual states in various regions of the world and with other regional structures. The EU's external relations have expanded significantly in the post-bipolar period. The EU seeks to consolidate its role in the international arena: in global trade, in the field of development assistance, in promoting regional integration, democracy and security.

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The EU consistently demonstrates interest in implementing interregional policy, which is enshrined in the EU foreign policy doctrine and is also confirmed by an extensive system of interregional relations. At the same time, various cases demonstrate that the EU does not always successfully implement its interregional strategy, and each of the existing and emerging areas has its own characteristics. In addition to the EU, other regional associations strive to build interregional ties, thus forming an extensive network of regional partners, among which the EU is the most active.

The problems of regional, interregional and, more broadly, transregional cooperation are acquiring a special resonance today and are attracting the attention of an increasing number of both foreign and domestic researchers. Most studies of the phenomenon of interregionalism in world politics (as institutionalized to one degree or another relations between two regional integration associations) belong mainly to European researchers, who rely primarily on the experience of the EU. In this regard, the Eurocentric view on this issue prevails in the theory of new regionalism.

This study develops theoretical provisions regarding the understanding of the phenomenon of interregionalism and its role in the foreign policy of a large regional association such as the EU. Among the most significant results obtained in the article are the identified functions of interregionalism as a foreign policy instrument, the causes, features and problems of the EU interregional practices in the modern world, and a refined typology of interregional ties.

The relevance of the chosen topic of this article is determined by both the above-mentioned practical considerations and theoretical problems: despite the existence of a number of studies devoted to the phenomenon of interregionalism, the key factors that determine the success or failure of the implementation of interregional relations in modern world politics have not yet been identified.

## Theoretical background

On 1 December 2021, the European Commission unveiled a novel geoeconomic leadership strategy, entitled the Global Gateway Initiative. This broad connectivity plan aims to amass funds amounting to €300 billion for the 2021-2027 period, underpinned by a project and investment implementation principle<sup>1</sup>.

The Global Gateway initiative is an integral part of the ambitious Global Europe program, which concentrates all available resources and instruments. The EU seeks to strengthen its role in the international arena: in global trade, in the field of development assistance, in promoting regional integration, democracy and security (Marx and Westerwinter 2022). The EU consistently demonstrates interest in implementing interregional policy, which is enshrined in the EU foreign policy doctrine, and is also confirmed by an extensive system of interregional relations (Caraveo and Iacomino 2023). At the same time, various cases demonstrate that the EU does not always successfully implement its interregional strategy, and each of the existing and emerging areas has its own characteristics. In addition to the EU, other regional

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<sup>1</sup> European Commission. 2021. "Global Gateway: up to €300 billion for the European Union's strategy to boost sustainable links around the world." December 1, 2021. Accessed January 21, 2025. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_6433](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433).

associations strive to build interregional ties, thus forming an extensive network of regional partners, among which the EU is the most active (Gstöhl and Larik 2023).

The concept of connectivity, a fundamental principle of the Gateway, was adopted from the 2018 “Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy”, which has gained considerable traction. The concepts of connectivity and neighbourhood have been around for some time. Since the 1990s, both concepts have been included as integral elements of regional and global leadership strategies by the EU and other actors. The structuring of the neighbourhood space began after the Second World War. Subsequent initiatives to develop relations with Japan and India have confirmed the effectiveness of prioritising logistics and infrastructure projects. These efforts appear to be two-way, attracting private investment and promoting greater synergies with ‘neighbours of the neighbours’ and distant regional alliances. However, in implementing the Gateway in the Eurasian macro-region, the EU faces competing projects. In addition to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the presence of the ambitious, though perhaps less active, Eurasian Economic Union creates an environment of competing geopolitical leadership regimes.

In analysing the European project in the context of geostrategic hyper-competition, the paper proceeds from two main assumptions. Firstly, the global system consists of long-standing, divergent and even radically different political regimes, as well as regimes in a state of formation. The Eurasian macro-region is utilised as a site for analysing the competition of global and regional forces. Secondly, Global Gateway could be analysed in the context of the transition of leadership regimes from geopolitical to geo-economic. In this case the strategic autonomy of the EU necessitates the transformation of its conceptual framework and the rethinking of the system of interaction with partners and neighbours. Thus, the Global Gateway project represents an attempt to conceptually restructure the neighbourhood space in which the EU is confronted with the competing geo-economic leadership projects of other powers, namely China and Russia.

The paper argues that the content of EU-Russia-China competing projects in the Eurasian macroregion is found in the realisation of different models of geopolitical leadership. The concept of global leadership is common for actors and decisive for their mutual perception, however, the perception of this construct and its decision-making practice seems to be specific to each participant. The concept of leadership in the research field of international relations is analysed within the framework of two main methodological programmes: hegemonic stability theory (Wiener 1995; Ndzendze and Marwala 2023; Badalić 2024), which identifies leadership with the provision of public goods, and transactional theory, which emphasises the role of mutual benefits and advantages in the exercise of leadership (Tago 2025; Jansen and van Schijndel. 2025; Northouse 1997).

It is important to note that the present study does not seek to reject the possibility of commonality of interests and goals of the leading country and its followers. Rather, it employs the concept of leadership rent, which is predicated on the idea that a selected group of geopolitical leaders determines the nature and pace of global development and functions as natural ‘centres of gravitation’ for regional countries (Vadell and Caria 2025; Jansen and van Schijndel 2025). Two major behavioral patterns are chosen by

geopolitical leaders - donorship and patronage, frequently employed in the establishment and maintenance of centripetal impulse. These establish personalised relationships of dominance and dependence, often drawing on cultural and historical ties (Beeson and Crawford 2023).

Patronage-clientship is often considered as a special form of unequal exchange between two actors, characterized by inequalities of power and status, perceived or real. It is a private relationship governed by the principle of reciprocity and includes strategies for the protection and promotion of clients' interests, the use of which is conditioned by the set of incentives and disincentives offered to them (García-Marzá and Calvo 2024; Piattoni 2001; Sotiropoulos 2023).

Patronage, defined as the practice of providing support and assistance to another entity, particularly a state, entails a deep and pervasive integration into the behaviour of states, influencing the manner in which these states represent their interests (Amoah 2025). The concept of donorship entails the realisation of leadership rent through the establishment of robust economic relationships of interdependence (Barkin 2023).

According to R. O. Keohane, and J. S. Nye, "dependence means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. Interdependence, most simply defined, means mutual dependence. Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries." (Keohane and Nye 2012, 7).

As suggested by S. Destradi (2008), there are two main models of leadership implementation. On the one hand, in the normative persuasion model, the hegemon or leader engages in a process of ideological persuasion in which legitimacy emerges through the transfer of norms and values from the dominant elite to the peripheral or regional elite. The endogenous learning model, on the other hand, is based on the development of identical norms and values in different states as a result of chance or common responses to structural conditions. The second, the imitation model, focuses on followers adopting the norms and policies of the dominant state in an attempt to emulate its success, but without the leader attempting to influence their normative orientations or policies (Garzon 2024; Nayar 2007).

The EU is practicing a specific approach to geopolitical leadership and relations with its counterparts. It positions itself as a benevolent actor that provides material benefits and public goods (including concepts such as equality, economic and social progress, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights) to neighbouring or cooperative countries through specific instruments of economic aid and trade.

## **Global Gateway in the History of the Contesting Neighbourhood Policies in Eurasia**

Space modelling constitutes an integral element of any global leadership strategy. In this context, Eurasia represents a unique space in which different models and practices of strategy implementation compete. The concept of structuring space is not a novel one; following the Second World War, global leadership assumed the arrangement of adjacent and distant territories on ideological grounds (NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation; European Communities and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance).

The formation of the EU's geopolitical leadership model has undergone several phases. Firstly, since 1989, the European Union has adopted a strategy that differentiates relations with neighbouring countries. The PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme was established as a pre-accession instrument, while TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) did not imply EU membership. Following the dissolution of the USSR, there was a substantial shift in the semantics of the concepts of Europe and the EU, and a natural zone of shared neighbourhood was formed, with both the EU and Russia claiming influence. During the period of enlargement in the early 2000s, the EU not only redrew the geographical boundaries of Europe, but also had a significant influence in determining the political and economic future of the states included in the 'ring of friends' within the Southern and Eastern Partnership. In doing so, the EU played a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape, determining which states would be considered part of the European zone and, by extension, the rules and institutions that define that zone: namely, peace, stability, and prosperity.

Secondly, the evolution of the conditionality concept in the 1990s has had a substantial impact on the interconnection between financial assistance and the fulfilment of specific political and economic criteria, to the extent that the alleged normative power of Europe has become a prevalent expression. The EU's influential integration project is regarded as the most effective explanatory model, functioning as a patronage instrument. Its rationalised civilising mechanisms of leadership rent are employed to transfer to the periphery, and the capacity for independent decision-making and the exclusive responsibility of third countries for security is frequently called into question. Similar models of representation, decision-making and implementation of specific measures in dealing with peripheral actors vis-à-vis global actors serve to pragmatise the patron-client approach (Bull and Watson 1985; Fawn 2020; Krois 2020).

Thirdly, until the mid-2000s, the European Union demonstrated a limited level of engagement with the so-called 'neighbourhood-of-neighbourhood' countries, prioritising its involvement with directly adjacent states. Since 2011, the EU has been experiencing a crisis in its foreign policy strategy. The Neighbourhood Instrument, which had existed since 2004 and structured relations with the countries on the southern and eastern flanks, did not initially envisage the possibility for the latter to gain membership in the EU. Concurrently, negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia concerning their association with the EU have posed challenges to the rigid principles of engagement previously employed with those deemed to be under the pre-accession mechanism or unfit to join the exclusive cohort of European Union members.

The proclamation of China's BRI in 2013, as well as Russia's gradual turn to the East, the strengthening of this tandem in the Eurasian space, and the acceleration of the dynamics of Eurasian economic integration, have made it necessary for the EU to conceptually calibrate its own leadership model and foreign policy strategy.

## Pillars of the EU Leadership

The EU mode of leadership is a contemporary manifestation of strategic sovereignty/autonomy, representing a derivative form of leadership since 2017. This complex interdependence is characterised by a commitment to policy, as defined by R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye (2012). The realisation of leadership rent policy is contingent on the establishment and maintenance of a certain degree of interdependence. In economic literature, interdependence is typically characterised as a symmetrical relationship, with benefits accruing to both parties involved (Hillebrandt and Novak 2016). However, since the 1990s, the geo-economic landscape has complicated the interdependence relationship, placing recipient countries in a situation of strategy choice: export promotion or import substitution. As K. Barbieri (1996) asserts, leadership rents are more favourable to the donor than to the recipient, and stronger positive effects of foreign direct investment are evident in countries pursuing export rather than import policies. Moreover, an unfavourable partner under the influence of confounding factors – continuity, political regime and allied commitments – incurs net losses (Barbieri 1996; Aydin 2023).

As the Global Gateway progresses, the EU's transition to a new world order and worldview, one that is inherently economic but imbued with geopolitical ambitions, becomes increasingly evident. The prevailing narrative of the EU's adaptation to global turmoil presents a dichotomy between interdependence on the one hand, and strategic autonomy and European sovereignty on the other. This narrative has been a source of lively debate and much political discussion since 2017. However, a conventional view has generally established itself in the EU that a policy of increasing interdependence requires abandoning a clear distinction between economy and security.

The EU's Strategic Agenda (2021-2029) establishes a framework that connects the modernisation of internal cohesion with the EU's capacity to respond to geopolitical shocks. This, in turn, determines the EU's global ambitions and strategies. Traditionally, the EU has been regarded as a weak foreign policy player, but a strong economic actor. The established order of multilateralism, a system founded on principles established among other entities by the EU, is now being contested. The process of constructing European strategic autonomy, characterised by an enhancement of internal resilience, is eroding long-standing liberal norms and necessitates an elevated degree of congruence between the EU's domestic and foreign policies. The task at hand is of considerable complexity, as it pertains to the fundamental logic of European integration and the probabilistic model of enlargement. In this context, a pivotal aspect of formulating an effective response to this challenge lies in the calibration of relations with neighbouring countries, necessitating the reformatting of strategic decisions within a shifting geographical framework. This process is evident through the incorporation of the Global Gateway project within the overarching programme 'Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe'<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> EEAS. 2022. "The new 'NDICI - Global Europe' (2021-2027)." March 17, 2022. Accessed January 21, 2025. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/new-%E2%80%98ndici-global-europe%E2%80%99-2021-2027\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/new-%E2%80%98ndici-global-europe%E2%80%99-2021-2027_en).

Global Europe is key to support the Global Gateway, our value-based connectivity approach, which will also be implemented through Team Europe Initiatives, putting together the leverage and know-how of EU institutions and EU Member States. It is posited that a rudimentary repackaging strategy could be employed to imbue the development programme with internal coherence and strategic direction, thereby exerting a notable external influence by virtue of the EU's actions. Furthermore, this initiative is predicated on the novel European instrument NDICI-Global Europe, which has already precipitated a substantial shift in the objectives of European cooperation policy.

In the context of Eurasia, the ability to exercise political and geo-economic leadership by EU entails not only the navigation of competitive dynamics with analogous initiatives such as the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union, but also the fostering of internal European unity, the balancing of supranational and national powers, and the mitigation of the risk of fragmentation. Interventionism, as a necessary step in the implementation of the leadership rent strategy, raises questions about the extent to which member states are still willing to cooperate through the EU institutions, or, conversely, about the extent of their resistance (Giuli and Oberthür 2023).

The problem with the instrumentalisation of interdependence, a process in which states use global exchange networks to gain strategic advantage, is that it encourages them to abandon institutionalised cooperation and seek ways to reduce their vulnerability to economic absorption (Baldwin 1980).

It is important to acknowledge the influence of a paradigm shift in the global order on the shift towards greater internationalism, from a geopolitical to a geo-economic understanding of leadership. The EU's move away from neoliberal free market ideology predates the global financial crisis, although the beginning of this shift can be traced back to the early 1990s, owing to the aftermath of the financial crisis and the lessons learnt by China and South East Asian countries. The subsequent crises of the 2010s prompted a re-evaluation of economic security and its associated strategic autonomy, a shift that was further accelerated by the global financial crisis as governments worldwide sought to rescue strategic industries and financial instruments. The rise of U.S. hitech companies and Chinese industry underscored the evolving nature of the global economy. In response, the EU has embarked on a comprehensive re-evaluation of its economic policy instruments and the politicisation of economic sovereignty, signifying a deepening interventionist approach.

Growing competition and instability on the world stage have increased the importance of the relationship between economic, security and foreign policy. The EU insists that political-strategic considerations have become more prominent in its external economic policy. From a formal perspective, Global Gateway demonstrates that the EU has begun to shape a different kind of governance, in which economic policy serves broader strategic goals alongside commercial objectives related to specific regional policies. While the emergence of a more strategically oriented EU economic policy is a significant change, it should be noted that the EU is still characterised by a donor stance, i.e. seeking to bring about political change through economic instruments. Apart from this obvious observation, several important features of EU leadership should be noted. Firstly, the EU's leadership strategy continues to

exhibit characteristics of short-term and defensive mercantilism (Kovács 2024; Kirchner 2024). Secondly, the EU's emphasis on economic security remains to be aligned with other priorities on the union's foreign policy agenda. The attainment of viable geo-economic leadership necessitates a more precise delineation of the nature and extent to which European interests should be promoted within the macro-region. Thirdly, as part of the modernisation of the original Global Gateway project; the EU is moving away from a market priority in its foreign policy strategy towards a security policy. However, there is a risk that it will become overly enthusiastic in its geopolitical approach, adopting a defensive stance and competing with other players' geostrategic leadership projects.

In this context, concerns pertaining to security assume an increasingly predominant role in shaping Europe's geo-economic leadership. In accordance with the Global Gateway, several new EU strategies and documents have been proposed, pledging an economic policy aimed at safeguarding European sovereignty. This signifies the politicisation of economic strategy. At the beginning of 2021, the European Commission placed open strategic autonomy at the centre of its trade policy review. The concept was defined as the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through cohesion and interaction, reflecting its strategic interests and values (Trade Policy Review 2021). The concepts of open strategic autonomy and European sovereignty are not entirely overlapping, yet they exhibit significant commonalities. Both emphasise the necessity to reduce economic vulnerability and to protect EU interests; however, they also underscore the importance of multilateral cooperation and collaboration.

In June 2023, the commission unveiled a landmark economic security strategy, thereby crystallising these concepts<sup>3</sup>. In 2024, the EU has reinforced its commitment to advance its geo-economic leadership. This assertion is evidenced by Mario Draghi's European Competitiveness Report in September 2024, which advocates for a genuine EU external economic policy that is consistent with security interests<sup>4</sup>. The paradigm that was previously conducive to the generation of prosperity was designed for a world of geopolitical stability, in which national security considerations played a minor role in economic decisions. However, deteriorating geopolitical conditions require a fundamentally different approach to Europe's industrial policy and a genuine foreign economic policy – or, as it is termed in the present day, statecraft (European Commission 2024). The interweaving of geopolitics and geo-economics is evident in the European Commission's recently unveiled policy principles for the 2024-2029 period, which underscore the utilisation of economic instruments to attain strategic objectives, the incorporation of economic and political interests, and the adept management of strategic vulnerabilities of interdependence (Brøgger 2024; Reykers and Rieker 2024).

<sup>3</sup> European Commission. 2023. "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on "European economic security strategy"." Brussels, June 20, 2023. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52023JC0020>.

<sup>4</sup> European Commission. 2025. "A new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness." Accessed January 21, 2025. [https://commission.europa.eu/priorities-2024-2029/competitiveness\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/priorities-2024-2029/competitiveness_en).

The consistent adoption of EU strategic documents demonstrates a revised and calibrated position between economic efficiency and geopolitical sustainability. In this regard, French President Emmanuel Macron continues to advocate for greater strategic coherence in pan-European policy, since the EU's economic policy is subject to a rationale that goes beyond purely economic logic<sup>5</sup>. The European economic security strategy emphasizes that economic decisions merge with national security concerns (Braun 2024; Gänzle, Wunderlich and Hofelich 2024).

It is evident that the emergence of a novel geostrategic leadership paradigm within the EU is contingent upon a series of contradictory logics. On the one hand, the Global Gateway initiative was conceived with the objective of actualising the EU's aspirations concerning geopolitical global leadership, a process that entails interventionist actions by the hegemony. However, the concrete measures undertaken also reflect more limited commercial objectives. This duality in the EU's approach to geo-economic leadership is further evidenced by the emergence of European mercantilism in select policy initiatives (Rehm and Howarth 2025). A similar selectivity is evident in Resilient EU 2030, which refers to like-minded countries. However, the criteria for this group of countries remain undefined, thereby suggesting a reversion to the narratives of the 2000s that delineated the circle of friends of the EU and the geography of the Neighbourhood Programme. As part of the Global Europe strategy, the EU has entered into new trade and investment agreements with regimes in Africa, Central Asia and Latin America that can hardly be defined as like-minded in terms of geopolitical ideology. However, it is a commitment to European ideals that underpins the conditionality of any agreements entered into.

The foreign policy logic of the EU's Global Gateway initiative is also questionable. The European Commission has acknowledged that the project is oriented towards the EU's economic interests rather than foreign policy strategies (Buzogány, Parks and Torney 2025). Alongside the security logic dictating export restrictions with unfriendly regimes, there is also a clear commercial interest of the member states of the European community. In the EU's model of relations within a leadership strategy, as posited by O. Westerwinter (2022), the normative persuasion is evident. This model involves the leader assuming the role of transmitting norms and values, thereby undermining the legitimisation of security narratives of interdependence.

### **Between China's BRI and Russia's Eurasian Ambitions**

The adoption of the NDICI - Global Europe Instrument and the Global Investment Initiative Gateway signal a rethinking of Europe's approach to China in the context of systemic rivalry between the U.S. and China, and to Russia in the context of competition for the neighbourhood.

The EU's position on China is characterised by a delicate balancing act, aimed at accommodating the divergent national interests of its member states. However, the EU's geo-economic leadership is predicated on a more nuanced and consolidated

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<sup>5</sup> Embassy of France in Washington, D.C. 2023. "Netherlands - Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the Nexus Institute (The Hague, 11/04/2023)." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article11269>.

assessment of Europe's strategic posture vis-à-vis China. Notwithstanding the fact that Global Gateway was established as a competing project, the serious interdependence between the EU and Beijing necessitates a clear focus on economic security in strategic sectors and the achievement of reciprocity in trade and economic relations between the EU and China. It is evident that the EU's excessive interdependence on China is already causing trepidation within the European establishment, as the European project appears to be more a response to Beijing's interventionist agenda than a reflection of its own priorities. In addition to competition in the real economy and financial and infrastructure programmes, the EU is confronted with a fierce competition of narratives against the backdrop of China's and Russia's patronage proposals. The EU's emerging economic security agenda makes scant reference to the priorities and challenges of the normative order of many countries in the Eurasian macro-region. The expansion of the BRICS group in January 2024 to include the five largest countries in the Middle East and Africa, as well as other countries that have expressed interest in joining, also exacerbates the challenge of the EU's engagement with middle powers.

Moreover, the EU's global infrastructure programme represents a significant challenge to the EU's capacity to establish new partnerships founded on mutual interests rather than on leadership rents. The ongoing discourse concerning the reform of development banks, particularly the question of ensuring adequate funding to meet the rapidly escalating credit needs, constitutes a further salient aspect of cooperative Europe's geo-economic leadership.

Conversely, Russia has utilised the rhetoric of the historical ties to the political fabric of the targeted regions, whether in the former Soviet Union, with the EU or in post-colonial Africa. This has necessitated the implementation of a pragmatic selection of friendly states. Furthermore, political loyalty, the similarity of the regime to that of Russia, and the exploitation of common historical memory and modernist patterns of state sovereignty facilitate the implementation of a political patronage agenda. There has been an ongoing process of stating and revising the economic, political, and social objectives of the alternative regional and cross-regional integrations, which means that any project patronized by Russia is not the ultimate goal of the inter-regional collaboration. Rather, the aim is to deliver security to the public and impose structures that legitimise and maintain the current political status quo. Russia's approach to evolving its political and economic structure is multifaceted. On the one hand, the country has sought to align itself with the borrowing mechanisms of the EU through various financial and economic integration processes. On the other hand, it has also demonstrated a marked divergence from the EU's liberal democratic principles, pursuing policies that are designed to bolster the political fortunes of the current leadership. Ultimately, any integration process under Russia's auspices is characterised by a prioritisation of economic imperatives over immediate political gains.

A fundamental dimension of Russian geopolitical leadership is the primordialist understanding of sovereignty as a principle according to which a state does not recognize any authority higher than its own over its territory or people. Russia directly refers to paragraph 1 of Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, and other international legal mechanisms.

The fundamental principle of public international law affirms the equality of all states, obliging them to adhere to the obligations they have established, while granting them the right to exercise full internal sovereignty. This principle also provides for the right of states to exercise their own political, social, economic and cultural systems of governance without external interference. Therefore, non-interference by other states in the internal affairs of any state, as well as non-violation of its territorial integrity and political independence, are of paramount importance.

The second pillar of Russian leadership is predicated on the notion that the economy comes first. Consequently, energy trade relations in Russia are frequently perceived as a matter of symmetric or asymmetric interdependence, with importers reliant on energy supplies and exporters dependent on the revenues generated by trade. This, in turn, engenders possibilities for natural links between unbalanced trade relations and political coercion. In this context, the willingness of an actor, in this case Russia, to control or cut off supplies to gas-dependent countries or trading partners can be seen as a means of exerting political influence. If the EU establishes political clientele by economic means, then Russia uses nothing but economic ideological patronage.

Thirdly, in the context of leadership criteria, Russia considers security to be the factor that exerts the greatest influence on the thinking and actions of other nations. The primary distinction between the collective West, particularly the EU, and Russia with regard to the conceptualisation of security lies in their divergent emphasis on values and national interests. The former places significant emphasis on long-term values within a liberal logic framework, whereas the latter prioritises short-term national interests within a realistic logic framework. Given its own difficulties with separatist regions, Russia has always believed that sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference should take precedence over all other norms under all circumstances.

The neighbourhood has always been regarded by Russia as its protective belt from the outside. Since then, the mere intrusion of a foreign power into Russia's neighbourhood has been perceived as a threat to Russia itself, thus explaining the Russian obsession with maintaining control over these territories by preventing their westernisation. The contradiction lies in Russia's constant promotion of the right to protect the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad, a concept which has been strengthened from one iteration to another. The defence of the Russian language on the global stage is presented as a means of justifying the realisation of Russian geostrategic interests in the 'near abroad', regardless of the cost. This rhetoric was employed in 2014 in relation to Crimea. In the context of its interactions with Russia, the EU's consolidated regulatory authority, characterised by its formal adherence to the principles of conditionality at the level of member states' bilateral strategies, encounters the practice of a policy of pragmatism.

M. Leonard and N. Popescu identified "five distinct policy approaches to Russia shared by old and new members alike: 'Trojan Horses' (Cyprus and Greece) who often defend Russian interests in the EU system, and are willing to veto common EU positions; 'Strategic Partners' (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) who enjoy a 'special relationship' with Russia which occasionally undermines common EU policies; 'Friendly Pragmatists' (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg,

Malta, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia) who maintain a close relationship with Russia and tend to put their business interests above political goals; ‘Frosty Pragmatists’ (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom) who also focus on business interests but are less afraid than others to speak out against Russian behaviour on human rights or other issues; and ‘New Cold Warriors’ (Lithuania and Poland) who have an overtly hostile relationship with Moscow and are willing to use the veto to block EU negotiations with Russia.” (Leonard and Popescu 2007, 2).

This classification serves to highlight the absence of a consolidated EU position on these matters. For instance, Russia frequently employs its strategic partnerships with influential actors to advance its interests. These strategic partners often have a special relationship with Russia. In contrast, countries that are friendly and cold pragmatists have a stable economic relationship with Russia and prioritise national interests over common political goals. Finally, new Cold War warriors are countries that are perceived as hostile towards Russia and are often willing to block EU-Russia negotiations.

Since 2014, when formulating their foreign policy strategies, both actors have been under no obligation to seek a solution to the aforementioned problem of Russia’s inclusion in the balance of power of the EU and European institutions. It is improbable that Moscow will seek to dominate Europe or join the European concert of democratic states. The ongoing consolidation of Russian-Chinese relations, coupled with Russia’s gradual strategic reorientation towards the East, effectively negates the necessity for Moscow to confront the so-called ‘European problem’. The EU’s strategic accommodation is complemented by periodic diplomatic interventions; however, these efforts have largely failed due to Moscow’s reluctance to modify its foreign policy and domestic political system. Rather than seeking to reset its relations with either the EU or the U.S., Russia is seeking to diminish American influence in key regions of strategic interest, including the Balkans, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, Russia has expressed contentment with the present level of practical cooperation with Europe. Paradoxically, there has been a deterioration in political relations despite the continued purchase of Russian gas by the EU.

### **Interregionalism as a balancing instrument and normative power of the EU**

When typologizing the EU interregional relations in different regions, we can highlight their individual features in the context of the EU foreign policy: the use of interregionalism as a balancing instrument, the use of normative power to transfer institutional experience and broadcast political interests, asymmetry and the influence of non-state actors. In the framework of this work, it is also supposed to identify the connection between the above features and the functions of interregionalism (Söderbaum, StÅlgren and Van Langenhove 2005).

Firstly, interregionalism is an important balancing instrument. In this case, one of the main functions of interregionalism is manifested. The EU seeks to compete with world powers for influence in the regions of the world, primarily with the United States and China. In addition, it can be said that the special interest of the EU in conducting active interregionalism is a kind of claim to the status of a global leader. Balancing can

have different variations and manifest itself not only in its classical understanding of the balance of power to ensure security, since the balance of power can be associated with institutional balancing (Meissner 2017). On the one hand, it attaches importance to a significant increase in the number of international institutions with a decrease in the effectiveness of military power as a means of influence in the international arena. On the other hand, he agrees with the realist argument about the use of institutions by states or groups of states as a means of increasing their power. In my opinion, interregional and transregional relations generate pragmatic and flexible links, institutionalizing relations between regions. An example of this kind of balancing is the EU's desire to enter into major agreements in various regions to maintain balance in competition with other influential players, including in response to other major projects by competitors (Plank 2023).

Secondly, the peculiarity of the EU foreign policy is the use of normative power as the main instrument for promoting political interests and institutional experience in other regions. Normative power explains that the formation of the EU foreign policy course is built by promoting norms, based on cooperation and dialogue, and normative power is part of the EU identity (Santander 2025). The mechanisms of normative power are non-military forms of influence and include informational, procedural and open dissemination of norms. The EU, through these mechanisms, is considered to be able to set global normative standards, which is an important aspect of its power and influence in the modern world. The extensive set of normative principles of the EU is set out in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, but at present the EU has a value system that includes not only the norms of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, but also social rights, sustainable development and the prevention of climate change. In my opinion, through the practice of interregionalism using normative power, the EU advances its liberal international agenda, disseminates European identity and contributes to strengthening the role of the EU and increasing its competitiveness. The main objectives of the EU regional policy are the dissemination of democratic values and institutions, which are set out in the concepts of European identity, good governance, the rule of law and the EU rules.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

The implementation of the Global Gateway initiative demonstrates that the formation and implementation of the EU's geo-economic leadership strategy in Eurasia, and in particular in the so-called Eastern Partnership region, is faced with a number of contradictions. In addition to the presence of competing national interests within the EU, there are difficulties at the external level in ensuring the compatibility of donor policies with commitments to comply with the rules of global multilateralism. The success of the EU's geopolitical leadership programme, therefore, is contingent upon the EU's capacity to achieve strategic autonomy within a complex interdependent global context.

A further characteristic of the European model of geo-economic leadership is its focus on security, primarily economic security. Evidently, this approach is principally aimed at shielding Europe from geostrategic challenges posed by China and Russia and mitigating its dependence on critical supplies. The balancing of different models of

leadership depends, amongst other things, on the development of the strategic context and the behaviour of other major powers, including their reactions to EU initiatives. Nevertheless, the defensive nature of the EU's geostrategy appears to be at odds with the neoliberal inclination towards maintaining international cooperation and shaping the norms that underpin it.

It is evident that the absence of equilibrium between the geo-economic and geopolitical dimensions of the leadership strategy is pivotal for the further legitimisation of the EU's global role. The EU's transition from the normative persuasion model, where leadership is achieved through the transfer of norms and values from the centre to the periphery, to the endogenous learning model, based on the development of identical norms and values in different regions as a result of common responses to structural changes, has not yet been accomplished. After five years of Global Gateway implementation, the EU is still learning how to strategically manage interdependence.

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The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

### **Ethical Standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects

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