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THE 'ILLIBERAL TURN' AND EU'S FOREIGN POLICY: A TENTATIVE ANALYSIS

Abstract: The paper analyzes the impact of the "illiberal turn" on the European Union's (EU) foreign policy. It examines how the rise of illiberal governments in Europe, particularly in Hungary and Poland, challenges the EU's role as a promoter of democracy. Using a liberal intergovernmentalist framework, the study explores how illiberal actors influence EU decision-making, weaken democracy promotion tools, and erode the EU's normative power. The paper concludes by assessing the implications for the EU's global influence and internal cohesion.

Keywords: illiberal democracy, illiberalism, EU, liberal intergovernmentalism, democracy promotion

1. Introduction

Ever since it began to establish itself as a player in the international arena, the EU has been regarded as a *sui generis* actor. Concepts such as "Civilian power", "Normative power", "Civilizing power" are some of the definitions that have been used to qualify this unique identity. The lack of a classical military instrument, coupled with a strong commitment to values such as democracy and human rights, both at home and in its external relations, have been central to this perception of the EU as somewhat "different" from more traditional actors in IR (Ceccorulli, Fassi, 2022: 7-8). According to one perspective, the EU is best understood as a "liberal power", "an actor that is composed of liberal democracies whose interests, identities and institutions motivate and constrain its policy" (Wagner, 2017: 1398).

As a "liberal power", the EU has been an essential pillar in the establishment and further development of the Liberal International Order. Today, this order is in crisis (Ikenberry, 2020). It is challenged both

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externally – by the rise of illiberal powers with a revisionist agenda, starting with China and Russia – and internally, by illiberal forces that erode liberal democracies from within (Palano, 2022; Chandam, 2024). While is clear that this "illiberal turn" will have some effects on the EU's identity and international posture, less clear are the mechanisms and processes through which these effects develop. This paper focuses on one part of this complex picture: the assertion of illiberal forces in the European Union and the influences these may have on the more normative dimensions of EU foreign policy.

The article is organised as follow. The first section introduces the "illiberal Zeitgeist", focusing on the challenges that illiberal forces pose to liberal democracy, the relationship between populism and illiberalism, and the empirical evidence of an "illiberal turn" in Europe. Section two presents a theoretical framework to analyse the impact of the illiberal turn on EU foreign policy, adopting a liberal intergovernmentalism approach: according to this model illiberal forces in EU Member States can influence EU's foreign policy, through a bargaining process involving both the EU and the domestic levels. This impact can be identified in terms of EU's goals, instruments, and resources. The following sections apply this framework to the empirical analysis of one specific area of EU's foreign policy, democracy promotion, which is strictly linked to the EU's identity as a liberal power. The conclusions evaluate how the growing influence of illiberal forces impact on EU's effectiveness in upholding democracy, both internally and in its international relations.

2. Grasping the "illiberal Zeitgeist"

The perception that we live in an era characterised by a crisis of liberal democracy, of the liberal international order, or of liberalism more broadly seems to be widespread (Fassi, Parsi, 2021). However, grasping exactly what is generally meant by the 'illiberal turn', how this is linked to specific difficulties concerning democratic principles, procedures or institutions, and in turn how these reverberate or intersect with the changes taking place in the current international system, appears less straightforward.

Indeed, there seems to be a veritable 'war of words' going on around the concepts of democracy, liberalism, and illiberalism (Campati, 2024). Not only as far as scholars are concerned, on a theoretical or analytical level, but in a broader political sense. The terms democracy, liberalism, and illiberalism have different meanings for different actors, and are used also as instruments of political struggle, mobilisation and coalition-building, both domestically and internationally (Varga, Buzogány, 2021).

To some extent, the current debate on illiberalism is not entirely new, and can be partly traced back to the concept of 'illiberal democracy' revived in the late 1990s by political analyst Fareed Zakaria (1997). Reflecting on new democracies, hybrid regimes or transitional regimes that were emerging in the post-Cold War scenario, Zakaria highlighted the "risk of a weakening of constitutional democracy", i.e. "a potential disjunction between democracy (based on free elections) and liberalism (rule of law, separation of powers, fundamental rights)". In particular, his predictions were that "while democracy might survive, in the long run, liberalism might not." (Canihac, 2022: 4).

The notion of "illiberal democracy", despite the extensive debate and controversy surrounding it, had merit in drawing attention to a crucial yet frequently overlooked aspect: the peculiar, precarious, historically determined equilibrium between these two elements of the "Western Canon":

> Indeed, while democracy and liberalism have evolved to become inseparable components of the Western democratic state, the two notions denote different principles. Most definitions of democracy emphasize the procedural aspects of democratic rule that determine the process of electing a government, representative of the will of people. In contrast, liberalism as a political principle requires that individual liberty is protected from state power and that limitations are placed on government authority with the aim of guaranteeing equality, justice, and individual rights and freedoms (Dandashly, Noutcheva, 2022: 418).

In contrast, illiberal democracy is characterised by elected governments that, while maintaining electoral processes, restrict civil and political liberties, undermine the rule of law, erode the separation of powers, and control the media (Cabada, 2021). The protection of individual freedoms and minority rights by independent institutions, characteristic of liberal democracies, is compressed here by the concentration of power, the erosion of independent bodies such as the judiciary and central banks, and the promotion of a homogeneous view of the nation, often to the detriment of minorities. This is often accompanied by an unscrupulous use of social and traditional media to promote a strong sense of national identity and a direct and personal relationship between leaders and people.

If in the 1990s the focus was mainly on newly created political regimes, which were believed to be "deviating" from the Western model based on a balance between democracy and liberalism, the illiberal turn now seems to be affecting the heart of the West and Europe in particular. Contributing to these developments have been the spread of "populist" forces, parties and governments, the (first) presidency of Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit between the United

Kingdom and the European Union, the rise of the far-right in Europe (Bruno, Downes, 2022), the advance of sovereignist and Euroskeptic forces in the 2019 and 2024 European Parliament elections, and the affirmation of illiberal governments in the heart of Europe, starting with Hungary and Poland. In particular, Viktor Orbán has made "illiberal democracy" a real political project, presenting it as a clear alternative to liberal democracy, considered by some as ineffective or failed, and consolidating his power in Hungary for more than a decade (Kim, 2023).

The difficulties experienced by liberal democracy in Europe are highlighted by several indicators, particularly with regard to East-Central Europe: "Democracy indices such as Bertelsmann, Economist Intelligence Unit, Freedom House, Nations in Transit, and V-Dem capture a steady erosion of liberal democracy across the countries that acceded to the EU in the early 2000s" (Burlyuk et al.: 1). Some scholars particularly point to the existence of an "East-West divide" in the EU regarding the quality of liberal democracy, with the formation of a true "illiberal bloc" centered on the countries of the Visegrad group: Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia (Scott, 2022). However, other analyses highlight how even founding members such as France and Germany are not immune to such processes of democratic regression. Smolka (2021), for instance, shows that "both old and new Member States are affected by the two phenomena" and "20 EU Member States faced at least one period of democratic decline between 2004 and 2016 (Pintsch et al., 2022: 406).

The significance and scope of the illiberal turn, however, could be better understood by adding a further perspective, shifting the focus from the analysis of political regimes to that of political ideas. In this view, Campati highlights that "illiberalism" itself has a long historical pedigree, and suggests that the "new illiberalism" can be defined as "a new ideological family that finds its glue in a position of opposition to liberalism" and has four main characteristics: 1) "it has spread in the last two or three decades in countries with a past experience of liberal tradition"; 2) "it updates the visions of classical conservatism", with respect to issues such as "the primacy of nation, religion, and gender relations", and suggests that human beings possess ontological characteristics that cannot be entirely socially constructed. 3) "it draws inspiration from the ideologies of the extreme right", setting it apart from the status quo-oriented approach of classical conservatism; 4) "it proposes the refutation of some typical elements of political liberalism, such as trust in institutions and respect for the rights of minorities" (Campati, 2024: 30).

It follows that illiberalism is not a clear-cut, defined, definitive model towards which states, political forces, individuals could converge – as it was, to some extent, for the Western model of liberal democracy. Mostly, the new illiberal turn is defined simply and mostly *in opposition* – and *by the opposition* – to the Western model of liberal democracy, to liberalism, and – to a certain degree – to the Liberal International Order and some of its constitutive elements.

3. The illiberal turn and EU foreign policy: a liberal intergovernmentalist approach

As mentioned, the EU has long been considered a pillar of the Liberal International Order, an atypical actor founded first and foremost on the democratic characteristics of its constituent elements, the Member States, and oriented towards a foreign policy inspired by liberal values, norms and principles. On the basis of the previous analysis, what are the potential consequences of the "illiberal turn" in Europe on the EU's identity and international posture? How this will affect the LWO?

One way to address the question is by applying the 'liberal intergovernmentalist' approach developed by Andrew Moravcsik (1993). Liberal intergovernmentalism suggests that the process of European integration is best understood as a two steps dynamic, influenced by the preferences that Member States bring to the negotiating table at the EU level. In turn, these preferences are the result of a bargain at the national level between governments and domestic groups that compete to shape the state's final position.

Starting from these assumptions, Sophie Meunier and Milada Vachudova argued that the "illiberal turn" in Europe might change these national preferences significantly, with the effect of shifting contestation among EU governments from the usual level of policies and competences, to that of "regime type and the very identity of the EU as an institution intertwined with the processes and values of liberal democracy" (2018: 1632). Although classical EU integration theories take ideological convergence around liberal values for granted, this is not the case anymore, and normative divergence is becoming more evident even within Europe. As a consequence, this internal contestation would make it even more difficult for the EU to conduct a coherent foreign policy, and especially one that promotes liberal values (Meunier, Vachudova, 2018: 1641).

More precisely, the "illiberal turn" is expected to have an impact on EU's foreign policy and external relations in terms of three main elements: goals, instruments, and resources. Concerning the definition of goals, such an impact could be amplified or mitigated by the

specific policymaking mechanisms that characterize the EU different policy domains (Keukeleire, Delreux, 2014: 61-93). Thus, in external policies governed by unanimity – such as most of Common Foreign and Security Policy/ Common Security and Defence Policy – "a shift in preferences by one illiberal government can have a disproportionate impact" on EU's goals and positions; in policies governed by the majority – such as in Trade, and most of EU External action – "many member states would have to shift their preferences in order to change the collective position of the EU and thereby its global power" (Meunier, Vachudova, 2018: 1640).

A second likely consequence is the impact on specific instruments that the EU has been using in its foreign policy, especially those that characterized the EU as a civilian, normative and liberal power. In particular, democracy promotion instruments – from bottom-up democratic assistance (EIDHR, EED) to top-down conditionality (such as democracy clauses in trade agreements) (Fassi, Giusti, 2014) – may be blocked by illiberal governments, or "more likely, they will be hollowed out, no longer enforced by the EU and no longer seen as a credible ask by target governments and groups" (Meunier, Vachudova, 2018: 1640).

The third expected impact concerns EU's power resources, and precisely its *soft power* based on being perceived as a unique international actor grounded on democracy. Obviously, the rise of illiberal forces within the EU might erode this image, and "the EU's normative appeal may wane as citizens, civil society groups and elites in third countries no longer see the EU as a model of liberal democracy, human rights and the rule of law" (Meunier, Vachudova, 2018: 1632).

Since the analysis proposed by Meunier and Vachudova in 2018, "the illiberal turn" has become much more evident both at the European and at international level: the hypothesis of a spillover effect on EU foreign policy today cannot be easily discarded. However, few studies seem to have analysed this relationship, and even fewer have investigated the specific effect on the EU as a Liberal Power, that is, in relation to goals, instruments, and capacities related to the normative dimension of EU action.

4. EU's goals: a(n illiberal) grain of sand in the gear?

Many scholars and observers denounce the risk that the illiberal turn might have an impact on the definition of EU's foreign policy goals: vetoing specific foreign policy decisions, increasing the level of norms contestation, or shifting the overall political equilibrium in the EU towards new issues and priorities. The first dynamic, vetoing, is to some extent the most visible and straightforward, as it is directly linked to the policymaking mechanisms that characterize EU Common Foreign

and Security Policy – unanimity. Here the position of one illiberal government can indeed block consensual decisions in the European Council or the Council of the EU: examples includes the non-application of the art. 7 of the Treaty on the European Union for violations of EU values against Poland and Hungary (Lionello, 2024: 67-68) – an "internal" domain, but strictly linked to the definition of EU' goals – Hungary's opposition to the adoption of harsher sanctions against Russia (Scott, 2022: 717), or Orbán systematic obstruction to military support for Ukraine within the European Council (Politico EU, 2025).

The second mechanism, norm contestation, could be more subtle, and less evident as it often unfolds within more insulated foreign policy circles. Juncos and Pomorska, for example, find indeed that "the polarisation resulting from the rise of populism and an 'illiberal turn' has increased the likelihood of normative contestation in CFSP" (2021: 371). The contestation involves both *constitutive norms* – "foundational values and principles" of the EU such as peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law and human rights – and *procedural norms* – the "code of conduct" or rules of the game, that in EU CFSP amount to norms such as consensus building, the need to consult with or inform others, to avoid becoming isolated within the group etc. (Ibi: 371; 380). Substantive norms are more political in nature than procedural norms, and that makes the former more likely to be the target of contestation: indeed, the authors see the emergence of "two distinctive poles" in relation to liberal values, especially in relation to immigration and human rights. At the same time, there is evidence of contestation of long-standing procedural norms in EU CFSP, especially by Hungary, whose leadership often adopts unpredictable positions and does not mind becoming isolated or perceived as a "pariah state" in EU foreign policy circles; instead Hungary and other illiberal governments might consider that reputational costs at the EU level are more than compensated by symbolic gains at the domestic level, thus reducing the likelihood of reaching common decisions in CFSP (Ibi: 375-376).

A third mechanism is captured by the concept of "informal and illiberal Europeanisation", according to which challenges to EU foreign policy do not exclusively emerge in the form of de-Europeanisation (re-nationalisation of foreign policy, or even exit from the EU), but mostly from governments that might try to make the EU reflect their beliefs and expectations by Europeanising their own illiberal agendas (Rivera Escartin, 2020: 1196). This form of Europeanisation is defined as "informal", as in EU CFSP horizontal forms of interaction between states – such as coalitions of like-minded states – increasingly prevail over the vertical and formal dimensions (Ibi: 1197). And, it is "illiberal", since there a change in the substance of what is Europeanised,

as governments lead by illiberal forces "cross-load their own illiberal norms and values", as shown in the cases of Viktor Orbán policy towards Egypt, and former Italian Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini (Lega) approach towards Tunisia (Ibi: 1195; 1208).

The three mechanisms just outlined are likely to expand as illiberal forces assert themselves in Europe. In this view, the June 2024 European Parliament elections were considered a significant test for EU's democratic resilience, due to concerns over the rise of far-right, disinformation, foreign interference (Youngs et al., 2025). Indeed, the elections were perceived by some even as "a potential turning point in EU policy", with the rise of far-right populist parties "threatening to the liberal principles within the bloc, with the risk of exacerbating ongoing institution-member state tensions and outright challenges to EU normative frameworks, present legislation, and future policies […] for years to come." (Demir, Hadfield, 2024: 96). Two elements need to be mentioned in this view. First, analysis on the degree of illiberalism shows that there is a considerable variation within each party family: we cannot automatically assume that all culturally extreme right parties are illiberal, because several of these parties seem ready to endorse constitutional principles (Rohrschneider, 2024). Second, in 2024 European elections far-right parties indeed won roughly a quarter of the vote, and made notable gains especially in France, Italy and Austria. However, the landslide victory that was expected did not materialize and, moreover, in the European Parliament the far-right "remains institutionally divided, spread across three political groups": despite holding a plurality of seats, it should not be able to mobilize as easily as the traditional "centrist" coalition (Mudde, 2024).

Nonetheless, the elections seemed to confirm already existing illiberal trends within Member States and had an impact on the overall EU political equilibria and definition of common goals. Some observers noted, for example, how recent strategic documents already reflected the new "zeitgeist" in relation to the more sensitive issues related to EU's democratic values: "Both the European Council's Strategic Agenda and the Commission's new political guidelines for 2024–2029 identified the defense of democracy among their main priorities" but focused more on defending European democracy and less on supporting democracy globally (Youngs et al, 2025: 6). The mission letters given by the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to the new European commissioners "reinforced this new tilt", including the mission letter to the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, which "contained no mention of democracy support" (Youngs et al., 2025: 6).

Overall, in 2024 the EU issued fewer new policy initiatives and made fewer advances in democracy support than in previous years, and this was especially apparent when compared to the new dynamism of EU defense, security, and economic commitments." (Ibi: 8). One area that once again attracted particular attention and resources, both at the level of the member states and at the level of EU institutions, was migration, and in particular its external dimension. In line with the agenda promoted by radical right-wing parties, most member states indeed pushed for decisive action to curb migration flows, including through funding so-called return hubs in third countries, mostly non-democracies. These developments highlight the abandonment of an ambitious "mobility-democracy nexus", a comprehensive approach combining democracy promotion and mobility, in favour of "a crisis management logic, prioritizing border controls, returns and readmission" over normative goals (Panebianco, Cannata, 2024: 27-28). Even worse, these migration-related agreements (with countries like Libya, Niger or Turkey) provide both legitimation and bargaining power vis-à-vis the EU to governments with debatable democratic credentials, often even increasing their capacity for internal repression by strengthening their security forces and border control agencies through resources, training and equipment (Fassi, Lucarelli, 2022: 182-183).

5. EU normative instruments: democracy promotion *policies*

The role of illiberal governments in the definition, choice, and implementation of EU instruments of normative foreign policy, and more specifically in the domain of democracy promotion, emerged in several occasions and at different levels. For instance, in term of strategic planning, the year 2024 marked the end point of the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy for 2020-2024: "As several member states, led by Hungary, were not favourable to agreeing to a new, improved, or upgraded plan, the EU decided simply to extend the existing plan to 2027" (Youngs et al., 2025: 8). Similarly, at the diplomatic level, it was meaningful that all EU member states participated in the 2024 international Summit for Democracy in South Korea, with the exception of Hungary. Moreover, these latter, assuming the rotating presidency of the EU Council created a diplomatic upheaval with controversial and uncoordinated visits to Moscow and Beijing (Euronews, 2024).

Although there is no shortage of examples, it seems that there has been little systematic analysis of the impact of the "illiberal turn" on different instruments of EU democracy promotion. One of the few substantial studies in this direction is a special issue edited by Anne

Pintsch, Dennis Hammerschmidt and Cosima Meyer (2022). Although the central question here is exactly how the erosion of democracy within the EU may impact its action as a key democracy promoter, their focus is rather on the specific role of populist forces. As seen before, the relationship between populism, democracy and illiberalism is far from obvious, and continues to be the subject of much debate. Moreover, while populism is often identified as a challenge to democracy, notwithstanding an expanding literature on the subject (see Chrysogelos, 2021; Coticchia 2021; Wajner, Giurlando, 2024) little is still known about its actual impact on democracies' foreign policy, and more specifically on democracy promotion policies and instruments. This analysis could thus provide some useful insights on populism that can be applied, to some extent, to illiberal forces.

In order to better understand the forms and content of democracy promotion policies, it is possible to distinguish different processes and factors. As for foreign policy in general, populists or illiberal actors could influence a state's democracy promotion policies either directly, via participation in government, or indirectly, through pressuring governing parties (Pintsch et al., 2022: 413). In turn, these activities could be bilateral or multilateral, and directed towards different kind of actors: other States, International Organizations, civil society, individuals. Moreover, these policies can include distinctive instruments, ranging from diplomacy (diplomatic for the democratic progress of a third country, or conversely denounce its violation of democratic standards, for instance in the case of elections), assistance (democratic aid – the provision of financial or technical resources), conditionality (i.e. the promise of certain benefits in exchange for specific democratic reforms), sanctions (Fassi, Giusti, 2014).

The empirical analysis, however, does not provide a straightforward answer: if quantitative studies seem to confirm the impact of the illiberal turn on European democracy promotion instruments, qualitative studies tend to qualify its reach (Pintsch et al., 2022; 418). When bilateral democracy promotion is affected, for example, it is often reshaped by populist forces according to their specific preferences and worldviews, more than completely abandoned. On the other hand, while there is evidence of populists' pushback against civil society – as expected, given their opposition to the very idea of pluralism –, there are also cases of populist support for Civil Society Organizations (for example when these are more aligned with their specific ideology) as well as instances in which CSOs find strategies to cope with a reduced support (Pintsch et al., 2022, p. 418).

One specific instrument that is attracting a certain attention is that of democratic conditionality, especially in the framework of the EU's

enlargement policy. Illiberal governments have contributed to blocking or undermining the use of conditionality in EU enlargement policy mainly in two ways: through their support for the entry of other illiberal regimes without them fully meeting democratic criteria, and through undermining the credibility of the instrument of conditionality itself. The first point is exemplified by Hungary, eager to have other illiberal regimes within the EU, supports the entry of Serbia and Montenegro, even before other member states deem them ready in terms of the full respect the liberal-democratic values on which the conditionality of enlargement is based (Mingardi, 2024). Instead, the case of Ukraine, an official EU candidate since June 2022, went in exactly the opposite direction: the Orbán government has long blocked the delivery of the 50 billion Euro of the Ukraine's Facility, designed to support Ukraine from 2024 to 2027 and linked to the enlargement criteria, in order to obtain private gains (the release of part of the EU funds frozen) (Youngs et al., 2025: 14). These inconsistencies, and the relative impunity of illiberal governments within the EU, undermine the instrument of EU conditionality, reducing incentives for candidate countries to take seriously the European Commission's assessments and admonitions regarding respect for the rule of law and democratic principles. Moreover, analysis show that most illiberal or far-right parties (that are gaining increasing support at the domestic level) express scepticism or opposition to EU enlargement, motivated by financial, migration, security and national sovereignty concerns – such positions will inevitably influence the future dynamics of the EU accession process (Alexandris, 2025).

6. EU's resources: dissipating EU's soft power?

The third potential impact of the illiberal turn concerns EU's resources in terms of *soft power*, and specifically its image as model of liberal democracy, human rights and the rule of law. As we have seen, the democratic backsliding within the member states challenges both the functioning of the EU and its nature. The lack of mutual trust between member states, the participation of less than fully democratic countries in EU decisions, and the weakening of EU's ability to protect fundamental values put its very democratic identity at risk (Lionello, 2024). The assertion of illiberal forces thus impacts EU foreign policy in terms of objectives, specific instruments, but also and perhaps above all risks impacting the way the EU is perceived by external actors.

The perception of the EU by leaders and public opinion in third countries is at the core of a specific democracy promotion mechanism, democratic contagion (Whitehead, 1996). According to this model, the mere example set by existing democracies and the increasingly dense interactions (political, economic, social) at an international and

transnational level would be sufficient, in the long run, to positively influence democratic developments in other countries. As seen before, conditionality implies "a bargaining process" in which an international actor uses selective incentives in order to change the behaviour of actors in the target country, while these latter weigh the benefits and cost of democratic change. Instead, democratic contagion can be understood as a form of spontaneous "socialization", a learning process in which democratization results from a change in normative and causal beliefs inspired by external models and examples (Lavenex, Schimmelfennig, 2011: 890).

Few studies seem to have systematically analysed this specific mechanism in relation to the illiberal turn. Olga Burlyuk, Assem Dandashly and Gergana Noutcheva (2023), for instance, explicitly focus on the effects of the internal rule of law crisis on the EU's ability to promote democracy in its neighbourhood, placing the external legitimacy of the EU in its neighbouring countries at the centre of their analysis. In particular, by using local surveys in European Neighbourhood Policy countries, they emphasise the role of citizens' perceptions as well as the discourses and opinions of local elites' (Ibi: 2).

Overall, their empirical analysis finds little evidence of deterioration in the EU's image as a democracy promoter and human rights defender, as seen from these countries. On a positive note, the EU's internal rule-of-law crisis has not (yet) damaged the EU's reputation and normative power in the Neighbourhood, and in the past decade, the EU's image has remained relatively unchanged. On the other hand, the study shows how the "EU's rule-of-law crisis, while salient for the EU itself, is a trivial matter for its eastern and southern neighbours", and it is not perceived as "crisis" (Ibi: 18).

Moreover, while the EU maintains its role as reference for the neighbours willing to improve democracy at home, people of both neighbourhoods still view the EU positively more for various other reasons than for its democracy. In addition, "In the ENP South, the EU is associated exclusively with its western members, mainly France, Spain, Italy […] Therefore, the deteriorating rule of law in some eastern European members […] appears less significant" (Ibi: 16). The former, however, can affect negatively eastern neighbourhood countries' own membership ambitions "by undermining the symbolic power of the positive example" associated with Eastern EU members (Ibi: 17). On the other hand, specifically in these regions, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 seems to have quickly revived the 'EU model' and revitalised the European aspirations of some states, with Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia immediately applying for EU membership and being quickly granted candidate status by the EU (EU Commission, 2025).

Shifting the focus from the regional to the global level, the research field on the EU's external image has long highlighted how this latter is often quite different from the EU's own self-representation as assumed both by EU leaders and by the academic literature regarding the EU's global stance as "a profoundly 'different' one", which promotes positive values and collective norms (Manners, 2002). In the specific area of democracy promotion, for example, it has emerged how the EU has been instead often criticised for "double standards", for promoting reforms that are excessively centred on "Eurocentric norms", for "a patronising style" reinforcing the perception of the EU as "a neo-colonial power" (Lucarelli, 2014: 1-2; 9-10).

Furthermore, the external image of the EU appears to be highly variable. Even in the past, the EU has been perceived as a model of democracy in some parts of the world, but this perception is not uniform globally, and in many regions it is not the prevailing image; in addition, even within regions, this normative image may be influenced by historical, political factors and the type of regime in the third country (Chaban, Headley, 2022), and may show significant differences between élites and public opinion. Although the impact of illiberalism on the image of the EU as a global model of democracy is not yet captured by recent empirical analysis, some studies in other normative field of EU action (e.g. climate change) point to factors that seem extremely significant for this dimension: "resilient images may become fragile when expectations are not met, and in particular when there are persistent contradictions to the evaluative normative element of the imagery when perceptions of the EU as a leader and pursuing norms that should be followed are put into question. Such contradictions can potentially lead to contestation of the EU's normative policy position and an erosion of resilience, from strong image resilience to 'fragile resilience'" (Chaban, Elgström, 2024: 15).

7. Conclusions

The analysis highlighted the challenges posed by the illiberal turn in Europe and its consequences for the EU's foreign policy and global influence. More specifically, the application of a liberal intergovernmentalist approach allows to capture the mechanisms through which illiberal forces in EU Member States – in governments and/or within societies – can influence EU foreign policy, and in particular those areas that characterise the EU as a 'Liberal Power'.

Examining the specific field of democracy promotion, we have highlighted how the impact of the illiberal turn can already be grasped in relation to the EU's goals, instruments, and resources. Theoretical and

empirical research in this field is perhaps only just beginning. However, the trends that seem to be emerging today from Europe, and across the Atlantic, suggest that these issues will remain topical for the foreseeable future.

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