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Vicedirettrice: Beatrice Magni

Indice

Aleksandar Damjanovski

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1. *Introduction*

The US-China competition has reawakened the need for the EU for a more comprehensive approach to its strategic autonomy and sovereignty. Scholarships started to investigate the extent to which the EU would have been able to strengthen its independence compared to other great powers, as the competition among the latter soared in the last decade. The classical realist perspective holds that anytime a state strives to increase its own security, it generates a security challenge for the other actors – the so-called 'security dilemma' (Jervis 1978). Concerning the US-China tech rivalry, instead, the EU appears to avoid this dilemma's trap. It does by offloading the burden of limiting and containing Chinese technological ambitions to the US, while enhancing its own possibilities of achieving strategic autonomy without altering the *status quo*.

This dual-edged approach is confirmed, on the one hand, by the EU initial reluctance to adopt US sanctions and export bans, on 'dual-use' semiconductors, against Chinese company, so avoiding open disagreements with the latter. And via a series of policy initiatives that strengthen its strategic autonomy in comparison to the others such as the European Chips Act, the EU-US Trade Technology Council, the European Alliance on Semiconductor Technology, and the Comprehensive Digital Partnership.

It should come as no surprise that, following the launch of the European Defence Fund (EDF), the EU chose to act on one of its fundamental pillars for strategic autonomy: the semiconductor technology and its supply chain security. European Chips Act, which includes a proposal for

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a European Chips Fund, along with other initiatives, make it patent how the perception for this technology has dramatically changed becoming key variable for great power's ambitions. Semiconductor manufacturing and trade reflects geopolitical tensions similarly to what occurred in the oil sector in the twentieth century. The lack of domestic manufacturing capability is increasingly viewed as a risk and a hindrance to state sovereignty. As a result, gaining leverage in this essential industry is a matter of both 'strategic autonomy' and state security.

Nonetheless, the EU did not aimed to alter or to affront US leading position in the sector, but rather to exploit elements of prevailing circumstances to increase its own strategic autonomy, thus limiting others influence. This security strategy can be duly explained by the 'buffering' theoretical approach as proposed by Chong (2003).

The following sections aim to develop an initial theoretical framework to understand better how the EU responds to and interacts with more powerful state actors by examining the variations in EU's security strategies vis-à-vis US-China tech rivalry, with a particular emphasis on EU policy on supply chain security and semiconductor technologies. Ultimately, it will provide critical insight into the contemporary understanding of the European Commission's role in foreign policy strategies through trade and industrial initiatives.

An important caveat regarding the unit of analysis employed in this article needs to be mentioned. The primary unit of study is the state when dealing with neorealist concepts like bandwagoning and balancing. When applied to the EU, there is a risk of over-stretching these concepts since certain initiatives are far from a unitary actor's outcome. For example, applying them to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), where interstate bargaining is still crucial for comprehending the EU's external action, would have been challenging. Nonetheless, in other areas the EU acts as a single unit, as in the case of trade policy and regulation of the internal market, where the European Commission retains exclusive competencies. Furthermore, in its attempt to appear 'different' and normative superior compared to other influential actors such as the US (Bretherton and Vogler 2005), the EU has gone through a schismogenetic process resulting in a distinct identity from its Members.

Thus, the EU as a unified polity (Cotta 2012) arose in those policy areas such as environment, artificial intelligence, and cyberspace, where its supranational institutions have been frontrunners and displayed a significant role vis-à-vis member states. This article will consider the EU as a unified polity rather than the simple sum of its member states' national interests. The focus on the European Commission (EC) as the unit of analysis is used for two reasons here. First, its outcome is the one of a unitary actor. Second, as the latest EU Strategic Compass shows, supply chain security and semiconductors are two of the most important aspects of contemporary state strategic autonomy and sovereignty. Both are prerogatives of the EC as part of the EU market, making them appropriate for the research. As a result, the study addresses this issue by examining the EU's stance in both areas: EU security and unitary unit of analysis.

2. T*he* EU-C*hina relationship*: *tensions between grate powers*

The last three years marked a significant shift in the relationship between the EU and China, from being considered an economic partner to a competitor (European Commission 2019). Several elements have marked this shift, above all the EU sanctions against Chinese entity and individuals accused of human rights abuses in Xinjiang (PRC),[1] which China retaliated with counter-sanctions; and the trade issues on key sector tech goods such as 'dual-use' semiconductor.

The Chinese counter-sanctions put in a deadlock the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement Investment (CAI), launched in 2004 and agreed in principle in 2020 after 35 round of negotiations. As the political context was "not conducive to ratification" (Valdis Dombrovski 2021), the approval process was put on hold, exacerbating even further the tension between the EU and China.

The other aspect that downside relationship between the EU and China was the trade of the 'dual-use' semiconductor. In the context of US's unilateral efforts to halt the transfer of sophisticated technology to China, the Trump administration waged a campaign to prevent the sale of the highly

[1] Council Decision (CFSP) 2021/481 of 22 March 2021 amending Decision (CFSP) 2020/1999 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses ST/6933/2021/INIT OJ L 99I , 22.3.2021.

sophisticated semiconductor produced by the ASML Dutch company, leader in the lithography chip making process, to China. With no ability to stop the sale immediately, the US government encouraged European countries to take the security concerns into account as lithography equipment is subject to the Wassenaar Arrangement, which controls export restrictions on so-called 'dual-use' technology with commercial and military uses.

Despite the US pressures, the EU preferred to cooperate on topics of mutual concern, concerning Beijing, while also seeking greater business connections with China to help Europe's export-driven economy (Casarini 2022), As emphasized bluntly in the EU-*China*: A *Strategic Outlook* and EU-*China Connectivity Strategy* documents. But rising geopolitical tensions between the two trading blocs have transformed the EU's approach to trade – and to external action in general. Objectives such as sustainability and supply chain security, and strate – gic autonomy have become all increasingly prioritized in the consideration of trade agreement. It further challenges the EU to strike a balance between its economic interests and its larger geopolitical partnership with the US (Kim 2022). As this research attempt to explain, while the intensification of great power competition soared, the EU approach has changed accordingly launching several policy initiatives that try to position the EU as an independent international actor in the new technological rivalry era.

3. *Polarity and Technology*

The question of balancing and bandwagoning persists in the realm of international politics and European Studies, see Cladi and Locatelli (2012). Scholars almost concluded that these two strategies were the only two fundamental approaches to state security in global politics. Especially after the end of the so-called bipolar system, which saw the dawn of the US as the unique hegemonic actor, these two approaches to state security were once again in the spotlight. The essential tenet of this school of thought is that actors bandwagon with the powerful and balance against the foe in order to maintain security and attain their goals. This argument hinges on the balance of power as state actors seek to lessen security concerns by attempting to influence power distribution through alliance and domestic policy choices.

Though literatures on balancing-type strategies already displayed high degree of variation (Mueller 1995), according to the structure of international system, balancing and bandwagoning appeared insufficient to account for the range of strategies adopted by international actor for preserving and promoting their interests. Historical evidence shows that even the most vulnerable states exhibit greater diversity in their strategies than either balancing or bandwagoning can capture (Fox 1977; Schroeder 1994).

To overcome this fallacy, scholars such as Jack Snyder and Thomas Christensen (2013; 1990), and Robert Jervis (1978) among others, have introduced more sophistication into Walt'z balance analysis that goes beyond the mere counting of great power poles. They blended Waltz's observations with key security dilemma and perceptual variables that interact with polarity in shaping international alignments.

3.1 Technology as a 'key variable'

The emergence of new disruptive technologies adds further complexities to understanding actor's position in the international system, which polarity appears insufficient to account for. The polarity of the system is generally not subject to conscious control. But material variables such as the offence-defence balance of technology and their application are more subject to policymakers' choices (Christensen 2013). Technology has always been, and remains, crucial for State's power projection. Nonetheless, in an era great power competitions and geostrategic rivalry fueled by global digitalization, technology is even more crucial as it creates new sources of power and security in international affairs.

Future wars will be waged in a totally different way and the war over technology will be the next battleground of geopolitics, stated Valdis Dombrovskis (2021), Vice-President of the European Commission (EC). This is the reason why European competitiveness in innovation, research, and technology has become critical to establishing EU's strategic autonomy and global position for next 20 or 30 years (Breton 2022). According to the 'double-hatted' Commissioner Breton: Securing the most advanced chips has become an economic and geopolitical priority. Hence, semiconductor technology, and the perception of it, have become pivotal for EU's security and strategic autonomy. Two reasons explain the emphasis on semiconductor technology: First, the systemic value of semiconductors as bedrock for modern economies and for the advent of the fourth industrial revolution; second, the 'dual-use' of semiconductors in both military and civilian applications (Barbé and Morillas 2019).

By focusing on technology as a 'key variable' (Jervis 1978) that interacts with polarity, we would have a better explanatory force of the undergoing international positioning made up by the EU vis-à-vis US-China tech rivalry. Nonetheless, simple relaying on balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy, and its cognates such as 'buck-passing' and 'chain-ganging', may not be sufficient to fully understand EU's behaviour. Indeed, EU's response to preponderant power may not reflect a behaviour that falls somewhere in between balancing and band-wagoning, and it rarely takes one of the two extremes either. On the contrary, EU's attempt to increase own digital sovereignty and strategic autonomy can be explained by using alternative approaches such as 'buffering' (Partem 1983; Chong 2003; Beehner and Meibauer 2016). Over time, scholars have questioned the balancing-bandwagoning theoretical approach with regard to the EU's behaviour, in both unipolar system and multipolar system, in which one would have imagined to be more likely to occur (Waltz 1979), proving it inaccurate.

In the following section we further analyse why balancing-bandwagoning theoretical approach does not suit with the current EU approach toward strategic autonomy and digital sovereignty in the context of US-China tech rivalry. But first, it is important to shed some light on what is meant by balancing and bandwagoning, why it has been so widely used in the past and for so long, and why it does not fit with the current analysis of the EU's strategy.

4. W*hy realism confounds* EU'*s behaviour*?

Scholars have attributed a considerable extensive meaning to both balancing and bandwagoning definitions, among others Vasquez and Elman (2003), Jervis and Snyder (1991), and Schweller (1994). By loosening its definitions, which has resulted in some confusion and blurring of its meanings, these developments have brought to light the limitations of balancing and bandwagoning as analytical frameworks to fully grasp actor's behaviours. Therefore, it is appropriate to begin our argument by defining balancing and bandwagoning outright.

Since actors are likely to be wary of the possibility that one opponent will amass the resources to compel all others to do its bidding, hence they will check dangerous concentrations of power by strengthening their own capabilities – internal balancing – or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliance – external balancing (Wohlforth 2008). Thus, balancing is defined as a strategy used by states aiming to offset the dangers posed by the most powerful and threatening actors, while preserving its own security and advancing its own interest (Mearsheimer 2001). Instead, bandwagoning is a strategy for preserving primary security concerns by seeking protection from a stronger, yielding to its will or ambitions Waltz (1979). Such strategy may be observed whenever a weaker power forms alliances with stronger powers or when it supports or lacks opposition to the dominant state's policies, though these actions may jeopardize its interests. In essence, bandwagoning means an inevitable loss of autonomy of action in exchange for international protection.

This latter scenario is particularly relevant when speaking about the EU's support of US policies against China.

Notwithstanding their prominence as concepts in international relations literature, balancing and bandwagoning are not as common in history as their academic reputation would suggest (Elman *et al.* 1995). And even the conventional view that regards unipolarity as the ideal system in which balancing and bandwagoning are likely to occur has been called into question (Chong 2003). The EU and its constituents' persistent affronts to US ambitions and interests on the global stage over that period of time suggests that bandwagoning may not fully capture responses to unipolarity either.

Furthermore, in the era of great power competition, as the world system has become more complex, the bandwagoning- and balancing-based approach to state security seem to be inadequate to fully explain European Union's behaviour. The idea that whenever a state capabilities do not differ significantly from those of the leading state, the former can counterbalance; or, on the other hand, whenever state capabilities have fallen so far behind the dominant state they will bandwagon, due to their incapacity to influence power distribution or bring about significant independent effects, particularly on a systematic level, is an oversimplification of the current state international environment, especially when we consider the relationships among the EU, US and China.

To override multipolar complexities, neo-realist scholars have adapted their theoretical framework by introducing concepts such as 'Chain-ganging' and 'Buck-passing' (Richey 2020; Härtel 2017). The latter is more than a simple variant of balancing that entails the collective action problem. It is a condition in which states escape balance by relying on third parties to shoulder the expenses of dealing with a rising hegemon[2] (Christensen and Snyder 1990). Buck-passing occurs particularly under multipolarity since it is crucial for a state to identify other individuals who can successfully challenge the pre-eminent state's influence. Applied also in the study of European governance and foreign policy (see Lavenex 1998; Van Calster 2000; Engelbrekt 2007), 'Buck-passing' lacks to fully describes the EU's approach against US-China tech rivalry as certain EU initiatives do not fall under its category.

Alternative theoretical approaches had greater explanatory capacity in trying to unveil the complex relationship between the EU and the US that falls beyond the simple balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy (see Kagan 2003). Scholars have developed alternative theories to better explain state's behaviour. Paul Schroeder (1994) accounts for 'hiding', 'transcendence', and 'specialization' in his attempt to illustrates state's self-preservation;[3] similarly, Chong (2003) speaks for 'beleaguering', 'buffering', 'bonding' and 'biding'.

The following section will argue how 'buffering' theoretical framework may better explain the EU's strategy vis-à-vis the US-China tech rivalry. But first we need to dig deeper into what 'buffering' means.

4.1 Buffering': the EU's way on strategic autonomy

Buffering as a theoretical concept has received little attention in IR, and mainly with reference to a buffer state's foreign policy, see Partem (1983); Chay and Ross (1986); Hourcad *et al.* (2013). Nevertheless, other scholars have used it as a theoretical framework to investigate the positioning of

[2] Walt (1987) defines it as the State's "attitude to pass to others the burdens of standing up to the aggressor".

[3] 'Hiding' refers to ignoring a threat (could also be a declaration of neutrality), whereas 'transcendence' and 'specialization' refer respectively to solving a problem through international agreements and to have a stake in other state's security.

the European Com- munity during the Cold War (Spiegeleire 1997), and as an alternative strategy for second-tier states (Chong 2003). According to Stephan Spiegeleire (1997), buffering does not refer solely to a spatial and territorial dimension, as the 'buffer-zone', or buffer-state, but to a system or sub-system in which international actor's buffering strategy is operating. This occurs in particular during great powers rivalry.

When great powers competition occurs, holding equidistance is often made untenable by constant pressure by one or both larger rivals; a policy of leaning is often fraught with the danger of losing one's independence or encouraging a reaction by the slighted power (Partem 1983). Nonetheless, nations powerful enough to express higher degree of independence from the hegemonic state are more likely to pursue measures other than balancing and bandwagoning. The odds of adopting buffering as a strategic choice depend on the level of power disparity with the hegemonic state and the level of integration in the world system. The success of buffering strategy is assessed by looking at the degree to which the actor preserves its autonomy of action, restrain action of the powerful, avert conflict, reduce tension (Chong 2003).

Under unipolarity, the more integrated an actor is in the World System and greater power it has relative to preponderant power,[4] the more likely will display buffering rather than balancing or bandwagoning.

From a theoretical standpoint, this article proposes 'buffering' as an alternative actor's strategy to those of bandwagoning and balancing amid great power rivalry. It stands alone that to perform a buffering strategy the international actor should have acquired a measure of true political and increasingly economic independence, internationally codified. Furthermore, 'Buffering' strategy has a systemic effect on macro-stability, as it is not meant to disrupt the current status quo or to exacerbate powers' competition – the so called 'buffer-effect' Spiegeleire (1997). Buffering is here defined as the process of reducing exposure to and influence from the leading actor by carving out neutral zones in terms of geography or function that can remove or at least severely restrict the dominating pow-

[4] By the degree of power and level of integration, I mean economic capability or 'softer' forms like social strength, cultural effects, or ideational influences. The level of integration, instead, refers to how present the actor is in international fora and how it can restrain or support its plan or policy.

er's direct and active impact (Chong 2003). This may empower actors to pursue their own interests more freely. Buffering, on the other hand, is more passive than balancing. Its goal is not to change the status quo or to undermine the pre-eminent actor's position, but rather to preserve or exploit characteristics of current conditions that limit the pre-eminent actor's ability to exert influence.

Buffering appeals in particular to those actors that are not far behind to other great powers in terms of strength, and that are highly integrated into world system.

To make 'buffering' successful, the actor uses institutional fora to establish exclusive functional domains, restricting the active influence of the leading state on related subjects (Chong 2003). It needs a powerful institutional and bureaucratic machine, that ensures a high level of control over the governance of these issues, thus attaining more autonomy when pursuing their interests at the expense of the leading actor.

Furthermore, buffering by an international actor creates policy communities and overlapping institutions meant to limit or exclude active influence of the leading state. It offers a political vacuum in which second-tier states can deal with problems before the leading state steps in. It also creates legitimacy for action that is not dependent on the dominant actor.

Table 1 • 'Buffering' actor strategy: features

Objectives	*Effects*
Reduced exposure ⟾ ⟾ Increased autonomy ⟾	• Limits active influence of the dominant power • Legitimacy for action independent of leading actor
Instruments	
Institutional fora ⟾ ⟾ Exclusive functional areas ⟾	• Overlapping institutions that limits leader's unilateral influence • Creates political space for like-minded states

4.2 Research design

To operationalize the study of the EU's behaviour other than balancing and its cognates, like buck-passing or chain-ganging, in the context of US-China tech rivalry, it may be necessary to test the following hypotheses:

H1: T*he* EU *strategical response to* US *and* C*hina tech rivalry over semiconductor technology does not fit with buck-passing and chain-ganging narrative*
H2: T*he* EU*'s initiatives display features of 'buffering' strategy*

Furthermore, the paper attempts to disprove the following null hypothesis:

H0: B*uck-passing and* C*hain ganging explain the* EU*'s strategic security variation when reacting to* US-C*hina dispute over semiconductor technologies*

To assess the H2, we need to investigate whether, or not, EU initiatives:

(*a*) D*o they create new institutional fora*
(*b*) D*o they establish new regional or functional area*

If (a) occurs, we need to assess: 1) if it is an overlapping institution or not; 2) if it creates new linkages with like-minded states or with the system leader. If (b) occurs, we need to assess: 1) if it creates a geographical area that limit or exclude the participation of the powerful; 2) if it creates political space where stakeholders can handle these issues before leading states intervene.

If the research can offer evidence to support the two primary hypotheses and reject the null hypothesis: the notion that the EU behaves in ways beyond 'buck- passing and chain-ganging' in its quest to achieve strategic autonomy should look credible. Acceptance of the first two hypotheses implies the rejection of the Null hypothesis.

M*ethodology*: the research considers the EU's initiatives launched or adopted over the period 2019-2022 due to the EU changing perception in semiconductor technology as a key element for its security. Furthermore, the choice of this time-span period is duly motivated since it overlaps with the beginning of the US-China tech rivalry and the EU's changing perception of China: It has passed from viewing the China as partner to competitor and ultimately a rival (European Commission 2019).

Furthermore, throughout this period, the EU has started a review process of its Global Security Strategy (EUGS) with the so-called Strategic Compass. The Strategic Compass has emphasized the importance of digital technology, semiconductor industry and its supply chain security as *conditio sine qua non* for its security and 'strategic autonomy'. For the above-mentioned reasons, this research takes into account the EU policy initiatives adopted and lunched during this timeframe. The research analyses whether these policy initiatives entail requisites to enhance a 'buffering' approach or not. Based on that the research will either confirm or rebut the three hypotheses.

The initiatives taken into consideration are the EU-US Trade and Technological Council (TTC), the European Chips ACT (ECT), the Comprehensive Digital Partnership (CDP) and the European Alliance on Semiconductor Technology (All.SemiCon. Tech.). These initiatives are scrutinized over five requirements identified under the 'buffering' security strategy approach. If it creates overlapping institutions; if it excludes leader, if it increases autonomy, if it builds legitimacy for action independent of leader actor, if it creates political opportunity for like-minded states. Whenever a policy initiative satisfies the majority of these requirements, we can assess that the initiative is part of a 'buffering' approach.

Before embarking into our analysis, the following section will dig deep into semiconductor as a key technological variable for state's security strategy. It will explain why semiconductors are so crucial for economic and security purposes, and how their role have changed in the last five years making it an EU priority for European strategic autonomy.

5. *Semiconductor technology: a turning point for* EU *digital power*

5.1 Semiconductor: 'a key technological variable'

The current setting of the international system, where high-tech leadership is associated with military strength and geopolitical reach, has exacerbated semiconductor supply as a critical strategic aim. Dominated by few companies worldwide, such as the giant Taiwanese TSMC and the South Korea's Samsung, the sector features vulnerabilities that have being used as a tool for political goals. The United States has taken advantage of these features by obstructing China's ambitions to create its own cutting-edge chip production facilities. This fierce competition between the two great powers over semiconductor technology has jeopardized European security since such technology raises economic and, above all, military issues.

Semiconductors provide significant value to complex weapon systems and is becoming increasingly true as notice by the US' military posture reliance on a small number of high-quality systems supported by modern microelectronics. According to the US Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), compound semiconductors[5] are used in military-specific devices with superior electrical features such as high electron mobility and direct bandgap compared to silicon-only-based semiconductors. Gallium arsenide (GaAs) and gallium nitride (GaN)-based devices, in particular, often emerge in military-specific applications. For example, GaAs and GaN technologies are used in radio-frequency integrated circuits (RFICs) and monolithic microwave integrated circuits (MMICs) for various defense and aerospace applications. Electromagnetic spectrum operations, signals intelligence, military communications, space capabilities, radars, jammers, and other technologies are examples of these (DARPA).

Taiwan is a key player in the worldwide compound semiconductor manufacturing industry. For example, Taiwan's WIN Semiconductors controls 9.1 percent of the overall GaAs device market share, ranking third globally after American firms Skyworks (30.6 percent) and Qorvo (28.6 percent). On the other hand, WIN Semiconductors has by far the highest proportion of pure-play GaAs foundry revenue, accounting for 79.2 percent. Taiwan-based AWSC (8.6 percent), California-based GCS (4.2 percent), and Hsinchu-based Wavetek round out the top three (3.4 percent). The top three Taiwanese businesses control more than ninety

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[5] For reasons of brevity, this article does not distinguish between semiconductor devices and semiconductor materials. The term 'semiconductor' is used interchangeably to refer to integrated circuits, chips and microchips, and to materials as silicon, germanium, arsenide.

percent of the GaAs foundry market. The dominance of non-US companies in a strategic sector for military buildup capabilities represents a strategic vulnerability. Given the systemic role of semiconductors in the military buildup, this technology is perceived as a key variable for defence concerns. The link between technological leadership and geopolitical competition is grounded in the assertion that technology yields military superiority. But the perception of it has more to do with the idea of 'strategic autonomy' and independency.

Applying Jervis' analysis (1978), it can be stated that semiconductor tech has exacerbated the severity of the security dilemma by both material and perceptual factor (Tang 2009). Especially the latter explains why the EU multiplied its initiatives in the semiconductor sector in the last two years, though it has considerably low internal demand for both civilian and military application. Nonetheless, the idea that semiconductors are pivotal in digital sovereignty and 'strategic autonomy' pushed the EC to announce several initiatives such as the European Alliance on Semiconductor Technology, the European Chips Act, the EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TCC). Furthermore, its Comprehensive Digital Partnership agreement has boosted bilateral agreement with a significant semiconductor producer, such as Singapore. These EU package initiatives must be seen throughout the broader context of US-Chinese competition.

As digital technologies have grown increasingly intertwined with geopolitics, the EU initiatives are motivated more by politics than by economics or defence. They reflect the EU's need to position itself as an independent actor in the rivalry between the great powers, forging its own relationships with each of them. Therefore, balance theoretical framework and its cognates, such 'buck-passing' and 'chain-ganging', struggle to offer plausible explanation to EU behaviour. They have a propensity to place the actor on one side of the chessboard, whilst the EU attempts to place itself outside of it, carving its own zone. On the contrary, 'buffering' theoretical approach entails these features and offers a better analytical explanation on the new narrative taking shape around the EU's technological power.

5.2 The EU's trade security politicization

Given the importance of technology for the EU's desire for autonomy, the EC has examined semiconductors as a key to achieving digital sovereignty. Nonetheless, the US-China competition has prompted security concerns about the EU's ability to protect its interests in an international environment molded once again by great powers rivalry (Demertzis *et al.* 2018; Weyand 2020). Indeed, in its attempt to restrain the rise of China in semiconductor sector, the US have damaged European economy, underlying the political risks stemming from US policymaking. The US export bans imposed on Chinese companies such as SMIC and Huawei, had side effects in European market too. In December 2020, European diplomats expressed concern that US trade restrictions favoured US corporations since some were granted licenses to sell to Huawei or SMIC, while EU competitors were barred from the Chinese market (Yang 2020).

The limited foreign policy instruments available to the EU have prevented it from adequately defending its interest. Foreign and security policy remain largely in the hand of member states, or in intergovernmental fora such as the Political Security Committee or the European Defence Agency. This has emphasized EU's vulnerability in the face of the deterioration of the multilateral system caused by the US-China tech rivalry. Furthermore, it has underpinned the EU's dependency on the US policymakers (Leonard *et al.* 2019).

Nonetheless, the European Commission has exclusive competencies on trade policy and regulation of the internal market. Both are becoming powerful tools of leverage during trade agreement thanks to EU's capacity to regulate and shape global standards, the so called 'Brussels effect' (Bradford 2020) – which has even further extended through its Digital Service Act and Digital Market Act.

Rising political tensions between great powers are altering the EU's approach to trade and, more broadly, to external action. Supply chain security, and defence industry concerns are all becoming increasingly important in trade agreement negotiations. Hence, 'EU's trade politicization' (Leblond and Viju-Miljusevic 2019; Garcia-Duran *et al.* 2020; Van Loon 2020) are now covering also strategic autonomy and digital sovereignty, and new tools in the hands of the EC are receiving additional considerations to attain this scope, such as weaponization of unilateral measures, stronger eenforceability,and implementation of tread agreement. The review of EU's trade policy, labeled as 'Open Strategic Autonomy' (European Commission 2021b), is the Commission's attempt to increase European autonomy while not appearing protectionist or undermining the international trade order (Fontelles 2020). It emphasizes both autonomy and openness but from a theoretical perspective it can be seen through the lenses of 'buffering' approach.

The following section will put under scrutiny the major initiatives in that sense in the semiconductor domain, and it will assess whether they abide to 'buffering' approach or not.

6. *The EU's 'buffering' approach: how it is stepping out from US-China tech rivalry*

The tensions between US and China over semiconductors have taken on the 468 features of a 'technological cold war' (Segal 2020) and have left the EU more exposed to disruption arising from this rivalry. Furthermore, it has forced the EU, which historically balance its reliance on the US for security and on China for trade, to choose side: a quest that has been difficult and expensive.

Five years eclipsed between the lunch of the European Global Strategy (EUGS) and the Strategic Compass process, which can be seen as an update of the former. Although not present in the original report the EUGS already mentioned the relevance of digital technology, though not referring to semiconductor in particular. On the contrary, the EU's 'Strategic Compass', highlighted the perception of semiconductor as a key technology. But also emphasized EU's attempt to reduce dependency on US policymakers and Chinese manufacturing. Indeed, among the four interconnected baskets, the one dedicated to 'Resilience' entails Supply chain security, whereas the one dedicated to Capability Development entails the concept of Technological Sovereignty. Both are key concepts for the EU's strategic autonomy and technological power. Hence, since the launch of Strategic Compass process in 2020, the EC launched several initiatives to attain its goals: the EU-US Trade and Technological Council (TTC), the European Chips Act, the Comprehensive Digital Partnership with Singapore and the European Alliance on Semiconductor Technology. We will briefly discuss their main characteristics.

6.1 The EU's 'Buffering initiatives'

6.1.1 *Trade and Technology Council*

In December 2020 the EC proposed to establish a new EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC). The rationale for such initiative was to maximize market-driven transatlantic partnership and to boost technological and industrial investment.[6] Formalize during the EU-US summit in June 2021, and launched in September of the same year, it acts as a venue for the EU and the US to coordinate responses to critical global trade, economic, and technological concerns. It is an open platform for transatlantic trade and economic cooperation, while respecting each side regulatory autonomy. Which translated means: reducing trade barriers, suitable standards, and regulatory methods for emerging technologies, guaranteeing vital supply chain security, as ways to achieve these objectives.

The TTC was also an opportunity to launch almost in parallel another initiative: the Joint Technology Competition Policy Dialogue (TCPD). The TCPD aims to creating cooperative approaches and strengthening collaboration in the tech industries on competition policy and enforcement.

The TTC entails ten working group dealing with the five key areas, export controls, security supply chain (semiconductor in particular), technology standard, global trade challenges, and foreign direct investment screening (European Commission 2021a). As regards semiconductors, the TTC aims to establish a uniform and early warning and monitoring mechanism for the semiconductor value chain, and it improves semiconductor demand transparency and avoid subsidy races. By focusing on semiconductors' secure and resilient supply chain, the working group doubles down on how trade and security policies intertwine. Indeed, semiconductors are by far the most important supply chain of common interest under the TTC.[7] Although the Commission estimated that the EU is less dependent on the US than vice versa in this delicate environment, the EC recognized that both had significant mutual dependencies

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[6] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: A new EU-US agenda for global change, JOIN(2020) 22 final, Brussels 2.12.2020.

[7] EU-US Trade and Technology Council: New forum for transatlantic cooperation, EPRS, 27.09.2021.

with China. Therefore, the EC also suggests how the TTC would have been the appropriate platform to address these dependencies in its Industrial Strategy.[8]

What is important here is that the TCC is co-chaired by top representatives of the EC, such as EU Competition Commissioner and the EU Trade Commissioner, on the EU side. While on the US side, it comprehends the US Secretary 522 of State, Secretary of Commerce, and the US Trade Representative. It is important because it signal the high relevance of what is at stake: for Washington a specific tool for China containment, but for the EU an opportunity to reduce trade and tech tensions posed by the US supremacy in semiconductor and digital technology, while avoiding open confrontation against China. It is an insurance policy for the EU, allowing it to respond jointly to global trade issues or threats without bearing the cost of supply chain disruption.

It can be stated that this initiative bears some of the 'buffering' approach features. It creates an overlapping institution, since the Wassenaar Arrangement already tackled some of these issues regarding Dutch chip-equipment sale to China.[9] It uses institutional fora to reduce leader's unilateral influence. It serves to create legitimacy of action, independent of leading actor.

6.1.2 *The European Chips Act*

The ECA is a comprehensive set of measures proposed by the EC to ensure the EU's security of supply, resilience and technological leadership in semiconductor technologies and applications. It is based on three main pillars: the Chips for Europe Initiative; a new framework to ensure security of supply; and a coordinated mechanism between MS and the EC for monitoring, assessing, and coordinating together common crises.[10]

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[8] Updating the 2020 New Industrial Strategy: Building a stronger Single Market for Europe's recovery, European Commission communication, 5.05.2021.

[9] The US effort began in 2018, after the Dutch government granted a license to ASML, the global leader in lithography, a vital chip-making technique, to sell its most sophisticated machine to a Chinese company SMIC.

[10] Commission Recommendation (EU) 2022/210 of 8 February 2022 on a common Union toolbox to address semiconductor shortages and an EU mechanism for monitoring the semiconductor ecosystem C/2022/782 OJ L 35, 17.2.2022.

The Chips for Europe Initiative aims to pool resources from the Union, Member States as well as third country associated with EU programs. Furthermore, through the Chips Joint Undertaking mechanisms it aims to involve also private sector. The initiative's goal is to have a thorough understanding of the semiconductor ecosystem and value chain. In particular, the Chips Joint Undertaking, embedded into the Initiative, has strategically reoriented the previous Key Digital Technologies Joint Undertaking action plan: a public private partnership for funding projects critical for Europe's digital economy. Additionally, to the Initiative, the establishment of the 'Chips Fund' should facilitate access to debt financing and equity in the semiconductor value chain, thus sup- porting the development of a dynamic and resilient semiconductor ecosystem.

The ECA also sets a new framework to ensure security of supply by attracting investments and increased production capacities in semiconductor manufacturing. In particular, in response to Union's need for a more resilient supply chain, the ECA establishes criteria for simplifying the execution of specified initiatives that contribute to the Union's supply security of semiconductors. To that purpose, the EC works with Member States to identify sectorial requirements for trusted chips in order to develop uniform standards and certification, as well as procurement criteria.

Furthermore, as stated in the Commission Recommendation to Member States on a common union toolbox,[11] the ECA sets up a coordinated mechanism between the EC and the MS for monitoring the supply of semiconductors. It will exercize surveillance over exports and introduce protective measures when deemed necessary and grant the Commission a mandate to act as a central purchasing body for public procurement. The Chips for Europe Initiative includes a new legal instrument – the European Chips Infrastructure Consortium (ECIC) – that is specifically designed to simplify and structure the legal relationships be- tween private-public consortium members, and to provide a structural dialogue with the Commission for the implementation of the Initiative's actions.

The initiative itself double down how the security of supply, resilience and technological leadership in semiconductor technologies cannot be

[11] *Ibidem*.

achieved solely by Member States acting alone.[12] The scale and scope of the efforts needed to develop a state-of-the-art European chip ecosystem demonstrates the value added in acting at Union level, as no single Member States can achieve this alone.

The ECA satisfies several requisites of the 'buffering' approach. It creates 'legitimacy of action', vis-à-vis state actors, since it creates new legal supranational instruments and Union's financial aid; it creates a new 'functional area' where the leading state is excluded. Furthermore, it creates political space for other countries as it aims to build "semiconductor international partnership with like-minded countries", as the initiative is addressed to Singapore, Japan and even Taiwan.

6.1.3 *The European Alliances for Semiconductors and Cloud technologies*

The Alliance for Processors and Semiconductor technologies, and the European Alliance for Industrial Data, Edge and Cloud are two separated industrial alliances launched by the EC. Both initiatives stem from the European Industrial Strategy, updated on March 2021 and will help to progress the next generation of microchips and industrial cloud/edge computing technologies, as well as providing the EU with the tools it needs to reinforce its essential digital autonomy. It is an institutional forum where European institutions and MS, along with private stakeholder can meet to reach the EU's goal of increased manufacturing capacity in the next generation of high-quality semiconductor. These Alliances are open to private and public sector with legal representative in the Union and with relevant activities within. This provision excludes de facto companies and public entities from leading countries in the semiconductor sector.

Based on previous positive industrial alliances experiences on raw materials, batteries and hydrogen, the EC launched and supported these alliances as the best tool to accelerate activities that would not develop otherwise. The Alliance for Processor and Semiconductor Tech's overarching goal is to identify current gaps in semiconductor production and the technological improvements required for enterprises active in the

[12] Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing a framework of measures for strengthening Europe's semiconductor ecosystem (Chips Act), COM(2022) 46 final, 2022/0032 (COD), 8.2.2022.

EU, including small European actors, to be more competitive. This will improve EU's competitiveness, strengthen Europe's digital sovereignty, and meet the need for the next generation of secure, energy-efficient, powerful chips. The overall purpose for the EU is to achieve critical mass and reduce dependencies in semiconductor technology.

The Alliance's two main lines of actions are: 1) the strengthening of the European electronics design ecosystem, particularly design at cutting-edge nodes; 2) The establishment of the necessary manufacturing capacity. Its main tasks are planning and analysis, increasing design capacities and manufacturing production in Europe and leverage investment and innovation synergies. The EC acts as a facilitator of the Alliance and is entitled to organize the General Assembly which adopts recommendations and reports.

The EC monitor the progress of the General Assembly, provides secretarial services and acts as a facilitator towards cooperation among stakeholders. Furthermore, the EC organizes an Alliance Forum, an inclusive, and open forum for communication and exchanges between the European Commission, Alliance members. Similarly, to the TTC, the EC might establish working groups of the Alliance dealing with specific topics such as manufacturing, supply shortages, state-aid support.

6.1.4 *Comprehensive Digital Partnership*

It is a comprehensive and forward-looking Digital Partnership between the EU and Singapore aiming to expand digital and cooperation trade. The Partnership will enhance cooperation to build a more resilient supply chain. Once the Digital Partnership enter into force, it will convene an annual ministerial meeting led by European Commissioner for Internal Market and Singapore Minster for Trade and Industry. The EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement (EUSFTA) is the bedrock of the Partnership. The EUSFTA entered into force at the end of 2019, during its inaugural Trade Meeting, already envisaged the necessity for a comprehensive digital partnership that will address the challenges stemming from semiconductor supply chain. Under the 'buffering' theoretical framework, this initiative promotes the limiting of leader's influence, since does not involve the US; it creates more legitimacy for the EC to act within semiconductor supply chain, and it creates a political opportunity for Singapore to be less dependent on US exports. Therefore, several 'buffering' requisites are satisfied here.

The above initiatives have been scrutinized whether they entail or not 5 characteristics of a 'buffering' approach: the creation of an overlapping institutions (the use of a regular institutional forum); the exclusion of the Leader's active influence; the increase of autonomy; the legitimacy of action; and the creation of a functional area or political space for like-minded states.

Table 2[13] summarizes the research findings of the above-described policy initiatives display 'buffering' approach characteristics. If most of the requisites belonging to a 'buffering' approach are satisfied, then the initiatives is deemed to be part of an EU 'buffering' strategy.

Table 2 • The EU's 'buffering' initiatives over semiconductor technology

		'Buffering' approach requisites				
Policy	***Governance***	*Ovrlp. Inst.*	*Ld's excl.*	*Auto. Up*	*Lgtm. Act.*	*Pol. space*
TTC	EU-US	yes	no	yes	yes	no
ECA	EU/Jap/Taiwan	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
CDP	EU-Singapore	no	yes	yes	no	yes
EAST	EU	no	yes	yes	yes	no

Since all four initiatives set out by the EC display characteristics of the 'buffering' strategical approach, though to a various and mixed degree, the second and third hypothesis are confirmed.

Furthermore, all these initiatives combined served as 'buffering' strategy from a broader perspective. Indeed, while the Comprehensive Digital Partnership establishes a network linkage with a like-minded State, the TTC creates an institutional forum where the EC (the buffering actor) can reduce the influence of the leading actor on related topics. On the other hand, the European Chips Act and the European Alliance on Semiconductors are tools used to advance buffering actors' interests while carving out exclusive regional or functional areas that can further reduce the leading state's influence.

[13] CDP stands for Comprehensive Digital Partnership; EAST for European Alliance on Semiconductor Technology; ECA for European Chips Act; TTC for Trade and Technology Council. While the upper abbreviations stand for: Overlapping institutions, Leader exclusion, Increased autonomy, Legitimacy of Action, Political space (which entails 'creating functional area').

7. *Conclusions*

A major part of this article has been dedicated to the EU policy initiatives in the context of a technological great power competition, through an IR theoretical approach. Nonetheless, various reasons have led to a souring of relations between the EU-US and China beyond the tech rivalry, the description of which is beyond the scope of this article. This article attempts to demonstrate how classical realist theoretical frameworks, such as balancing and bandwagoning and its cognates, 'buck-passing' and 'chain-ganging', lack to explain properly EU's strategy in a multipolar context characterized by US-China tech rivalry. Other theoretical approach such as 'buffering' are more suitable to explain the EU policy initiatives in this domain. The findings suggest that despite the race to attain autonomy into semiconductor technology among great powers, the EU's adopted a 'buffering' strategy which do not immediately disrupt or challenge the US predominance and neither contest Chinese assertiveness in this domain. 'Buffering', on the other hand, it makes the current system with the US in a leading position less stable over time as it limits US hegemonic influence and allows other states to act in accordance with the EU's needs rather than Americans.

Having said that, an important caveat is the short time-span to which this article addresses. On a longer run is it still possible the balancing/bandwagoning strategy applies for the EU. In this perspective, deconstructing the many options that third states have – when in the midst of a hegemonic rivalry – in terms of 'buffering', 'hiding', 'bidding', and so on – might be viewed as transitory adjustments toward an ultimate objective of balancing or not. It is possible that in a long run, at a critical juncture, the EU will be forced to choose whose side they support. If this notion is right, 'buffering' is likely to be a temporary rather than permanent strategy in times of unpredictability.

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Loretta Dell'Aguzzo
and Emidio Diodato

The Belt and Road Initiative: An Opportunity or a Threat for the European Union?

1. *Introduction*

In the late 20th century, many scholars believed that the US could still provide a necessary minimum of management of the international system and other states would continue to accept its services, whereas others argued that both friends and foes sooner or later would react to the predominance of the United States by working "to right the balance" (Waltz 1999, 700). The rise of China, since the country joined the WTO in 2001, can be seen as a process of gradual balancing from which also other actors could benefit. However, China's geographic position in Eurasia may engender fear in its neighbours. Hence, from a geopolitical perspective, we could expect that EU countries and US are likely to cooperate in order to counterbalance China's power in Eurasia and preserve the status quo.

These statements appear a bit simplistic, as "even the most cursory glance at the historical record reveals many important cases of underbalancing" (Schweller 2006, 1). Indeed, the decision to cooperate in order to prevent another state's rise is not as automatic as neo-realist thinkers tend to assume and it is influenced by a plethora of different factors. Most notably, Walt (1985) argues that balancing against a state is more likely when that state is perceived as particularly threatening. China's ascendency as a global power has prompted a debate among IR scholars on whether US and its liberal allies should envisage the rise of China as an opportunity or as a potential threat. Scholars belonging to the first camp, defined as 'optimists', as opposed to the 'pessimists' (Walt 2018),

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claim that – since China is a major beneficiary of the liberal order, it will not attempt to challenge the latter's existence (Ikenberry 2008, 2014). Others argue that participation in international organizations has socialized this rising power (Johnston 2008). As a consequence, they maintain, rather than attempt to overturn the liberal order, Beijing is likely to try to achieve greater authority within existing institutions (Schweller and Pu 2011). Moreover, some scholars find that these institutions will even strengthen as long as economic interdependence grows (Monteiro 2014; Deudney and Ikenberry 2018). In any case, other observers suggest that liberal institutions function in ways that advantage status-quo oriented actors to the detriment of revisionist powers (Wohlforth 2018, 71).

On the contrary, so-called 'pessimists' maintain that China is likely to sustain the current economic order based on open markets and free investment flows, only as long as the West does not turn to protectionism (Niblett 2017) and others even suggest that – due to its historical, cultural and socio-economic background – Beijing will push for changes that might dramatically alter existing international norms and institutions (Jacques 2009; Kupchan 2014). Hence, China is supposed to reshape the liberal order in ways that reflect its own interests and values rather than those of the West (Pillsbury 2015). Other scholars warn that China will pursue this goal by assisting in the emergence of other competitive great powers, or in the formation of a regional balancing coalition against the US in the Western hemisphere (Mearsheimer 2010, 388).

These different perceptions of China's role in the international system and its objectives as a great power have also shaped EU-China relations during the last decades. Indeed, since 1975, when formal diplomatic ties were established between them, China represented for the EU a huge economic opportunity and EU institutions encouraged Member States to deepen bilateral ties with Beijing in order to increase trade exchange. Despite concerns over violations of human rights – worsened by the 1989 Tiananmen event – EU trusted that China's human rights record would improve with the gradual opening up of its economy (European Commission 1995, 7). This optimistic belief has guided EU's policies toward China until late 2010s, when the latter seems to have abandoned the prior foreign policy principle of 'hiding one's capacity and keeping a low profile' and has, contrastingly, started to rely on a 'going global' strategy aimed at seeking a bigger role in the international system (Chen and Gao 2022, 201). Hence, as we shall see, EU has come to realize that the inclusion of China into the global economy is not likely to contribute to a fundamental political change in that country, as main liberals have envisaged, and – especially during the last few years – has tried to adopt a more pragmatic, and consequentially competitive, approach in its relations with Beijing.

The launch of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) by Xi Jinping in 2013 has reinvigorated the debate in Europe over the attitude to adopt towards China. Indeed, due to its undisputable ambitious scope and geographical reach, this global infrastructure project is believed to present both opportunities and challenges for the EU. On the one side, in line with the international development goals set mainly by Western-led international institutions, it is supposed to contribute to cooperation and the economic growth of countries in which it is deployed. Yet, on the other side, the BRI is essentially a Sino-centric project, which may also favour the diffusion of alternative practices, whose spread would be facilitated by the establishment of China-led financial institutions (Benabdallah 2019, 93). Since its launch, EU's response to the BRI has oscillated between these two positions, that is from considering this project as an opportunity for economic development in Eurasia to seeing it as a threat to EU's unity, its security and its market system.

This paper discusses the evolution of European reactions to the BRI in the early years after its launch (from 2013 to 2017) and, through the analysis of official documents, publications and policies, shows that at first EU's reaction was more favorable and later, starting from 2016, its attitude changed to become more hostile. Indeed, our analysis shows that EU concerns about Chinese practices increased with the development of first BRI-related projects and that core EU Member States, most notably France and Germany, which represent also a portion of Continental Europe that is more peripheral to the BRI, have increasingly worked for the adoption of a whole of EU approach to China. Factors that have pushed EU to shift toward a more 'protectionist' stance mainly concern the lack of reciprocity and the threat of Chinese control over critical technologies and infrastructure. Yet, the different impact of the BRI in various European regions has reduced EU cohesion, making difficult the establishment of a clear European strategy.

Finally, this paper argues that, contrary to the expectations of many observers, EU involvement in the BRI has not much affected transatlantic relations. As we shall see, even though EU and US have different interests and attitudes towards China, their reactions to the BRI are not so dissimilar. In particular, both actors' responses to this initiative became more hostile when China adopted a more assertive external action and when its practices began to threaten both liberal norms and values and their economic and security interests.

2. *The Belt and Road Initiative: history and purposes*

The Belt and Road Initiative, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR), is a global infrastructure project whose stated purpose is to promote integration and cooperation between Asia, China in particular, and European, Middle Eastern and African countries. This project was first set forth by Xi Jinping in two speeches delivered in 2013: addressing an audience in Astana, he announced China's proposal to build a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and during a speech in Indonesia he unveiled the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), to wit the two main components of the BRI. The first component is the modern version of the ancient land network and, like its historical antecedent, it aims at "promoting connectivity, building overland economic corridors [...] and explore possible areas of win-win cooperation" (China Daily, 3 August 2015). The second component's main goal, instead, is to use China's coastal ports to "link the country with Europe through the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, and with the South Pacific Ocean through the South China Sea" (Yilmaz and Changming 2018, 257). The initiative was officially launched with a document issued by the National Reform and Development Commission which identified six economic corridors linking the two aforementioned components, the SREB and the MSR.[1] Moreover, the same document established as supporting financial institutions the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, AIIB, and the Silk Road Fund, SRF (Clarke 2018, 84).

[1] "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road", issued by the National Reform and Development Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 28 March 2015, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml.

Whereas China is not the only international player focusing on economic integration of Eurasian countries,[2] the BRI is unique in its scope and scale, as the Chinese government is expected to spend $ 1 trillion in total (Wuthnow 2017, 4). Some authors have noted that these figures might be exaggerated, given that investments trumpeted by political leaders are the sum totals of old, new and also aspirational projects (Pantucci 2021, 30). Indeed, this initiative does not come from nowhere: it has integrated a myriad of projects dating back to when the Central Asian states became independent in the early 1990s (Swanström 2005). All of this aside, Beijing signalled the seriousness of its intent by allocating since 2017 $40 billion for the SREB, $25 billion for the MSR, $50 billion for the AIIB, and $40 billion for the SRF (Ghiasy and Zhou 2017). The geographic coverage of the BRI is impressive as well: the two projects together cover areas generating 55 percent of the world's GNP, 70 percent of the global population, and 75 percent of known energy reserves (Casarini 2015, 2).

As for the scope of the BRI, the White Book defines five major priorities, such as policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade; financial integration, and connecting people.[3] Although Chinese authorities tend to frame the BRI in economic, often altruistic, terms, observers have stressed the geopolitical motivations behind the initiative. First, the BRI is supposed to increase Chinese soft power: "the Silk Roads act as a platform for demonstrating the global impact of Chinese civilization" (Winter 2019, 182). This is evidenced by the 36 percent increase in Confucius Institutes in the OBOR countries (Liu, Wan and Huang 2020). Actually, in 2016, the Belt and Road region was the fastest developing in the world: 135 Confucius Institutes and 130 Confucius Classes in the 51 project countries, 460,000 students enrolled in cultural events and an audience of 2.7 million people.[4] Besides the will to promote Chinese culture and increase its soft-power, observers are particularly concerned by the undeclared for-

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[2] As an example, the EU, the US, Japan and South Korea all launched several projects to this purpose.

[3] See note 1.

[4] *Five Years of Sheer* Endeavour: *What Data Says about* Confucius *Institute* (2012-2017), "Hanban News", 26 October 2017, http://english.hanban.org/article/2017-10/26/content_703508.htm.

eign policy and geopolitical goals of the BRI and of institutions associated to it, especially the AIIB. Undoubtedly, this initiative is a reflection of China's ascendance as a great power and it is driven by both economic and strategic motivations. Yet, many foreign observers have raised the suspect that the BRI is designed to challenge the current world order and US hegemony (Bhattacharya 2016, 311), that is a grand strategy aimed at ensuring China's continuing economic and political rise (Arase 2015, 30). Others claim that the BRI contributes to create a "network of dependency that will enable [China] to hedge against the USA's alliance structure" (Miller 2017, 31). The last accusation is grounded on the fact that so far Beijing's approach has frequently been to extend loans to partner countries, which would use the funds to build infrastructure employing almost exclusively Chinese firms and work-force (Pantucci 2021, 31). For this reason, some authors have described this approach as 'debt-trap diplomacy', as apparently Beijing seeks to control partner countries' critical infrastructure by driving up their debts to unsustainable levels (Chellaney 2017). In this way, China can manage to consolidate its economic and political dominance in several regions, thus extending its sphere of influence. Chinese presence has grown in North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East, all areas that are of major strategic interest to Europe. However, some of the recipient countries have changed their attitudes towards the initiative over time, renegotiating projects and debts. In other states, China's deep penetration has raised concerns over governance and migration (Le Corre 2018). That being said, the Communist Party (CPC) has frequently expressed the desire for new models of international cooperation and the BRI can certainly provide a means to establish the country as a provider of international public goods, thereby elevating it to the centre of world stage (Clarke 2018, 86). As we shall see in the following paragraphs, these concerns, along with others that are peculiar to the EU, have influenced the latter's shift from a more favourable view of the BRI to a more 'pragmatic' and – to a certain extent hostile – approach.

3. T*he impact of the* Belt *and* Road Initiative *on* European *regions*

Europe is likely to represent a crucial actor for the success of the BRI, since it is the western terminal point of this project and Beijing's largest trading partner. Whereas the huge investments Chinese government is expected to make are believed to greatly influence trade relations between Europe and Asia, their effects will not be homogeneous across Eurasia. While the building of railroad networks will favour inner regions, like Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), port infrastructure will more likely positively affect the economy of coastal areas (ibidem), that is Southern Europe. Yet, as we shall see, also the economies of countries from continental Europe are likely to be interested by Chinese investments.

As for land trade, China and the EU are located at the two ends of the Eurasian continent and the two borders are separated by 4.500 kilometres. While in the past this distance has represented a barrier to strengthening bilateral trade relations, during the last decades the land mass separating these two regions is acting more as a bridge than as a natural obstacle between them. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, trade among countries of the Eurasian continent has increased steadily and the construction of new land routes could contribute to the economic development of countries and regions that have no access to the sea and that have historically been less wealthy than their coastal counterparts. Among EU Member States, CEECs will be the most likely beneficiaries of the projects of the SREB, that is those related to the construction of railroads. Actually, China started to consider this region as an entry point for the European market especially when most of CEECs became EU members during the 2000s. At the same time, these countries became more interested in seeking relations with China as the latter became a major player in world politics and especially after the economic and financial crisis of 2008, which induced many of them to look eastward (Szunomár 2018, 74). Cooperation between China and CEECs was reinforced first in 2012 with the establishment of the 16+1 format, a Chinese initiated-platform aiming at expanding cooperation between the promoter, 11 EU member states and 5 Balkan countries. [5] This cooperation framework was incorporated into the BRI in 2014, producing as the main result so far the Belgrade-Budapest high speed rail project, which was envisioned to boost trade in the Balkans and connect CEECs

[5] In 2019, with the entry of Greece, this framework was renamed 17+1.

with the Chinese-owned port of Piraeus in Greece (Cornell and Swanström 2020, 34).

The second main component of the BRI, the twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road, is supposed to benefit mostly the countries of Southern Europe that have ports on the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, during the last years Chinese investments in seaport management have significantly increased and they have been mainly directed to 13 EU Mediterranean ports (e.g. in Spain, Italy, France and especially in Greece) but also in northern European ports, like those of Rotterdam and Antwerp (Hache and Mérigot 2017). Chinese's enterprises investments in EU states were especially welcomed after the Euro crisis, when influx of foreign capital was much needed. The purchase of 51 percent stake in the Piraeus Port Authority in 2016 for 280.5 million EUR is among the most relevant examples of China's investment in European ports (Oziewicz and Bednarz 2019, 114-115). As mentioned, the port of Piraeus is of great strategic relevance for China since it is aimed at the construction of a transport corridor from the Mediterranean to Central and Eastern Europe (ibidem). Hence, once these projects are completed, Chinese goods will go from the Suez Canal directly to Piraeus, and then they will be loaded onto trains to continental Europe, cutting transit times from roughly 30 to 20 days (Casarini 2015, 4). The possibility that once the Port of Piraeus become linked to Central Europe by train trade would bypass Italian ports on the Adriatic Sea has induced Italy to join the BRI in 2019 (Fardella and Prodi 2017).

In addition to infrastructure aimed at increasing trade relations with CEECs and Mediterranean countries, Chinese companies appear interested in funding projects like the Rovaniemi-Kirkenes railway and the Helsinki-Tallinn tunnel, which aim at connecting the Arctic with the EU (Oziewicz and Bednarz 2019, 115). However, the inclusion of northern European ports in the BRI and the prospect of crossing the Arctic do not create another geopolitical sub-region for which a common impact can be identified in the context of the EU. If a third sub-region emerges in addition to the Eastern and Southern ones, it is what we might call Continental Europe, which revolves around the Franco-German axis. France and Germany are two core European states and have direct interests in Mediterranean and Central and Eastern Europe respectively. Contrary to other sub-regions, Continental Europe is more peripheral to the BRI. In the first couple of years after the launch of this initiative, France was not even considered as a potential target of this project. However, in 2016 a train connecting Lyon and Wuhan was tested with a first journey. Moreover, also the cities of Le Havre and Marseille tend to look at the BRI as an opportunity for economic development (Nicolas 2021). As for Germany, even though it is an important partner in its implementation, mainly thanks to five German-Chinese railway connections (Li and Taube 2019), the BRI has not yielded infrastructure investment in the country, since these projects had been planned long before this initiative was launched and were only later rebranded as part of the BRI (Gaspers 2016).

Against this background, it not a coincidence that CEECs and Mediterranean countries have developed a more favourable approach to the BRI, whereas Member States in which the economic impact of the BRI is marginal adopted a more cautious attitude towards these projects, and – especially France and Germany, due to their economic and political weight – have promoted a unified European policy towards this project, shaping EU's response to the BRI.

4. EU's *response to the launch of the* BRI

EU institutions' reaction to the BRI has changed over time, shifting from tacit acceptance punctuated by periods of more enthusiastic reception to widespread scepticism and sometimes even harsh criticism. According to some observers, EU's attitudes toward this initiative can be grouped into three different stages: when the BRI was launched in 2013, EU institutions adopted a 'wait-and-see' stance, which was followed by a period in which they tried to deepen cooperation with China, creating synergies between European investment plans and the BRI. During the last phase, starting in 2016, EU became more cautious, taking a preventative position and strengthening protection of its markets and interests (Zuokui 2018, 147). These developments took place in parallel with what happened in the United States, but they respond, as we shall see, mainly to internal transformations. Indeed, it seems that EU's shift from acceptance of the BRI to increased 'protectionism' reflects a change in the perception of China's external policy occurred not only at the EU but also at Member States' level. As will be discussed, if during the first two years after its launch, the BRI appeared as a carrier of opportunities for development, when the first BRI-related projects were implemented, both EU and Member States started to see it as a threat not only from an economic, but also from a political and security perspective.

When the BRI was launched in 2013, EU did not appear much interested nor concerned with this initiative because the widespread impression at the time was that it targeted mostly countries at the periphery of China and the latter was engaging with Europe mainly through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, like the cooperation framework with CEECs countries, which was only later incorporated into the BRI. It has to be noted that when the BRI was launched also the Chinese side seemed to prioritize Asian countries rather than Europe and only at a later stage African and European states gained prominence in China's new geopolitical vision (Zeng 2017). As a confirmation of this, during the 16th EU-China Summit held in November 2013 the BRI was not even mentioned and references to the OBOR were absent in the EU-China Strategic Agenda for Cooperation. Only in 2014 in an official statement the Chinese deputy minister of foreign affairs Zhang Yesui affirmed that the purpose of this initiative was to connect Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Western Asia and even a part of Europe (Zeng 2017, 9). During the same year, it was made clear that CEECs would be involved in this initiative.

After this stage of tacit acceptance, in 2015 EU institutions tried to seize the opportunities offered by the Chinese initiative and announced through the mouth of the EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker the EU willingness to create synergies between the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) and the BRI (Casarini 2016, 103). Actually, these initiatives share a number of similarities, given that both will be investing heavily in infrastructure construction (Pavlićević 2015). For this reason, in May 2015 President Juncker confirmed that he did not see any significant obstacles in integrating his fund with the BRI, adding that both parts should engage "to make sure that [their] plans fit at both the macro level and the operational level" (Zuokui 2017, 22). Similar views were expressed during the 17th China-EU Business Summit in June 2015, when Chinese Premier declared that China was ready to co-ordinate its development agenda with the EFSI in order to build important infrastructure jointly. Indeed, on that occasion, both parts put forward a series of measures aimed at the integration of the BRI and the Junker

Investment Plan, and the establishment of a platform for connectivity between China and the EU (Zuokui 2018, 147).

Later that year, during the EU-China High-Level Trade and Economic Dialogue (HED), held in Beijing on 28 September 2015, potential areas of cooperation between the two parts were explored (European Commission 2015). On that occasion, EU Commission and the Chinese government signed a Memorandum of Understanding which launched the EU-China Connectivity Platform, an initiative aimed at facilitating the discussion on cooperation strategies, improving transparency, as well as enhancing synergies between the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and the BRI (Di Donato 2020; European Commission 2015).[6] Already during this stage, Germany – although still adopting a pretty favourable position towards the BRI – pushed for using this platform to ensure the conformity of Chinese BRI-related investments in Europe with EU practices and standards. Moreover, for German officials the Connectivity Platform represented an important tool to align Chinese infrastructure plans in the European neighbourhood with those of EU member states (Ederer 2016).

During these early years, besides cooperation between China and European institutions, also EU member states strengthened their ties with Beijing. Indeed, when in 2014 the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank was set up, observers would not expect that several major Western European countries, including UK, France, Germany and Italy would join one after another. Also for this reason, the establishment of the AIIB has been seen as an important foreign policy achievement, signalling the emergence of an alternative to the American hegemony in international financial institutions (Baark 2019, 9). In fact, Washington considered the AIIB as a potential rival to the US-based World Bank and urged European allies not to join it. Yet, several accounts highlight that the participation

[6] TEN-T endorses projects of infrastructure construction or related to equipment, technology and standards. Based on the Regulation (EU) n. 1315/2013, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) is project launched in to develop a Europe-wide network of railway lines, roads, inland waterways, maritime shipping routes, ports, airports and railroad terminals. The aim is to improve connectivity between all the European Regions and strengthen social, economic and territorial cohesion in the EU.

of EU countries can be seen as an indirect attempt to shape through multilateral settings, rather than bilateral agreements, China's BRI-related activities in Eurasia (Gaspers 2016). Reportedly, France's decision to join the AIIB was motivated by the conviction that it would constitute a way of exerting pressure on the institution "so that it would abide by the rules in terms of social and environmental standards" (Nicolas 2021). In a similar fashion, despite concerns that AIIB serves Chinese geopolitical interests, apparently Germany seeks to shape it into a genuine international financial institution, instead of being a bank with "Chinese characteristics" (Stanzel 2017).

As we have seen, until 2015 – besides these attempts to influence the implementation of BRI projects – EU and Member States' reactions to this initiative were all but hostile. Still, with the EU's understanding of the initiative getting deep, starting from 2016 its attitude began to shift to an 'active self-protection' stance (Zuokui 2018, 147). Even though annual summits, ministerial meetings and sectoral dialogue aiming at deepening cooperation between EU and China take place on a regular basis, the implementation of first projects related to the BRI has been received with both appraisal and scepticism. Both EU institutions, some Member States and business actors have expressed several worries, mainly concerning the allocation of construction contracts, the respect of international trade and standard norms, the economic sustainability of BRI-related projects, the takeover of critical infrastructure in European states and the establishment of bilateral agreements regarding the BRI between China and EU members, which is deemed to reduce EU cohesion.

One of the main criticism Chinese investments in EU have attracted comes from European construction companies that are seeking to secure infrastructure deals and that accuse China to favour Chinese companies, especially state-owned ones. This raises the issue of reciprocity, since – whereas Chinese companies find an open-door environment in Europe – European companies have little chances to win contracts to build infrastructure projects in mainland China (Casarini 2015). Concerns about the respect of free trade rules have been voiced by some EU governments as well. Most notably, during a visit to China, French President Macron stated that the BRI could not be a "one-way" trade road leading to "hegemony, which would transform [recipient countries] into vassals" and also called for a new start in EU-Chinese relations based on "balanced rules" to address "legitimate questions" about China in Europe (quoted in Brattberg and Soula 2018, webpage). Similar concerns were expressed by then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who warned that China's BRI-related activities were "not being conducted in the spirit of free trade" (*ibidem*).

Another major concern relates to debt sustainability. Whereas Chinese financed infrastructures have been welcomed in many BRI countries, accepting Chinese lending entails severe risks given that some of the credit that has been extended is lent without due diligence and on terms that are potentially injurious to borrowers. This could leave countries so indebted to China that they could be forced to make it unwanted concessions (Tybring-Gjedde 2020, 6).

Furthermore, EU institutions are especially concerned with initiatives like the 17+1 platform and the signing of MoUs between China and EU member states. These initiatives are deemed to reduce EU unity. Actually, on several occasions, special relations established between Beijing and EU members seem to have influenced EU policies. As an example, in June 2017, Greece blocked an EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council criticizing China's human rights record. This was the first time that the EU failed to make a joint statement in that forum. Earlier the same year, Hungary broke EU consensus, refusing not to sign a joint letter denouncing the reported torture of detained lawyers in China (Brattberg and Soula 2018). Moreover, in the EU Council on 5 March 2019, previous Italian government comprising 5 Star Movement and Salvini's League voted against the draft text of the investment screening mechanism, reversing the position of the previous centre-left Gentiloni government, which had joined Germany and France in sending a letter to the European Commission in February 2017 to back calls for an EU intervention on this matter (Casarini 2020, 103).[7] Another matter of con-

[7] Indeed, this 'friendly' posture towards China is part of a series of efforts of various Italian governments to establish a special relationship with Beijing. Actually, in 2014, Italy's sovereign wealth fund, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti (CDP), already partnered with the Bank of China (BoC) to support Italian enterprises in the Chinese market. Three years later, they created the Sino-Italian Co-Investment Fund with a capital of 100 million euros (Bilotta, 2021). Finally, in 2019, Italy became a BRI country.

cern is that CEECs and countries that have signed MoUs with Beijing have become increasingly critical of European norms and bureaucracy.[8] Hence, China-led initiatives are believed to undermine EU cohesion by promoting alternative models of governance and a less transparent use of finance (Di Donato 2020, webpage).

A final issue concerns the race for technological dominance and the threat of Chinese control over critical technologies and infrastructure. More generally, at issue is the nexus between technology, national security, and the defence of shared values.

In order to tackle these problems, in 2016 the EU updated its strategy on China and, along with old commitments, for the first time it raised the issue of ‘reciprocity’ in relations with Beijing, seeking a level playing field and emphasizing the importance of fair competition across all areas of co-operation (European Commission 2016). Moreover, the new strategy states unambiguously that it represents a “further policy shift towards a more realistic, assertive, and multi-faceted approach”, in order to set relations with China “on a fair, balanced and mutually beneficial course” (ivi, 1). In approval of this strategic paper, the Council of the EU further asserted its determination on “the constructive management of differences” (European Council 2016; Fanoulis and Song 2021, 2). Other official documents confirm the EU increased scepticism toward cooperation with China. In 2017, the European Commission, led by calls from Germany, France and Italy, proposed to establish a framework to screen foreign direct investment in the EU (European Commission 2017). The screening mechanism for foreign investments in sensitive sectors (e.g. critical infrastructure, energy, and telecommunications, and defence technologies), adopted in 2019, allows the EC to voice opinions on FDI affecting the EU as a whole or multiple Member States. Hence, EC could help European governments to evaluate whether a foreign investor is controlled by a third country government or whether he has previously been involved in activities affecting security or public order, and also if

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[8] The correlation between pro-Chinese policies and Euroscepticism of some European governments is clearly highlighted in the dossiers produced by the European Parliament, for example China, the 16+1 format and the EU, at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2018/625173/EPRS_BRI(2018)625173_EN.pdf.

there is a “serious risk” that he engages in illegal activity (Regulation 2019/452, 2019). Though the regulation explicitly calls for non-discrimination against the investment’s country of origin, it is undeniable that its application would make more difficult for Chinese companies to acquire expertise and technology that could be used to produce goods at lower prices and harm European companies (Casarini 2019, 12).

The European Commission has also tried to promote a European alternative to the Chinese approach, adopting a plan to improve trade and economic and political ties between Europe and Asia. In contrast with China’s BRI, it stresses the importance of establishing a rule-based international system for connectivity projects, based on the respect of environmental and social standards and of norms of free trade and of fiscal sustainability of investments (Di Donato 2020, webpage).

European increased assertiveness toward China is proven by the EU-China Strategic Outlook published by the European Commission in 2019, which states that the EU’s goal is to maintain the international rules-based order, to pursue sustainable development at a global level and recognizes the differences between EU’s and China’s methods in pursuing these objectives. EU’s current approach to China can be synthetized with this statement: “China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. This requires a flexible and pragmatic whole of EU approach enabling a principled defence of interests and values” (Ntousas and Minas 2021, 4; EU Commission 2019).

6. T*he role of member* States *in the* European *response to the* BRI

Two considerations help us understand the different European reactions to the BRI. On the one side, China’s pressure on Europe has been a key component of the BRI. Over the past decade, China has shifted from a focus on developing countries with rich natural resources and its Asian neighbours to advanced economies with manufacturing and technology partnerships. Since the official launch of BRI in 2013, Europe has been seen as a bridgehead for the so-called "going global" strategy pursued by Xi in Eurasia (Yin 2018, 288-9). In this general context, as already underlined, Eastern and Southern Europe have been seen as more open to Chinese influence, penetration, and leverage, than their northern fellows. In Eastern Europe, in particular, the former 17+1 framework has often been referenced as a Chinese strategy to divide the EU (Ghiretti 2021). Regarding Southern Europe, Italy was the last European State to become a BRI country in 2019, but it was also the first among the G7 nations. The Chinese pressures on the Eastern and Southern borders have impacted European strategic posture. Indeed, besides the fact that EU has always shown an ideological aversion towards investment restrictiveness, the Euro crisis further softened political resistance to Chinese investments. High unemployment rates and the need to find buyers for IMF-mandated privatization plans led several EU Members to court Chinese investors (Meunier 2019).

On the other side, since same 2013, the EU has pushed forward a narrative of greater strategic autonomy and a reinvigoration of the rules-based international order and multilateral consensus.[9] Strategic autonomy is still seen as an effort to defend regional interests with a more integrated, innovative, and competitive defence technological and industrial base, and Germany and France have historically taken the lead in this process. The Franco-German duo is a sine qua non for European strategic autonomy in the field of defence. This collaboration led to the signing of a bilateral treaty on military cooperation in 2019.[10] Furthermore, the two countries have tried to lead this process while maintaining good economic relations in Eurasia and their special role in bilateral interactions with China. In particular, big contracts in areas such as energy

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[9] See the C*onclusion* of the European Council of 19/20 December 2013, at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140245.pdf.

[10] The bilateral treaty signed between France and Germany in January 2019 reaffirms the friendship between the countries. It builds on the Élysée Treaty signed by French and German leaders in 1963. See https://www.europeansources.info/record/treaty-of-franco-german-cooperation-and-integration-aachen-treaty/#:~:text=Bilateral%20treaty%20signed%20between%20France%20and%20Germany%20in,signed%20by%20French%20and%20German%20leaders%20in%201963.

and transport have historically dominated economic relations between France and China, while small and medium-sized businesses have represented Germany (Weske 2007). Whereas historically France has been politically and Germany economically more important to China, since the launch of the BRI France has sought to become more attractive from an economic perspective, while Germany, on the contrary, has tried to gain a prominent political role.

As far as the position of France regarding China is concerned, it has to be stressed that it has traditionally been the only European country with a strategic interest to counterbalance China's influence in Asia.[11] This position made it more difficult for Paris than for Berlin to play the new role in the economic filed. During President Xi Jinping's official visit to France in March 2013, the two countries agreed to a framework for reinforced political dialogue and people-to-people exchanges but also vowed to work towards a rebalancing of economic relations "within the spirit of reciprocity" (Ekman and Seaman 2015, 25-26). In a broad sense, France's approach became more transactional than strategic. However, initially the country was not considered a target of the Chinese initiative and Sino–French cooperation under the banner of BRI remained largely theoretical. As mentioned, the only concrete interaction emerged in April 2016 when the French city of Lyon welcomed its first delivery of freight from the Chinese city of Wuhan (Seaman and Ekman 2016, 21). Anyway, the transition from a more political-strategic to a more economic-transactional approach changed the country's role in European policy towards China. Since 2016, France has opposed certain types of Chinese investments, particularly in high-tech sectors. Working with Germany in the European context, "this shift has led Paris to take a more vocal stance in favour of common procedures for screening foreign investment in the EU" (Seaman 2017, 60). Moreover, the French government – in line with a French Senate's report on BRI – has emphasized the need for transparency and reciprocity and has called for the prevention of debt distress (Nicolas 2021). In particular, Paris has put much emphasis on

[11] On the French strategy in the Indo-Pacific, see *France's IndoPacific Strategy* at https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_a4_indopacifique_v2_rvb_cle432726.pdf.

the need to follow the 2017 "G20 Operational Guidelines for Sustainable Financing", whose objective is to ensure that lending and borrowing practices facilitate sustainable public debt levels (ibidem). Besides this, France, along with Germany, has consistently called for a joint response to the BRI based on the principle of 'strong multilateralism' and 'fair and balanced' trade. French President Emmanuel Macron in the EU meeting 2019 asserted that the "time of European naïveté" in China had "come to an end because for many years we had an uncoordinated approach and China took advantage of our divisions" (cited in Fuentes 2019).

As far as the position of Germany is concerned, it has to be highlighted that its core interest in engaging China has traditionally been the promotion of exports and securing the presence of national companies in China according to a "pragmatic perspective" (Huotari 2015, 35). It is noteworthy to mention that the strategic partnership between Germany and China was established only in 2010, while China announced a member-state-level deal with the UK, France, and other EU member states in southern Europe between 2003 and 2005. The Sino-German partnership took place only during the 2008 economic crisis, when it became clear that China and CEECs would be more inclined to enhance cooperation with each other (Zhou 2017, 16). Like France, Germany is more peripheral to BRI projects than CEECs and Southern European countries. Yet, even though BRI-related activities to Germany have been limited to a slimline of railway operation projects, Berlin's initial perceptions of BRI were positive. The government saw the BRI as a tool to secure Chinese investments in Germany and eastern Europe's neighbourhood. In a speech delivered in Beijing in October 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel praised BRI's long-term strategic outlook by stating that "the European Union also wants to be part of this endeavour" (Gasper 2016, 26). Since then, as previously discussed, Germany has been a keen advocate of using the EU-China Cooperation Platform as a tool to ensure the conformity of Chinese BRI-related investments in Europe with EU rules and standards.

It should also be noted that in 2016 there was a change in perception in the German public, media, and policymaking circles. A rapid increase in technology acquisitions spurred heated debates about the sale of critical or security-sensitive technologies (Huotari 2017). The debate about the appropriate balance between principled openness and targeted protection, as well as about the necessary measures to achieve policy goals including technological leadership, industrial competitiveness, and reciprocity in investments relations with China is far from concluded. However, changes in attitude occurred between 2016 and 2017 and influenced the policies of European institutions, which started to see China not only as a 'systemic competitor' but also as a 'systemic rival' in 2019. At the time the German government took a more political-strategic stance and along with France, it pledged to reinforce efforts to support a greater alignment of the different EU member state positions on China. In particular, German officials have sought an alliance with France and Italy on EU FDI investment screening legislation. Indeed, also other relevant actors in Germany highlighted the need to develop a more comprehensive approach to regulating at the EU level commercial and financial relations with China (Ian *et al*. 2021, 43): the Federation of German Industries emphasized that "no EU Member State can on its own cope with the economic and political challenges posed by China. Answers can only come from a strong, reformed Europe speaking with one voice' (BDI 2019, 1).

We can explain the role of Germany in influencing the development of European policies by considering that China's authoritarianism remains the main obstacle to an overall positive view of China in that country, which is Europe's largest economy (Pongratz 2021). The traditional hard power issues of economic growth and military might are not the only sources of fear in Europe about the rising of China. Underlying them is often a deeper set of questions concerning identity and shared values (Barr 2011). The influence of Germany has weighed on many European countries, both in Eastern Europe, except for Hungary (Ghiretti 2021), and in Southern Europe, particularly in Spain, that, after an initial support for the BRI, decided not to join this project. That being said, the German government's attitude on the BRI has been essentially pragmatic and it was able to count on the support of France. Even though the two countries have worked to develop a whole of EU approach towards China and the BRI, aimed at inducing Beijing to adhere more strictly to international norms, in doing so they have not lost sight of the fact their Southern and Eastern European fellows could benefit from China's infrastructure construction and investments. This particular attention to the east and south of Europe is especially true for Germany. Also for this reason, previous German government – stressing the 'partner' component of the EU definition of China – has pushed for finalizing a Comprehensive Agreement on Investments with China in December 2020, without even consulting with the US newly elected President Joe Biden.

7. US' *response to the launch of the* BRI

Due to its status as a global power, US has always looked at China's rise with more suspicion than EU and considers the Asian power as a threat to US hegemony. Yet, Washington's perception of the OBOR initiative has not always been so negative and, like that of the EU, has varied considerably over the years, for reasons only partially overlapping with those of the EU. Even though US has never appeared truly enthusiastic of this global infrastructure project, when the BRI was launched, Obama's officially response was fairly benign, commenting that "Asia needs infrastructure […] so to the extent that China wants to put capital into development projects around the region, that's a good thing" (Dyer 2015, webpage). Few months later, during Xi's visit to Washington in September 2015, a White House press statement remarked that US "welcomes China's growing contributions to financing development and infrastructure in Asia and beyond" (White House 2015).

Under the Obama administration, officials noted that China's BRI plans mirrored the intent of the US New Silk Road 2011 Initiative (NSR) and argued the BRI could be mutually reinforcing of US efforts to support peace, stability, and prosperity through economic opportunity and connectivity in one of the least-economically integrated regions of the world (Chang 2017, webpage). Contrary to the expectations raised during the Presidential electoral campaign, the early Trump administration adopted a similar stance towards the BRI, even "recogni[zing] the importance" of this initiative (Young 2018, 389). Moreover, a senior US official attending the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in 2017 remarked that "US firms have a long and successful track record in global infrastructure development, and are ready to participate in Belt and Road projects" (Strait Times, May 14 2017). Yet, he warned that the initiative's success would depend on several factors, not least "transparency in government procurement, high-quality financing to avoid unsustainable debt burdens and broad participation" (*ibidem*).

However, US' response to the BRI became more concerned due to alleged China's unfair economic practice and industrial policy. The publication of Made in China 2025 policy is a case in point, since Beijing has allocated billions of dollars in order to allow state-owned and private enterprises to catch up with Western technological expertise in advanced democracies. The use of state subsidies to enhance national companies' competitiveness has been vehemently criticized by the US, as it is supposed to undermine international trade rules (Ashbee 2020). In addition, Washington expressed concerns about Chinese foreign policy growing assertiveness. In late 2017, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson accused Beijing that its infrastructure development projects were causing several problems to recipient countries, since they relied extensively on Chinese workforce and burdened states with "enormous levels of debt" (Tillerson 2017, 7-8). Other officials expressed disappointment with the signature of MoUs between China and European countries and the incorporation of the 17+1 cooperation agreement into the BRI (Ashbee 2020).

All these concerns were amplified in the National Security Strategy published in December 2017, in which China was accused of "using economic inducements and penalties [...] to persuade other states to heed its political and security agenda" (White House 2017, 46). Moreover, with an implicit reference to the BRI, the document stated that "China's infrastructure investments and trade strategies reinforce its geopolitical aspirations" (*ibidem*). Actually, the document explicitly criticizes China for "gaining a strategic foothold in Europe by expanding its unfair trade practices and investing in key industries, sensitive technologies, and infrastructure" (*ivi*, 47). In what appears like an open challenge to the BRI, the Strategy highlights that in the area of foreign infrastructure development, the US could "offer a stark contrast to the corrupt, opaque, exploitative, and low-quality deals offered by authoritarian states" (*ivi*, 39).

In summary, the White House opposition to the BRI focuses on two main issues: first, the number of accusations US authorities have made over violations of free trade norms highlights the concern that China's infrastructure projects – and its rise as a global power at a more general level – can undermine the international rules-based system. Second, China's penetration in Europe along with the use of its economic and financial power to increase the level of national debt of less developed countries along the Belt and Road, thus making them dependent on China, has raised concerns for US strategic position relative to Beijing and fosters fears of displacement by China's rise (Young 2018, 389-390).

Despite these concerns, neither Obama nor Trump have developed a viable alternative to the OBOR, thus convincing their allies to drift away from China or have made real pressures to European states not to join the BRI. Indeed, perhaps mindful that his criticism to the AIIB had left US isolated, given that many EU member states raced to join the body, Obama acquiesced to the launch of the BRI (Ashbee 2020, 375). In a similar fashion, despite the Trump administration's critiques of China's growing assertiveness, there have been very few signs that the US would significantly increase funding for competing infrastructure development projects (Haider 2017). One explanation for US' restraint on competing with China in this area is related to the considerable budget cuts that the Trump administration made in several areas relevant to the construction of foreign infrastructure and to international financial institutions, like the World Bank. Undoubtedly, these cuts put into question both the capacity and the willingness to fully-fund potential alternatives to the BRI. In addition, since 2017 there has been an American disengagement not only with China but also with Europe. Another factor that could have induced the White House to adopt a somewhat milder stance towards the OBOR is related to the economic opportunities that many major US companies are expected to seek through BRI projects (Wuthnow 2018, webpage).

8. *Conclusions*

Today technological dominance appears to be a strategic dimension of the US competition with China. It will probably impact transatlantic relations because of the nexus between technology, national security, and the defence of shared values. The problem is that "the arrival of China in the upper echelons of fields such as AI and biotechnology, for so long dominated by the United States, has provoked a certain alarm in the West" (Ortega 2020, 5). However, as we have seen, the US did not oppose the BRI and did not put great pressure on Europe. If anything, the fact is that similarly to the US, most European countries no longer see China as a developing country but as an emerging global power that has become a competitor or even a rival, as stated in the 2019 EU-China Strategic Outlook.

The reference to the values of freedom and democracy in opposition to the Chinese communist regime fuels the fear of foreign influence and control over technologies and critical infrastructure as ports and railways. As this paper has shown, also violations of international trade norms and China's use of its economic power to increase its political influence in Europe, undermining EU's cohesion, have contributed to the hardening of Brussels' stance towards Beijing. However, EU's inherent 'fragmented' nature has so far impeded Brussels from adopting a single position in defence of its shared values. As a matter of fact, in formulating a China policy, the EU has to take into consideration that its member states have different interests and that – although the United States remains its most important economic partner – Europe's Eurasian trade and value chain is increasingly dependent on China. Therefore, it cannot consider Beijing merely as a 'rival' or as a 'competitor', but also as a vital 'negotiating partner'. Also for this reason, rather than seeking a balance against China, in the early years after the launch of the BRI (2013-2017), European countries appeared interested in finding their advantage in the context of integration of Eurasian economy and greater autonomy from the transatlantic partnership.

Our argument is that in the aftermath of the 2010 euro crisis, European rulers have in some way welcomed the emergence of a potential new provider of global public goods and opted for not balancing against it. The BRI offered European governments and institutions a new opportunity for economic growth. Even though concerns about the rise of China had already emerged after its entry into the WTO and few years later China began to be the primary target for accusations and complaints from the EU (Zhou 2017, 14), the latter, affected by the global financial crisis, decided to strengthen its cooperation with Beijing in the new framework of the BRI. Nonetheless, besides threatening the functioning of the current rules-based global economic system, China's initiative undermined EU's unity, as it led to the emergence of three sub-regions with different interests: namely, Central and Eastern Europe, Southern Europe, and Continental Europe. As we have discussed, Beijing has succeeded in exerting pressure on the first two regions. But continental Europe, led by France and especially Germany, progressively adopted a more cautious if not veiled hostile stance toward China by letting political-strategic considerations prevail over economic interests.

This shows also that the geographical location of global powers is not of secondary importance in the process of hegemonic competition. At first, geographical proximity favoured a policy of economic integration in Eurasia in the aftermath of the economic crisis. Seeking the strategic autonomy of the EU, France and Germany reacted to the BRI by converging on an open position, without perceiving a direct threat to the European borders, but attempting to redefine their bilateral relationship with China. Later, politics prevailed over economics, and the EU changed its stance towards China, moving closer to the US. While avoiding a conflict that could have harmed European unity, France and Germany have tried to defend European values and integration in contrast with China. Yet, it is worthy of note that this process was inspired by Germany and France following the principle of EU strategic autonomy and that Brussels and Washington positions towards China still differ on a number of issues.

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Costanza Marcellino

Between Autocratic Linkage, Support and Non-interference: An Assessment of China's Influence in South-Eastern, Central, and Eastern Europe

1. *Introduction*

With the third wave of global democratization (Huntington 1991) during the 1970s, scholars expected a progressive dominance of democracy around the globe. By the turn of the century, approximately 60 percent of the world's independent states became indeed democratic (Diamond 2008).

Yet, the enthusiasm driven by this third wave was premature and short-lived: this democracy force, which was supposed to encourage countries to undertake the path of regime change, soon clashed with the rise of authoritarian powers (Ambrosio 2010). Thus, this acceleration has begun to roll back: as reported by the NGO Freedom House which monitors the development of political and civil rights around the world, between 2005 and 2018 the share of Free countries declined to 44 percent (Freedom House 2019).

Against academia assessments inferring that the whole world is currently under a "democracy's retreat" (Freedom House 2019) or "rollback" (Diamond 2008; International IDEA 2021; Lührmann *et al.* 2017), in 2020 it was mainly struggling democracies and authoritarian states that accounted for more of the global decline. At the onset of the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom (2021), the countries witnessing democracy deterioration overcame those with democracy improvements by the largest margin since the 2006 negative trend started (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021).

If on one hand scholars witnessed that the 'third wave of democratization' has been gradually replaced by a 'third wave of autocratization'

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(Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), on the other hand the power and prestige of authoritarian actors such as Russia and China are rising vis-à-vis the progressive power decline of world's democracies (Ambrosio 2010). By creating opportunities of engagement and investment in countries with scarce financial resources and political management abilities, China established an indirect influence on these countries. The latter has additionally brought along anti-democratic tactics and a gradual erosion of institutions and human rights protection in many countries (Repucci and Slipowitz 2021). The portrayal of Chinese financial investments as donations to dependent recipient governments together with the recent democratic leaders' resorting to physical force to fight the pandemic, has fostered the thinking that authoritarianism might be an effective recipe for good governance, thus undermining the advantages of a democratic setting (International IDEA 2021). Consequentially, the Chinese non-interference strategy has allowed accountability for power abuses to go neglected while gradually strengthening and reinforcing the formation of autocratic alliances.

Due to the quasi-simultaneous occurrence of these two phenomena, this article aims at investigating whether the empirical phenomenon of the 'third wave of autocratization' (spread around 2006) is connected with the occurrence of increasing Chinese linkage with other countries (started with the Chinese accession to WTO in 2001). This paper explores this relationship by addressing the research question: "What is the effect of Chinese linkage on the quality of democracy of countries from South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe?". The hypothesis displayed in the article maintains that China indirectly contributes to damaging the quality of countries' democratic systems, in lieu of intentionally exporting autocracy.

The relevance of conducting such a study is dictated by four reasons. First, academic research has so far focused on explaining shifts in regime types by inspecting domestic factors, leaving the influence of external variables often under-theorized and unexplored (Kästner 2019; notable exceptions: Bader, 2015; Melnykovska *et al*. 2012). Here, scholars mainly prioritized the study of democracy promotion and the domestic reasons for democratic backsliding (Lust and Waldner 2015).

Second, although scholars' attention has recently shifted from democracy to autocracy promotion when cases of authoritarian powers suppressing democratization processes became more recurrent (Kästner 2019, 411; Yakouchyk 2019), scholars have tested the effect of this autocratic engagement solely on regime stability or *complete* democratic breakdown (Bader 2015; Schmotz and Tansey 2018; Tansey *et al.* 2017), thus hindering the possibility of detecting gradual shifts in democratic erosion (exception: Appendix of Tansey *et al.* 2017). Additionally, most studies on authoritarianism inspected why and how external state actors might support authoritarian incumbents in other countries (Tolstrup 2015), overlooking the role that China might play in domestic regime transitions.

Third, quantitative analyses have often only explored the effect of bilateral relations with China on specific regions of Central Asia or Africa (Hess and Aidoo, 2019; Sharshenova and Crawford 2017; Tansey *et al.* 2017), always considering cases of clear autocratization. However, as Lührmann and Lindberg emphasize, the 'third wave of autocratization' unfolds slow and retrieving evidence exclusively from complete breakdowns of democracies "fails to capture the often protracted, gradual and opaque processes of contemporary regime change" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1097). Furthermore, almost all contemporary autocratization episodes affect democracies, while fewer and fewer autocracies are affected by autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1103).

Lastly, the recent significant inroads that Beijing made in South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe along with the successful 'colour revolutions' undertaken in these regional countries in the early 2000s make these countries suitable cases for assessing Chinese influence. On the one hand, after the 2008 global financial crisis, many regional countries in Eastern Europe looked to China as an increasingly salient economic partner, that through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promised investing consistently in infrastructures, transport and energy (Brattberg *et al.* 2021). By proceeding so, this region is serving China as an entry point to the rest of Europe, allowing the Chinese power to establish a competitive alternative to the economic development package offered by Western Europe. On the other hand, Central Europe constitutes perhaps the most successful case of democratization: by the 2000, through EU's active leverage and the undertaken 'colour revolutions', regimes in Croatia, Serbia, Slovakia, Romania and many more neighbouring countries had undergone democratic transitions (Levitsky and Way 2005, 27). Yet recently the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has registered the highest democratic declines in this region, after Brazil and India (International IDEA 2021). The Chinese established political and economic influence in these countries, their successful democratic transition and their recent democratic decline constitute relevant conditions to assess the Chinese linkage effects on these countries.

By addressing the aforementioned research gaps, this article fulfils a quantitative exploratory study to shed light on the effects of Chinese linkage on South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe. Due to data unavailability for recent years (i.e. 2016 onwards), the scope of this research remains exploratory and cannot lead to final and ultimate results.

The paper proceeds as follows. The second section introduces the theoretical framework, where the state-of-the-art and present literature on domestic and external causes of democratic backsliding along with the theorization of Chinese influence are discussed. This will be followed by a section on data and methods, introducing the data sources employed and the variables' operationalization adopted. Lastly, the results of the random-effects regressions will be presented (4th section) and discussed (5th section), followed by a concluding chapter exploring the reasons behind the findings, the limitations encountered and further insights for future research.

2. T*heoretical framework*

2.1 A third wave of autocratization: the domestic causes

During the first years of the twenty-first century, the optimism that accompanied the global democratization process faced a dramatic disillusion. Many countries that had embarked democratization started diverging their trend and remained hybrid regimes in a blurry 'limbo' between consolidated forms of full democracy and full autocracy (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1097). This reversal has thus opened the path to a 'third wave of autocratization' (Crossaint and Merkel 2019; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

Nevertheless, this third wave compared to former thicker autocratization waves, is characterized by a gradual erosion of a country's democratic institutional structure. If in the past autocratization meant sudden democratic breakdowns through military coups and election day vote frauds, currently the new mode of autocratization registers more gradual shifts in countries' democratic quality, which entail stagnation and restrictions on media and civil society freedoms, 'executive aggrandizement' (Bermeo 2016, 10) and autocratic support for democracy repression by authoritarian powers (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1097). By attacking civil society freedoms, contemporary leaders have managed to subvert key dimensions of democratic institutions while keeping their democratic façade intact (Lührmann and Lindberg 2018). Thus, internally autocrats attack democratic institutions and values while externally authoritarian powers provide support to authoritarian political elites in other countries.

These events have led to the formation of many conceptualizations and theorizations within academia to address this phenomenon, along with the meticulous search for its internal and external causes. So far, the academic focus has been on the domestic causes; only recently, since the term 'autocracy promotion' (Burnell 2010) was introduced, the conceptualization of external influence became a subject of debate (Yakouchyk 2019).

At the domestic level, scholars identified six main causes for this empirical phenomenon. First, countries with asymmetrical distribution of financial and cultural resources are more likely to tend towards autocratization. On the one hand, in these countries the society perceives democracy as a threat to their economic interests; on the other, marginalized groups are reluctant to provide loyalty to the regime, even when a full establishment of democratic institutions occurs (Crossaint and Merkel 2019, 444).

Second, economic crises favour emergency legislation, legitimize institutional defects and normalize unrestrained power of the executive branch, thus reinforcing the authoritarian tendency (Crossaint and Merkel 2019, 444). A clear example of this is the recent COVID-19 crisis: in many countries, especially from Eastern Europe, political leaders turned to excessive surveillance, discriminatory restrictions on freedoms and aggressive enforcement of such restrictions (International IDEA 2021). These measures additionally pushed political elites of many countries to undertake greater personal executive authority (e.g. Hungary).

A third and fourth domestic cause have been found in the absence of strong traditions of civil society as well as in fragile stateness. When the civil society is weak and the state is partially eroded based on the use of force and violence (i.e. corruption and armed conflict), deficiencies in the rule of law are more probable (Crossaint and Merkel 2019, 444).

Here, a country's history also matters: the longer a dictatorship or totalitarian regime has been institutionalized in a country, the more difficult it becomes for that country to root out the autocratic culture and establish a full-fledged democracy (Crossaint and Merkel 2019, 444).

Lastly, international and regional influence also constitutes a key determinant: if ties with regional mechanisms, such as the EU or the United Nations (UN), which guarantee the promotion of democratic values around the world are lacking, political elites are more inclined to exploit the lack of regional supervision and violate democratic rules (Crossaint and Merkel 2019, 444).

In this regard, external influence of authoritarian powers such as Russia and China has also been found to be a key factor for regime change and autocratization trends (Melnykovska *et al.* 2012; Sharshenova and Crawford 2017). Consequently, academic focus shifted from democratization to autocratization processes. External factors and the related motives are discussed in the next paragraph.

2.2 A third wave of autocratization: the external causes

Besides domestic reasons for autocratization, the influence of external authoritarian countries has also been identified as shaping a country's autocratization tendencies (Ambrosio 2009; Tolstrup 2015, 674; Zielonka and Pravda 2001).

The academic interest for external factors as key causes of authoritarianism began when countries with on-going democratic processes started reversing the trend during the 2000s while non-democratic regional forces such as China, Russia and Iran truncated democratic transitions in neighbouring states and created economic alternatives to the Western European model (Kästner 2019, 411). Here, the academic focus gradually shifted from democracy promotion to the domestic characteristics of autocratic states or backsliding democracies, soon leading scholars to adopt terms such as 'autocracy promotion' or 'autocracy support' to designate the (in)direct pressure authoritarian states might play on other countries (Burnell 2010; Kästner 2019; Yakouchyk 2019). If a plethora of different terms such as 'democratic backsliding', 'autocratization' and 'democracy breakdown' has been used to indicated regime transition towards authoritarianism, also different designations for autocratic states' active or passive push to enforce authoritarian values in other countries have been employed.

However, as pointed out by the scholar Tansey (2016, 142), the term 'autocracy promotion' refers solely to the *intentional* efforts of authoritarian powers to support autocratic regimes to slow down the democratization process or strengthen the power of local authoritarian rulers. This term thus refers to the *direct* support of authoritarian powers, and it includes objectives only related to regime types, excluding foreign policy goals derived from self-interest motives. By contrast, as Vanderhill (2013, 8) claims, often the actions of powerful autocrats in supporting other countries are not aimed at developing authoritarian regimes, but rather at preserving the stability of authoritarian partner regimes (Kästner 2019, 414).

To tackle both the *direct* and *indirect* forms of autocratic support for other countries' democracy reversal, this paper relies on Yakouchyk's theorization of the term 'autocracy support'. He defines the latter as a group of actions initiated by external powers that directly or indirectly contribute to the decline of democracy in a country, independently of the motives (Yakouchyk 2019, 5). For the scope of this article, this concept of 'autocracy support' is then translated and adapted into the Levitsky and Way's concept of 'linkage to the West' (Levitsky and Way 2005) and Tansey's notion of 'autocratic linkage' (Tansey *et al.* 2017). The latter describes the "density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information among particular countries) among particular countries" (Levitsky and Way 2010, 43). This autocratic linkage concept thus translates the implications of authoritarian support in concrete economic, political and diplomatic dimensions of such international relationships.

Yet, before investing important resources on another regime, external actors carefully consider the type and weight of the potential gain that may result from it (Tolstrup 2015, 679). Summarizing the different motives' theorizations of different scholars, the reasons behind autocratic support by external authoritarian powers can be summarized in four factors: economic value, geopolitical value, ideology and fear of contagion (Tolstrup 2015, 679; Yakouchyk 2019, 4).

In economic terms, authoritarian regimes are more inclined to strengthen trade interdependencies among themselves due to the fear that a regime change could potentially harm their economic revenues (Tansey *et al.* 2017). Besides, weaker authoritarian regimes generally tend to depend on external resources and materials to survive (Yakouchyk 2019, 6). The geopolitical factor is also a pivotal motive: external actors will be more prone to engage with other autocratic leaders if such relationship yields access to strategic locations, preservation of the military bases, or as a counterbalancing act against other powers (Tolstrup 2015, 679). Ideological reasons also continue to play a role in explaining autocracy support. In the Chinese case, by gradually gaining control over media and non-governmental organizations, Beijing is able to portray a positive image of itself, promote its economic model alternative to the Western one, and shape local narratives in the targeted autocratic countries. This provides China opportunities to make inroads in those states with scarce resources and/or little political management capacity (Brattberg *et al.* 2021, 6). Lastly, considering fear of contagion, authoritarian powers aim at controlling the citizenry and reduce drastically democratic spillovers that might threaten their chances of survival (Yakouchyk 2019, 5).

Summarizing the theoretical framework provided above, autocratization tendencies are the result of both, internal and external circumstances. The weight and size of each internal and external factor in play, however, might differ from single case to single case. Having theorized the motives and the reasoning behind external support, in the next paragraph a zoom in the findings regarding Chinese influence will be discussed.

2.3 Zooming in: Theorizing Chinese influence

As shown in previous paragraphs, the democratic nature of a regime depends on the interaction between domestic and external forces, and the weight of each factor depends on the strength of the internal and external ties the country inquired engages in.

When it comes to measure the direction and size of the Chinese external influence on defective democracies and similar regime types, academic scholars provide a puzzled picture. On the one hand, a part of academic research provides findings which hint at a negative effect of Chinese autocratic linkage on the democratic quality of specific countries within Central Asia (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017) or Sub-Sahara Africa (Hess and Aidoo 2019). Here, additionally, academics discovered that economic ties with China might be linked with solid autocratic regime survival and likely democratic breakdown of defective democracies (Bader 2015; Tansey *et al.* 2017). On the other hand, other studies indicate that China's approach to such autocratic relationships has no (Hackenesch 2015) or positive effect (Melnykovska *et al.* 2012) on democratic structures. Nevertheless, even those studies confirming the pivotal role of Chinese autocratic linkage in determining the autocratic survival of other democracy-defective regimes conclude that these linkage effects are less comprehensive than expected, since only few proxies of this linkage result statistically significant (Bader 2015). Moreover, the investigations conducted by Tansey *et al.* (2017) and Bader (2015) end in 2010 and 2013 respectively, leaving the current period of Xi Jinping's leadership and the time of BRI's launch uncovered. Empirical evidence of the Chinese role in regime change thus remains inconclusive. This paper to some extent brings closer-to-present evidence to the importance of Chinese linkage effects.

Yet, is Chinese leverage on these regimes direct? Is China actively and deliberately supporting authoritarianism? In ideological terms, China under Xi Jinping's leadership has stressed several times in the memo referred to as Document No. 9 that the "promotion of Western constitutional democracy is an attempt to negate the party's leadership and the socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance" (Buckley 2013). This entails that China undertakes a political confrontation whenever it feels democratic powers are attacking the Chinese "doing-business approach". In practical terms, however, a deliberated authoritarian strategy only occurs when a defective democracy or incomplete autocracy is already politically unstable or there is a risk of democratic spillover among countries of the same region (Chen and Kinzelbach 2015).

In this article it is argued that the effect of China on the inquired countries is indirect. It might be that China does not have the ambition of making these countries undertaking a mere convergence to authoritarian states; yet its indirect leverage and ideological stances might still have major effects on the democratic quality of countries. Moreover, the simultaneity of these countries' re-autocratization and their increasingly closer ties to the Chinese authoritarian power is becoming increasingly evident.

In this regard, many studies provide empirical evidence for the indirect nature of Chinese influence. Overall, autocratic linkage is hypothesized to affect the democratic quality indirectly. First, due to weak ties with democracies, countries with higher autocratic linkage to China have a higher probability of adopting an authoritarian survival approach such as violent repression or election fraud (Schmotz and Tansey 2018, 667). Second, in countries with high autocratic linkage, autocracy external promoters will enhance the performance of authoritarian rulers and leaders by satisfying important elites, such as the military or big state companies (Kästner 2019, 414; Schmotz and Tansey 2018, 667). Third, the Chinese political strategy in these hybrid regimes tends to be more neutral, always aiming at doing effective business and avoiding any direct interference at the domestic level (Melnykovska *et al.*, 2012).

In contrast to autocratic linkage, democratic linkage exerts its influence directly. As for the case of non-post-Soviet countries such as Slovakia, Croatia and Serbia (Silitski 2010, 341), the higher the linkage of hybrid regimes to the EU or other democratic actors, the higher is their tendency to embrace external pressure and undergo a democratic transition. In a way, closer ties to democratic powers shape democratic institutions, strengthen democratic political forces while isolating autocrats (Levitsky and Way 2010, 40-45). In other words, if the democratic linkage is high in a country, the external democratic pressure will be more effective thus leading to improvements in a country's democratic quality. Overall, the interplay between autocratic and democratic linkages along with their individual size determines a country's regime type and potential regime shifts.

Summarizing the argument, the first inference of this article assumes that autocratization is an unintentional effect of Chinese foreign policy (Risse and Babayan 2015, 385; Vanderhill 2013). A second conclusion of the literature review and state-of-the-art related to autocratization and democratization is that democratic backsliding or autocratic tendencies occurs as a result of an interaction between domestic conditions, external democratic linkage, and external autocratic linkage. The weight of each factor in the result depends on how extensive linkage is. Where linkage is weak, international influences are weaker, and regime outcomes are mainly a product of domestic indicators (Levitsky and Way 2005, 33).

In the following paragraph, the specific effect of Chinese linkage on Central and Eastern Europe will be theorized, along with the related hypothesis.

2.4 The result of autocratic linkage: the cases of South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe

Few studies have investigated Chinese influence on domestic political systems quantitatively. Most research has so far considered consolidated autocratic states, neglecting to assess this impact on weak or not fully consolidated democracies. When considering the Chinese effect on the democratic quality of countries, however, this lack of research is astonishing: one would argue that closer ties to China would have the most extensive impact on more volatile or at least democratically weaker political systems. Given the lack of studies on the topic, this article focuses on the assessment of the Chinese autocratic linkage effects on few defective or not fully consolidated democracies in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe.

Here, Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe[1] constitute the regions that have undergone the biggest democratic transformations in the last decades (Crossaint and Merkel 2019, 442). Namely in the late 1990s, at the end of the first post-communist period, Central and Eastern Europe was considered a democratic success story (Cianetti *et al.* 2018), thus leading scholars to assume that these regions have passed by "a point of no return" to authoritarian reversal processes (Ekiert & Kubik 1998, 580). Despite unfavourable conditions for democratic tendencies, by 2008 Croatia, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and (partially) Albania had successfully democratized (Levitsky and Way 2010, 128). Ul-

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[1] Whilst considering EU member states and non-EU countries from these regions indistinctively is highly disputable, the preliminary analysis of the study displayed no major differences attributable to the criterion of the EU membership among the countries' regression models. For this reason and due to space limits, the author assesses all the countries together.

timately, by 2016, 10 out of 19 embedded democracies could be found in these two regions (Crossaint and Merkel 2019).

Nevertheless, this democratization process reversed unexpectedly, leading to a recent deterioration of the quality of democracy in most of these countries. Namely, within Eastern Europe, countries count 16 autocracy-reversed episodes during the third wave of autocratization (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019, 1103). Here, paradigmatic representative models are certainly Hungary and Poland, but scholars identified additional solid trends in Czech Republic (Hanley and Vachudova 2018), Slovenia (International IDEA 2021), Belarus, Slovakia (Vanderhill 2014) and many more countries (Cianetti *et al.* 2018). This optimistic picture of successful democratization in these regions must therefore be revised based on current developments.

Yet, the problem of poor democratic quality is assumed to exceed the traditional causes of legacies of communist or pre-communist authoritarianism or of transition politics side-effects (Cianetti *et al.* 2018, 244), and involve instead all the three regions in the phenomenon of "neighbour emulation" (Brinks and Coppedge 2006).

Beyond neighbour emulation, another key determinant of these autocratization trends can be found in the autocratic linkage that many countries in the region have established with China. Starting from the election of Xi Jinping as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2013 and the consequent adoption of the BRI, Beijing have gradually made significant inroads in South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe. By promising economic-oriented growth opportunities and investments in these regions, China was able to acquire solid leeway in this regional sphere and gradually as well as indirectly transfer its ideological stances to the local institutional systems (Brattberg *et al.* 2021). China managed to identify and take advantage of these countries' vulnerabilities at the institutional and political level, while inciting illiberal domestic forces to act against the incumbents or take over the country's leadership. These vulnerabilities might relate to the presence of weak institutional structures, low management capability and/or asymmetrical distribution of financial and cultural resources within these countries. By adopting this strategy, China further impoverished the already weak local institutional systems, thus creating room for worsening episodes of democratic quality. Whilst China might have not deliberately caused democratic quality impoverishment, the type of engagement it established with these countries, the fostering of a positive Chinese image, the promotion of an alternative economic model in the region and lastly the indirect shaping of local narratives has certainly boosted this downward trend (Brattberg, *et al.* 2021, 11).

Based on the theory on autocratic linkage and the increasing leeway China is achieving in these regions, the relationship hypothesized is the following:

> H1: T*he higher the autocratic linkage to* C*hina*, *the lower quality of democracy of* C*entral*, E*astern and* S*outhern*-E*astern* E*uropean countries gets*.

The prospect that Chinese soft power[2] efforts might play a minor role in shifting democratic quality in these countries makes this study worth to investigate, and ultimately de-escalates the alarmist debate on China. Despite countries' diversity, all these countries share common characteristics related to the adjoining geographical position and the likely 'neighbour emulation' effect, that make the investigation of these bilateral relations more harmonized.

3. D*ata and methods*

3.1 Data sources

To test the relationship between autocratic linkage and countries' democratic quality, a panel dataset was constructed by importing indicators from different data sources. Here, the study assessed Chinese autocratic linkage effects on 15 countries from South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine. The final dataset comprises

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[2] It is worth mentioning here that the lack of quantitative data and their unsuitability to tackle indicators of soft power do not allow the present study to account for this foreign policy strategy in the regression models. Future research might address this issue by complementing quantitative analyses with qualitative data, sources more appropriate for assessing this aspect of the indirect influence.

315 observations for the period 2000-2020 (n = 15; N = 315; T = 21). Choosing this period of investigation will allow the author to consider the influence of international events such as the 2008 financial and economic crisis and COVID-19 outbreak, while assessing the influence of the Chinese linkage on a longer timespan through time lags. As crises often favour emergency legislation and normalize wider executive power, it might be fruitful to consider here a historical interval rich of unexpected external events. However, due to few missing data for some countries in specific years (i.e. 2001, 2019, 2020) the period of investigation differs based on the model and variables employed. The longitudinal dataset is therefore unbalanced.

To measure the dependent variable (DV) democratic quality, this study employed the five democracy indicators constructed in the V-Dem dataset (Coppedge *et al.* 2021): the electoral and liberal democracy indices, the participatory and the deliberative democracy indices and lastly the egalitarian democracy index. By assessing the autocratic linkage effects on each indicator separately, this paper provides a fully-fledged analysis of the potential impact of Chinese ties on different aspects of democracy.

These data were later combined with other trade and geographical data retrieved from the WITS partner timeseries data, the World Bank and the CEPII database respectively. For what concerns the proxies to measure autocratic linkage, import and export partner shares with China for each country were imported from the WITS dataset (WITS - UNSD Comtrade 2021), while the country's trade volume and the geographical proximity between China and the inquired countries were obtained from the World Bank (World Bank 2021) and the CEPII GeoDist dataset (Mayer and Zignago 2011) respectively. Lastly, control variables such as GDP per capita, GDP growth and political stability retrieved from World Bank data were added to the new dataset. For the scope of this research, it would have been fruitful integrating additional data on the oil and gas production of each country, the aid provided by China in these regions, the arms trade and the diplomatic exchanges with China. However, most of these data are available only for small and old periods, reaching exclusively until 2013. Including these outdated data into this analysis would have hindered the study's purpose of providing a more recent picture of this relationship; therefore, lesser but more updated data are employed in this analysis.

3.2 The operationalization of variables

Table A.1 (Appendix) provides a summary of all the variables employed in the quantitative analysis, the related descriptions and the eventual recoding. Since this article looks at democratic quality and its shifts over time, the DV is measured through the aforementioned five indices acquired from the V-Dem dataset. The electoral democracy index measures the responsiveness of rulers to citizens, the fairness of the electoral competition, the size of the suffrage and to what extent elections occur clean and regular. The liberal democracy index emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights, while the participatory democracy indicator is concerned with the extent to which citizens can participate freely and actively in all political processes. Lastly, the deliberative democracy index focuses on the process by which decisions are made in a polity, while the egalitarian democracy indicator evaluates the extent to which rights and freedoms of individuals are protected. All these indices are measured on a scale of 0-1, and four out of five indices take the level of electoral democracy (first index) into account.

Considering the autocratic linkage with China, four independent variables (IVs) are employed to account for these ties. These four independent indicators, due to the unavailability of additional updated data, relate only to two aspects of the linkage: trade and the geographic proximity. To assess the trade linkage, three proxies are used: import and export partner shares, and the trade volume as a percentage of a country's GDP. The first two proxies are provided as percentages of imports/exports from the region of interest to the region under study out of the total imports/exports of the destination. The third proxy instead represents the total sum of exports and imports of goods and services measured as a share of a country's gross domestic product. As last proxy of the linkage, the geographic proximity is computed as the distance in kilometres between China and the country inquired.

Additionally, within the analysis, three control factors that have been found to influence autocratization tendencies are considered: GDP per capita, GDP growth and political stability (Heston *et al*. 2011). To account for political stability, the indicator 'Political Stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism' derived from the World Governance Indicators is employed. The latter estimates perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically-motivated violence, including terrorism. Estimates give the country's score on the aggregate indicator and range from approximately -2.5 to 2.5. To ease results' interpretation and account for the autocorrelation between democratic quality previous scores and the next ones, all the independent and control variables considered are standardized and lagged by two years.

3.3 The method

The dependent variables employed in these analyses are interval variables, which traditionally require the usage of the OLS regression model. However, when panel data are considered, regression models can examine group effects, time effects, or even both simultaneously, and thus require a different structure. For this reason, this study runs all the models which might be suitable for longitudinal data: pooled OLS, fixed effects (FE), and random effects (RE) models. To decide between the three modelling structures, firstly the Breusch-Pagan Lagrange Multiplier test (LM) and secondly the Hausman test were conducted. Here the LM test helps choosing between an OLS and a RE model, and turned insignificant, suggesting using a RE model for the type and structure of data employed. The Hausman test also resulted insignificant ($p > 0.1$), indicating that a RE is a better choice vis-à-vis a FE model.

However, after clustering the standard errors (S.E.) by country in the RE models and re-performing the Hausman test, the latter suggests the use of a FE regression instead. This indicates that the individual error terms are correlated with the regressors, therefore a random-effects model would include significant bias. While fixed-effects regressions enable the author to accounts for external circumstances such as crises and unpredictable events (e.g. 2008 economic crisis, COVID-19, etc.), they do not allow the study to assess the impact of (time-invariant) geographical proximity with China as a proxy for autocratic linkage, thus partially hindering the purpose of the analysis.

In order to still evaluate the effect of time-invariant factors on countries' democratic quality, many scholars have identified valid specifications of the RE model that still yield robust findings, among which standard errors' clustering by id, dependent and/or independent variables' lagging, independent variables' de-trending and many more are found (Bell and Jones

2014; Calzolari and Magazzini 2009). Additionally, academics show that, in respect to time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) data, RE models perform well even when normality assumptions are violated (Beck and Katz 2007). For this reason, here the article employs S.E. clustering by country and lagging of the regressors as measures to account for autocorrelation within dependent variables and between the latter and independent factors. Furthermore, when comparing the results yielded by the FE model without geographical proximity and the RE model including the geographical proxy, the author finds nearly identical coefficients between the two models. Due to the similar results between the two model types and the quasi-robust specifications undertaken to account for autocorrelation, the author can safely favour the RE versus the FE regression model. To compare the results of the two regression types and provide a model accounting for external events, however, the FE regression models for all the selected DVs are provided in Table A.3 (Appendix).

4. *Results*

For what concerns the descriptive statistics, Table A.2 (Appendix) displays the summary statistics of all the variables employed in the analysis. Here, we find that the number of observations per variable differs, specifically for the independent and control variables. This is so since not all variables cover the same and full amount of time (T) periods (2000-2020), hinting at the presence of missing cases for some specific countries in specific years. Moreover, with the lagging of all the regressors by two years, information on the first two years of the analysis (2000 and 2001) are lost. Figures A.1-A.5 additionally provide trends per country across years of the dependent variables democracy indices. Here, we observe that most countries in these regions provide a downward trend of democratic quality over time, except for five state actors (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic and Greece) which display, to some extent, upward trends.

Table 1 presents the results of the random-effects regression models for all the 15 countries together with S.E. clustered by country[3]. Each

[3] The progressive RE models, where each independent variable of autocratic linkage is inserted at different times in the regression equation, are available upon request.

model assesses the Chinese autocratic linkage effects on a different democracy indicator, whether electoral, liberal, participatory, deliberative or egalitarian. The R^2 for all the models ranges from 0.174 to 0.262, indicating that overall the models explain a sufficient but not very large proportion of the variation in the countries' democratic quality. Among all the democracy indicators, this model seems to best explain shifts in the egalitarian aspect of democracy.

The regression models seem to show support for H1, although the significance level is low for three out of five democracy indicators. Here, the proxy export partner share, which indicates the amount of country's exports to China as the share of the total amount of exports conducted by the country, registers a negative and significant relationship for most democracy indicators, except for the participatory democracy index, where it is insignificant. This suggest that for a given South-Eastern, Central or Eastern European country, as export share with China increases across time by one unit, the democratic quality decreases by slightly more than 2,1% ($p < 0.05$). The electoral democracy index presents the biggest decrease in democratic quality caused by an increase in export partner share. Results for the total trade volume of a country follow the same trend: with one unit increase across time in the amount of trade conducted by a country, democratic quality decreases by nearly 5%, with the sharpest decrease for deliberative democratic quality ($p < 0.001$). In contrast to export partner share and trade volume, import partner share does not yield any significant result, providing at times negative and at times positive effects.

Table 1 • Random effects regression of democratic quality

	Dependent variable				
	Electoral democracy (index)	Liberal democracy index	Participatory democracy index	Deliberative democracy index	Egalitarian democracy index
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Import Partner Share	0.004	-0.005	-0.001	-0.005	-0.003
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.010)
Export Partner Share	-0.024**	-0.021*	-0.012	-0.026***	-0.021**
	(0.010)	(0.011)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.008)
Trade (% of GDP)	-0.048***	-0.058***	-0.044***	-0.061***	-0.050***
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.012)
Autocratic Distance (km)	0.077**	0.083*	0.067*	0.076*	0.052*
	(0.039)	(0.043)	(0.036)	(0.042)	(0.031)
GDP per capita	0.018	0.026	0.019	0.026	0.025
	(0.017)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.016)
GDP growth	-0.005	-0.005	-0.006	-0.006	-0.006
	(0.006)	(0.007)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.005)
Political stability	0.021	0.020	0.017	0.001	0.025
	(0.017)	(0.021)	(0.016)	(0.022)	(0.019)
Constant	0.671***	0.553***	0.464***	0.507***	0.550***
	(0.033)	(0.039)	(0.031)	(0.040)	(0.032)
Observations (n x T)	238	238	238	238	238
No. Clusters (n)	15	15	15	15	15
Events (T)	14-16	14-16	14-16	14-16	14-16
R^2	0.195	0.209	0.174	0.181	0.262
F Statistic	56.152***	61.575***	49.056***	51.154***	83.462***

*Note: Entries are random-effects regression coefficients with robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All the independent and control variables are standardized and lagged by two years. Significance levels are *p < 0.10, **p < 0.05 and ***p <0.01.*

Among the significant findings derived from these regression models, the geographical proximity seems to be the one factor increasing democratic quality by the largest amount. Namely, the bigger the geographical distance between a country and China, and the higher the democratic quality of a country gets (coeff. = 7%, $p < 0.10$). However, the significance of its coefficients is considerably smaller than the one provided for export partner share and trade volume.

When looking at the control variables, we find no statistically significant effect, meaning that the total country's GDP per capita and growth along with its political stability do not play a major role in determining a state's quality of democracy.

5. *Discussion*

Overall, the findings indicate that autocratic linkage in its trade and geographical aspects significantly influences variation in the democratic quality of a country over time. Thus, the hypothesis H1 does find support.

The results for autocratic linkage are consistent with the literature and the theoretical framework provided. As economic ties with China become closer, the democratic quality of the engaged country decreases significantly. Scholars reached similar inferences with their analyses, concluding that China is in part responsible for regional declines in democratic governance (Hess and Aidoo 2019; Sharshenova and Crawford 2017), but that its influence is more indirect (Sharshenova and Crawford 2017, 467). When considering Chinese autocratic linkage under each dimension, the present literature shows that trade in the form of exports (Bader 2015) and trade volume (Tansey *et al.* 2017) account for the most influencing dimension of autocratic linkage on democratic quality. A second-to-importance dimension of this relationship is also found, in this paper as well as in the present literature (Tansey *et al.* 2017, 16), as a significant determinant of autocratization tendencies in many countries. Yet, few scholars have challenged these results with their analyses, retrieving an insignificant (Hackenesch 2015) or significantly positive impact (Melnykovska *et al.* 2012) of Chinese engagement on democratization.

By contrast, the control variables' effects are mainly insignificant. Many scholars have found that, against common logic, measures of economic development such as GDP per capita and GDP growth do not encourage improvements in democratic governance substantively (Bader 2015; Hess and Aidoo 2019, 19).

Nevertheless, due to the lack of other relevant autocratic dimensions and controls, such as arms trade, aid projects, diplomatic exchanges and oil and gas production, this article's findings must be taken with a pinch of salt and ultimate inferences are not allowed. Yet, since this research aimed at being exploratory and not at providing final conclusive estimates, it still represents the most updated model that we can achieve with the presently available data.

6. *Conclusions*

This paper explored the research question "What is the effect of Chinese linkage on the quality of democracy of countries from South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe?". It has done so by analysing one main hypothesis, according to which the higher the autocratic linkage to China, the lower the democratic quality of a country becomes. This hypothesis was tested by analysing data from different sources, among which the V-Dem dataset, World Bank data, WITS timeseries data and CEPII GeoDist dataset were used. This study conducted a random-effects regression model with standard errors' clustering by country with all regressors and controls lagged by two years to account for autocorrelation, and it compared these results with the fixed-effects regression model's findings.

This paper has found that the trade dimension of Chinese autocratic linkage has the most significant effect on South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe's democratization, followed for importance by the geographical proximity with China. By contrast, measures of economic development of a country, such as GDP per capita and GDP growth, do not appear to significantly encourage improvements in democratic governance.

However, due to unavailability of data for recent years (2013-) concerning arms trade, diplomatic ties and jointly undertaken aid projects, these findings must be taken with a grain of salt and treat these generalizations with cautions. It might be that, by controlling for these characteristics in the regression model, the current indicators for economic ties lose significance.

Certainly, the significant but low regression coefficients (regression coefficients amount at a maximum of 5% in decrease of democratic quality) suggest that Chinese linkage effects are less extensive than the alarmist debate on China would make us believe, and that bold inferences on the influence of Chinese linkage with these countries cannot be yet made. These findings furtherly hint at a less dramatic effect of the Chinese rise for both, hybrid regimes and defective democracies, and prevent scholars to fully equate Chinese engagement with the initiation of autocratization tendencies in these countries. Only future research will be able to establish more accurately the size of this Chinese linkage.

Whilst this article has provided substantial findings to advance the debate on the topic, it also presents considerable shortcomings. The first drawback refers to the absence of indicators assessing democratic linkages. Since it has been established throughout this study that a country's regime type is the result of an interaction between domestic conditions, external democratic linkages, and external autocratic linkages, it is pivotal evaluating the impact of all these factors jointly. Yet, the lack of updated data on relationships with other democratic countries along with the space limits for this article did not allow for providing a systematic joint analysis. Future research will need to account for these democratic linkages, perhaps looking at the relationship between the EU and the country inquired.

A second shortcoming relates to the case selection: this work included EU-member states and non-EU countries in the South-Eastern, Central and Eastern European regions indistinctively. This is so since the article's preliminary regression analysis displayed no major differences between the aggregate results of EU member states and those of non-EU countries. Yet, a more systematic assessment is needed: future scholars will need to conduct a more consistent comparative study where different sub-groups of the South-Eastern, Central and Eastern European regions will be analysed side by side based on the criterion of EU membership.

The methodology employed also presents some defects. The no-perfect RE regression model structure available for time-invariant variables along with the recent attempts of scholars to find solutions for autocorrelation issues and the violation of normality assumptions have forced the author to consider the RE model with some adjustments, where robust standard errors by country and variables' lagging have been advanced. Yet, the selected method is far from perfect, as it manages to account for time-invariant factors but simultaneously displays an error term bias. Incoming studies will need to further investigate the suitability of additional regression models for the current task.

Lastly, the present work failed to consider other key factors accounting for different aspects of the linkage (e.g. arms trade, diplomatic ties and jointly undertaken aid projects) along with other Chinese foreign policy strategies, such as soft power and the establishment of infrastructural projects. The lack of quantitative data assessing these elements prevented the author to include proxies of these variables into the regression models as well as to analyse whether these countries' linkages with China are additionally fulfilling other foreign policy strategies laid out by Chinese authorities. Are these linkages with China complemented by other foreign policy goals such as soft power and the establishment of infrastructural projects? Here, since qualitative methodologies seem more suitable to measure these concepts accurately, future research might elaborate further inferences and reflections based on a mixed methodology, the quantitative approach focusing on democracy deterioration while the qualitative method revolving on Chinese autocracy promotion.

Whilst only tentative conclusions can be drawn from the study, this exploratory paper provides a systematic quantitative assessment of the Chinese linkage on Central and Eastern European regimes while offering an up-to-date picture of the Chinese role on autocratization. Despite the aforementioned caveats, this study constitutes a fruitful starting point for future quantitative inquiries on China's authoritarian support and regime change.

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Appendix

Table A.1 • Descriptions and recoding (if applicable) of the dependent, independent and control variables used in the analysis. All data are country-level data

Variables	Questions and answer categories	Data source
Dependent variables		
Electoral democracy index	The electoral principle of democracy seeks to embody the core value of making rulers responsive to citizens, achieved through electoral competition for the electorate's approval under circumstances when suffrage is extensive; political and civil society organizations can operate freely; elections are clean and not marred by fraud or systematic irregularities; and elections affect the composition of the chief executive of the country. Scale: interval, from low to high (0-1).	V-Dem dataset
Liberal democracy index	The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights against the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of the majority. The index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account. Scale: interval, from low to high (0-1).	V-Dem dataset
Participatory democracy index	The participatory principle of democracy emphasizes active participation by citizens in all political processes, electoral and non-electoral. The index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account. Scale: interval, from low to high (0-1).	V-Dem dataset
Deliberative democracy index	The deliberative principle of democracy focuses on the process by which decisions are reached in a polity. A deliberative process is one in which public reasoning focused on the common good motivates political decisions—as contrasted with emotional appeals, solidary attachments, parochial interests, or coercion. The index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account. Scale: interval, from low to high (0-1).	V-Dem dataset
Egalitarian democracy index	The egalitarian principle of democracy holds that material and immaterial inequalities inhibit the exercise of formal rights and liberties, and diminish the ability of citizens from all social groups to participate. The index also takes the level of electoral democracy into account. Scale: interval, from low to high (0-1).	V-Dem dataset

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Independent variables		
Import Partner Share [lagged]	The percentage of imports from the region of interest (China) to the region under study (country from Central, South-Eastern or Eastern Europe) in the total imports of the destination. Scale: interval. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	WITS dataset
Export Partner Share [lagged]	The percentage of exports going to a partner (China) to total exports of a country/region (from Central, South-Eastern or Eastern Europe). It is expressed as a percentage share of the dollar value of exports of country/region from these regions to China. Scale: interval. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	WITS dataset
Trade (as % of GDP) [lagged]	The sum of exports and imports of goods and services measured as a share of the gross domestic product (GDP) of a country (from Central, South-Eastern or Eastern Europe). Scale: interval. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	World Bank data
Geographical proximity [lagged]	The bilateral distance between China and any country situated in either of the three regions measured in kilometres (km). Scale: interval. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	GeoDist dataset (CEPII)
Control variables		
GDP per capita [lagged]	The gross domestic product divided by midyear population for a country. Data are in current U.S. dollars. Scale: interval. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	World Bank data
GDP growth [lagged]	Annual percentage growth rate of GDP at market prices based on constant local currency. Aggregates are then based on constant 2015 prices, expressed in U.S. dollars. Scale: interval. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	World Bank data
Political stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism index [lagged]	It measures perceptions of the likelihood of political instability and/or politically-motivated violence, including terrorism. Estimate gives the country's score on the aggregate indicator, in units of a standard normal distribution, i.e. ranging from approximately -2.5 to 2.5. The variable was standardized and lagged by two years.	World Governance Indicators (World Bank)

Table A.2 • Descriptive statistics of all the variables used in the analysis

Variables	*Obsv.*	*Mean*	*Std. Dev.*	*Min*	*Max*
Dependent variables					
Electoral democracy index	315	0,672	0,188	0,213	0,906
Liberal democracy index	315	0,553	0,212	0,076	0,833
Participatory democracy index	315	0,463	0,166	0,083	0,768
Deliberative democracy index	315	0,510	0,207	0,075	0,846
Egalitarian democracy index	315	0,552	0,178	0,264	0,826
Independent variables					
Import Partner Share [lagged]	282	-0,035	0,978	-1,735	2,984
Export Partner Share [lagged]	281	-0,012	1,011	-1,025	4,501
Trade (as % of GDP) [lagged]	285	-0,023	0,997	-1,743	2,585
Geographical proximity [lagged]	285	0,000	1,000	-1,949	1,072
Control variables					
GDP per capita [lagged]	285	-0,042	0,994	-1,290	3,100
GDP growth [lagged]	285	0,095	0,941	-4,543	2,523
Political stability and Absence of Violence/Terrorism index [lagged]	270	0,011	1,004	-3,615	1,819

Figure A.1 • Trends of the electoral democracy index
over time and across countries

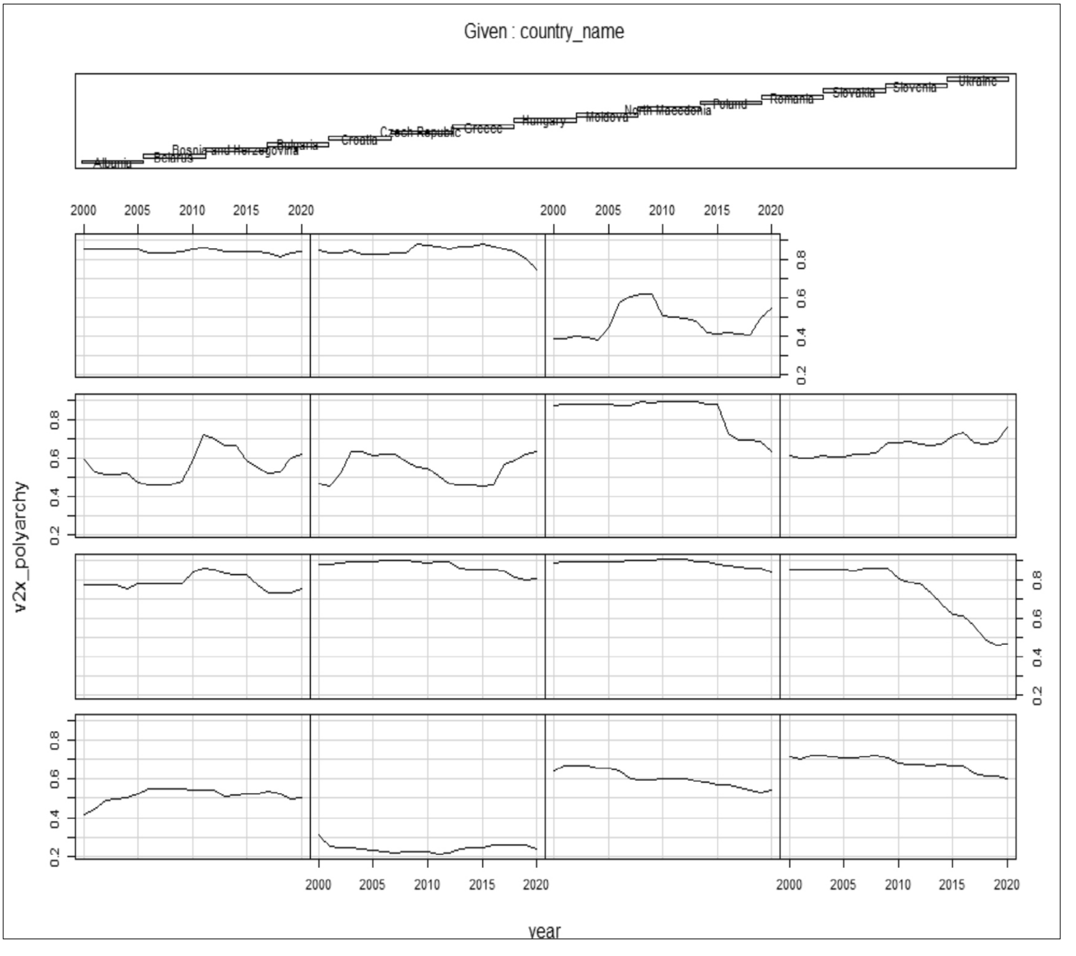

Figure A.2 • Trends of the liberal democracy index
over time and across countries

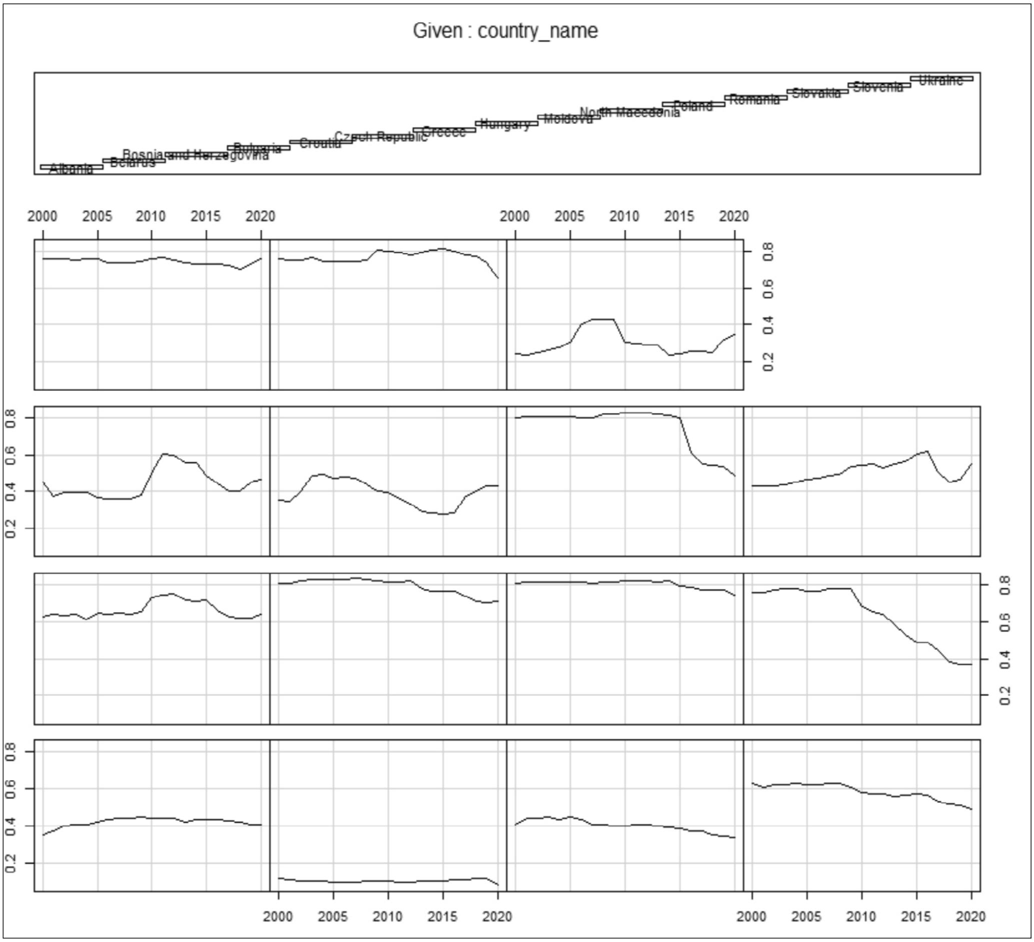

Figure A.3 • Trends of the participatory democracy index over time and across countries

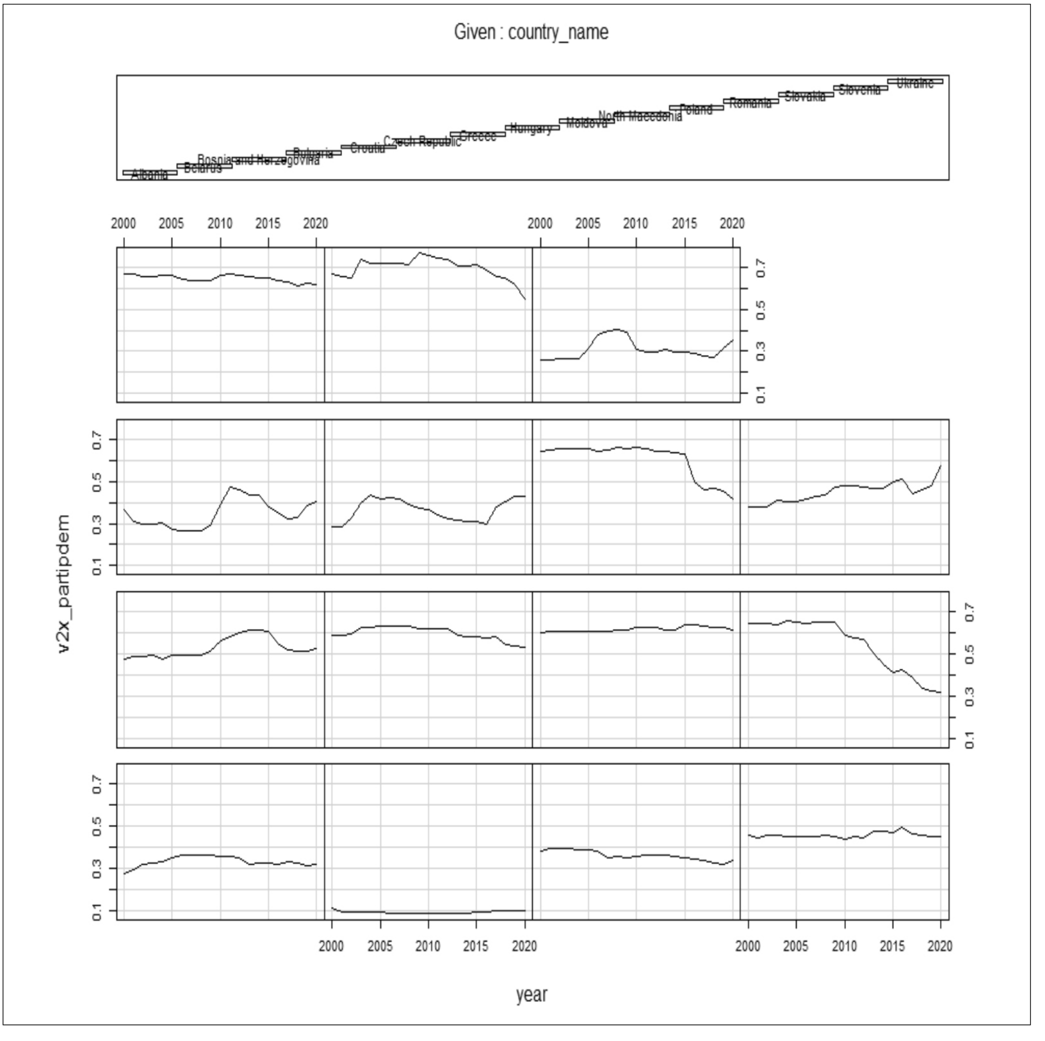

Figure A.4 • Trends of the deliberative democracy index over time and across countries

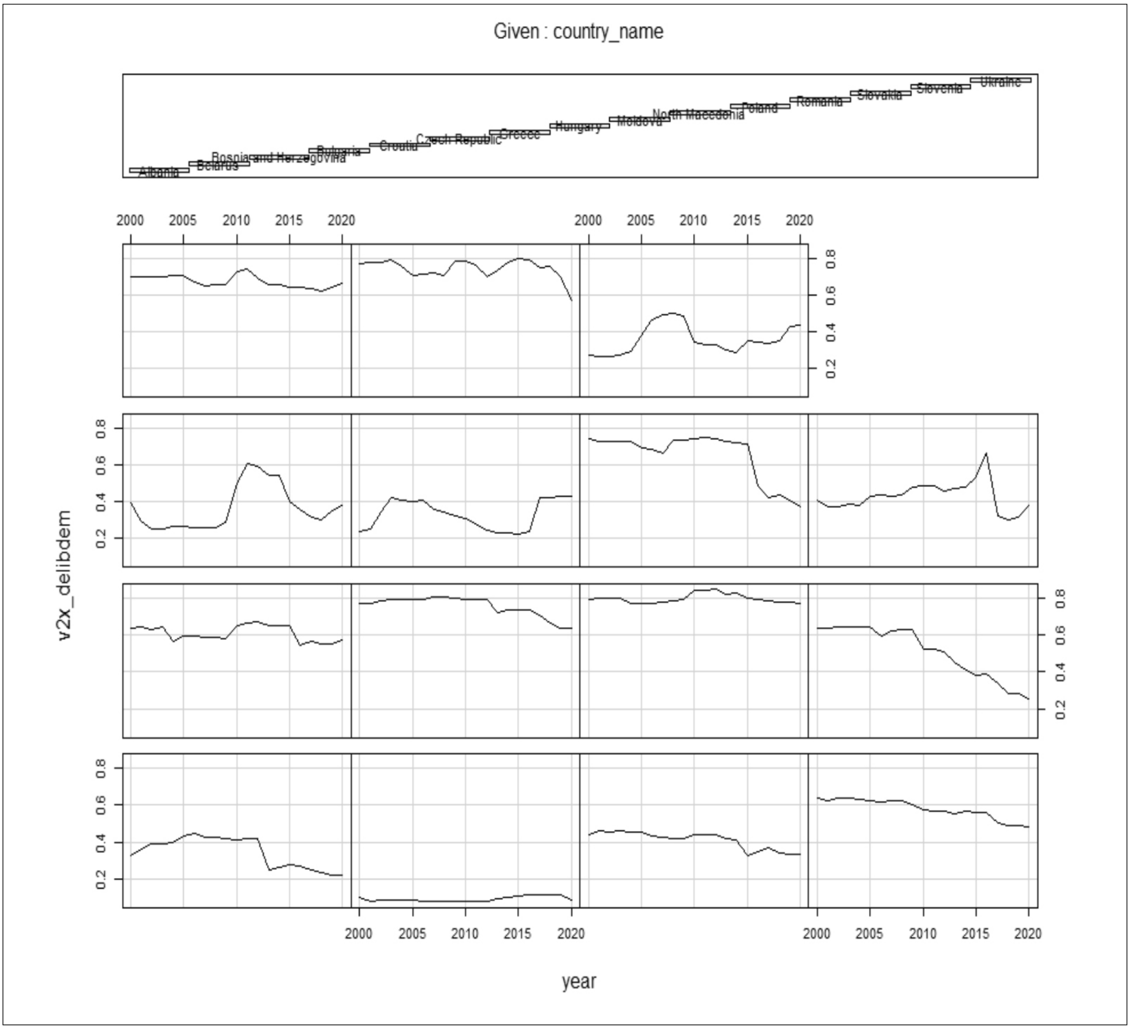

Figure A.5 • Trends of the egalitarian democracy index over time and across countries

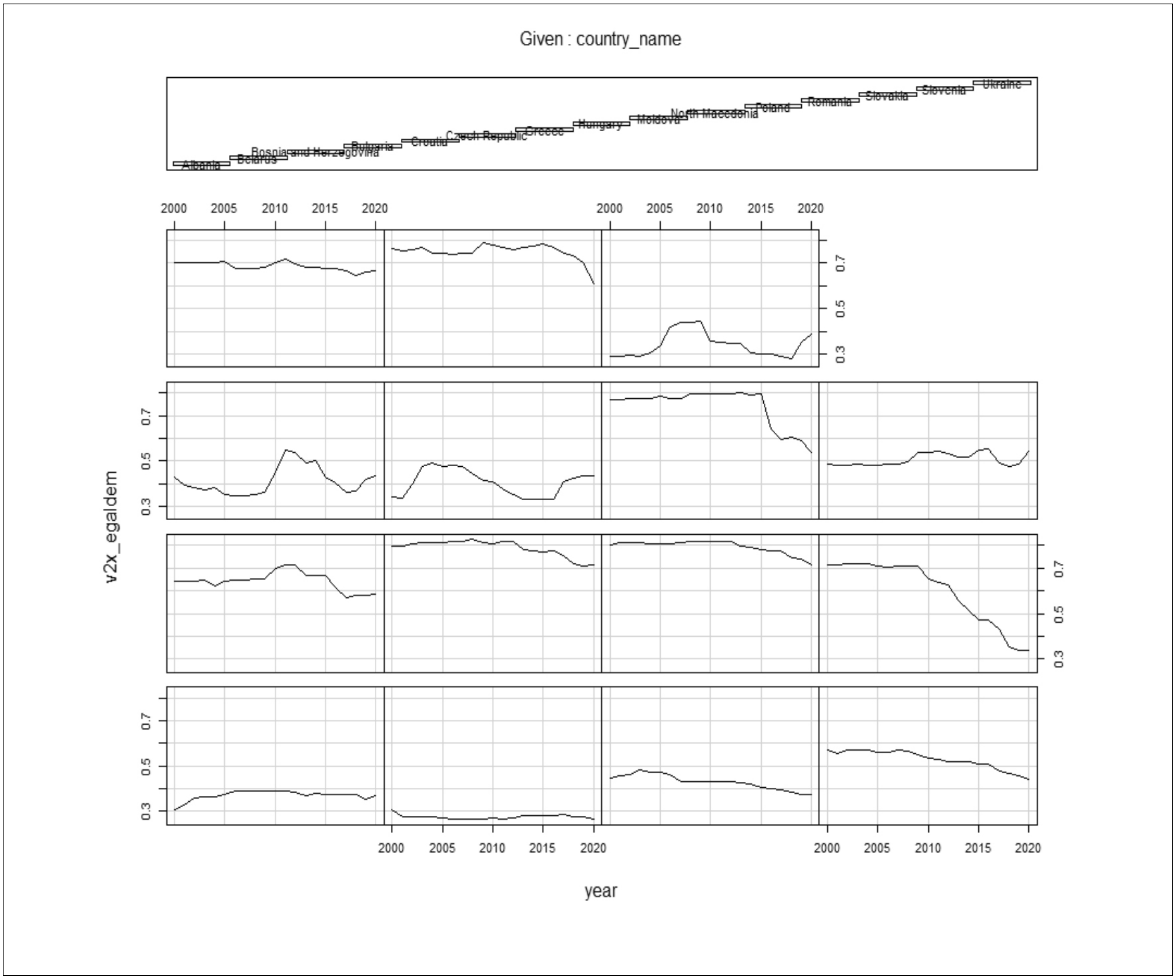

Table A.3 • Fixed effects regression of democratic quality

	Dependent variable				
	Electoral democracy (index)	Liberal democracy index	Participatory democracy index	Deliberative democracy index	Egalitarian democracy index
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Import Partner share	0.005	-0.004	-0.0002	-0.002	-0.001
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.010)
Export Partner Share	-0.023**	-0.020*	-0.011	-0.025***	-0.020**
	(0.011)	(0.012)	(0.007)	(0.008)	(0.010)
Trade (% of GDP)	-0.049***	-0.059***	-0.045***	-0.062***	-0.052***
	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.015)	(0.018)	(0.012)
GDP per capita	0.013	0.021	0.015	0.015	0.011
	(0.017)	(0.020)	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.015)
GDP growth	-0.005	-0.005	-0.005	-0.005	-0.005
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.005)	(0.008)	(0.005)
Political stability	0.018	0.015	0.014	-0.006	0.017
	(0.016)	(0.020)	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.016)
Observations	268	268	268	268	268
No. Clusters (n)	15	15	15	15	15
Events (T)	16-18	16-18	16-18	16-18	16-18
R^2	0.263	0.267	0.213	0.226	0.317
F Statistic (df = 6; 247)	14.679***	15.033***	11.171***	12.043***	19.137***

Note: Entries are fixed-effects regression coefficients with robust standard errors clustered by country in parentheses. All the independent and control variables are standardized and lagged by two years. Significance levels are *$p < 0.10$, **$p < 0.05$ *and* ***$p < 0.01$.

Elena Icardi

Perché limitare l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale? Ragioni e problemi del limitarianesimo

1. *Introduzione*

Secondo l'ultimo *World Inequality Report*, nel 2021, il 10 per cento più ricco della popolazione italiana deteneva il 48 per cento della ricchezza nazionale, il successivo 40 per cento il 42, mentre il restante 50 per cento appena il 10. Non meno drammatica è la stima a livello mondiale: sempre nel 2021 il 10 per cento più ricco possedeva il 76 per cento della ricchezza globale[1]. Per quanto questi dati appaiano preoccupanti – soprattutto se si pensa che, nel 2017, 689 milioni di persone vivevano sotto la soglia di povertà assoluta di 1,90$ e questa previsione sarebbe aumentata di una cifra oscillante tra gli 88 e 115 milioni durante la pandemia di Covid-19[2] – il sentimento di ingiustizia suscitato dalla crescente concentrazione della ricchezza nelle mani di poche persone, si accompagna al sentire comune per cui non c'è niente di male nel fatto che alcune persone sono più ricche di altre, purché lo siano diventate in maniera legittima.

Contro questo sentire comune, si posiziona il limitarianesimo, una recente teoria della giustizia distributiva per cui non sarebbe solo normativamente possibile, ma oggi più che mai necessario, limitare l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale. In un mondo in cui le democrazie appaiono minacciate da crescenti diseguaglianze economiche e mancano i mezzi per far fronte a bisogni im-

[1] Dati disponibili via https://wir2022.wid.world/ (consultato il 18 gennaio 2022).

[2] Dati disponibili via https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/poverty-and-shared-prosperity (consultato il 9 gennaio 2022).

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pellenti quali la povertà globale e la crisi climatica, sembra immorale, infatti, che alcune persone possiedano risorse in esubero (Robeyns 2017; 2019). Questo surplus dovrebbe perciò essere redistribuito tanto per salvaguardare l'ideale democratico di eguaglianza politica, quanto per supplire a esigenze come quelle sovracitate, tristemente distintive del nostro tempo.

Tuttavia, i due argomenti a favore del limitarianesimo – i.e., la tutela dell'ideale democratico, da un lato, e la soddisfazione di determinati bisogni, dall'altro (Robeyns 2017, 5) – non vanno necessariamente di pari passo. Laddove per salvaguardare l'eguaglianza politica, una volta fissata la soglia oltre la quale la ricchezza individuale può dirsi in eccesso, occorrerebbe tassare questo surplus economico del 100 per cento al fine di impedire che anche una minima parte di esso, e.g., il 20 per cento, si trasformi in opportunità di influenzare il processo decisionale, per supplire ai suddetti bisogni converrebbe prediligere misure meno esigenti. Non potendo usufruire direttamente della propria ricchezza al di sopra di una certa soglia, infatti, le persone sarebbero disincentivate dal produrla – il che si rivelerebbe alquanto controproducente per l'intento di rimediare alla mancanza di risorse. Si giunge così a un'impasse.

Per uscire da questa impasse sembra indispensabile riflettere più a fondo sui motivi invocati a favore della limitazione dell'eccessiva ricchezza individuale. Innanzitutto, ci si dovrà chiedere se sia possibile immaginare un compromesso tra i due argomenti; detto altrimenti, se sia possibile, nonostante la tensione evidenziata, fissare un limite che soddisfi entrambe le richieste contemporaneamente. In secondo luogo, qualora questa strada risultasse impraticabile, ci si dovrà interrogare su quale delle due ragioni prevalga in caso di conflitto. L'eccessiva ricchezza individuale dovrebbe essere limitata per evitare che essa comprometta il processo decisionale o per rimediare alla mancanza di risorse necessarie ad affrontare certi bisogni reali?

Sebbene a prima vista queste problematiche appaiano come mere difficoltà interne al limitarianesimo, in realtà, esse rimandano a questioni più generali. Se s'intende limitare l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale, senza confutare l'idea condivisa che prima facie non ci sia nulla di sbagliato nel possederla – giacché se così fosse non servirebbero altri motivi per limitarla –, occorrerà offrire una giustificazione il meno ambigua possibile. Non è la stessa cosa, infatti, giustificare un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale poiché mancano i mezzi per affrontare determinati bisogni urgenti – e rimuoverlo qualora essi fossero risolti –, o poiché esso appare come un requisito necessario al buon funzionamento della democrazia; allo stesso modo in cui è ben diverso fissarlo solo su scala locale, quale condizione democratica, o su scala sia locale che globale, quale soluzione alla povertà o alla crisi climatica. Per questo vale la pena indagare più approfonditamente quali siano le ragioni alla base del limitarianesimo.

La mia tesi è che, data la tensione tra i due argomenti, occorra selezionarne uno. Per la precisione, si dovrebbe optare per l'argomento democratico. Più che un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale, l'argomento dei bisogni mi sembra, infatti, giustificare uno schema di tassazione progressivo. Benché per sopperire alla mancanza di risorse si debbano tassare in primis i/le super-ricchi/e, l'urgenza di tali bisogni appare proporzionalmente superiore anche ai desideri di persone meno abbienti, le quali dovrebbero perciò contribuire di conseguenza. Al contrario, l'argomento democratico mi pare incentrato sulla necessità di porre un tetto alla ricchezza individuale stessa. Se oltre una certa soglia la ricchezza individuale compromette inevitabilmente il processo decisionale, occorrerà, difatti, impedire che essa superi la soglia stabilita al fine di garantire eque opportunità di influenzare le decisioni politiche.

Per dimostrare questa tesi il mio contributo si svilupperà in quattro parti. Nel primo paragrafo, analizzerò il limitarianesimo nella sua versione originaria, formulata da Ingrid Robeyns (2017; 2019), ricostruendo non solo il ragionamento per stabilire la soglia della ricchezza, ma soprattutto i due argomenti a sostegno della teoria. Nel secondo, metterò in luce la tensione tra questi due argomenti, spiegando perché, diversamente da quanto teorizzato da Robeyns, sostengo che questa tensione sfoci in un *aut aut*. Alla luce di questo conflitto, nel terzo paragrafo, considererò l'ipotesi che il limitarianesimo si basi sull'argomento dei bisogni e discuterò l'obiezione che, anziché un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale, quest'argomento giustifichi un sistema di tassazione progressiva. Nel quarto paragrafo, sosterrò, infine, l'ipotesi opposta, ovvero che il limitarianesimo si basi piuttosto sull'argomento democratico e, perciò, il limite debba calcolarsi in relazione alla distribuzione della ricchezza[3].

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[3] Il termine ricchezza è da intendersi in senso lato come quell'insieme di «beni materiali e immateriali suscettibili a una valutazione economica» (definizione

2. *Il limitarianesimo di Robeyns*

Il limitarianesimo, dall'inglese *limitarianism*, è una recente teoria della giustizia distributiva, introdotta da Ingrid Robeyns nel 2017, che sostiene la necessità di limitare l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale. Per far ciò, Robeyns (2017) s'impegna non solo a fissare una soglia oltre la quale la ricchezza dei singoli possa dirsi in eccesso, ma anche a spiegare perché al di sopra di questa soglia essa si possa detrarre. Il limitarianesimo nella sua formulazione originaria si potrebbe perciò riassumere nelle due affermazioni seguenti. Da un lato, tutto ciò che eccede le risorse necessarie a una piena realizzazione umana dovrebbe considerarsi come accessorio – i.e., un surplus del quale il singolo può fare a meno. Dall'altro, questo surplus dovrebbe essere redistribuito tanto per impedire che esso comprometta l'ideale democratico, offrendo ai suoi detentori maggiori opportunità d'influenzare il processo decisionale, quanto per supplire a bisogni urgenti sia a livello individuale che collettivo, quali la povertà e la crisi climatica.

Prima di entrare nello specifico, si noti che per "limitarianesimo" Robeyns intende una teoria parziale, non-ideale e politica (Robeyns 2017; Volacu e Dumitru 2019, 251). P*arziale* perché si occupa solo delle risorse che gli individui possiedono al di sopra della soglia stabilita. Lungi dall'esaurire le questioni di giustizia distributiva, il limitarianesimo dovrà, infatti, far riferimento ad altre teorie per regolare la ripartizione della ricchezza non in eccesso (Robeyns 2017, 1). N*on-ideale* in quanto s'interessa alla distribuzione economica quale essa è e non quale dovrebbe essere, giacché l'eccesso di ricchezza individuale non è moralmente inaccettabile in sé, ma in un mondo in cui «certain intrinsically important values are not secured» (Robeyns 2017, 5). P*olitica* poiché mira a stabilire un limite legale all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale, anziché identificare un dovere morale per le persone più abbienti. Una dottrina morale, non applicabile tramite azioni coercitive, non sarebbe, difatti, sufficiente a salvaguardare i suddetti valori (Robeyns 2017, 30-32). In sintesi, il limitarianesimo sarebbe

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tratta dall'Enciclopedia Treccani: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ricchezza/). Sia per ragioni di spazio che di competenza non mi addentrerò, infatti, in controversie specifiche alle scienze economiche. Ciò appare, inoltre, in linea con la logica del limitarianesimo, nel quale per ricchezza s'intende generalmente «the bundle of economic resources an individual possesses» (Timmer 2021, nota 1).

quella teoria a favore dell'imposizione di un'aliquota tendente al 100 per cento (teoria politica), nel mondo tale quale lo conosciamo (teoria non-ideale), su tutto ciò che un individuo possiede in più rispetto alle risorse necessarie alla sua piena realizzazione umana (teoria parziale).

Con questa definizione in mente, occorrerà capire come si calcoli la soglia oltre la quale la ricchezza dei singoli può dirsi in eccesso. Per Robeyns, essa corrisponde alla quantità di risorse materiali che gli individui hanno il potere di trasformare in un certo insieme di *capabilities*. Ovvero, quelle *capabilities* sufficienti per raggiungere una piena fioritura.

> We should determine the riches line by reference to a certain set of capabilities to which people should have access as a matter of fully flourishing in life (Robeyns 2017, 24).

Secondo l'autrice, difatti, nello stesso modo in cui è possibile stabilire un insieme di *basic capabilities*, ossia di capacità fondamentali affinché le persone conducano una vita dignitosa in un dato contesto (Robeyns e Morten 2020), sarà possibile determinare un insieme di *capabilities* affinché gli individui si realizzino pienamente in determinate circostanze (Robeyns 2017). In altre parole, laddove si può fissare oggettivamente una soglia inferiore al di sotto della quale le persone possiedono meno risorse di quelle necessarie a una fioritura minima, si potrà fissare una soglia superiore oltre la quale esse dispongono di più risorse di quelle necessarie a una fioritura massima – si noti che, sebbene entrambe le linee siano calcolate in *capabilities*, nell'ottica di Robeyns difficilmente esse coincideranno.

Una volta fissata la soglia, si tratterà di comprendere perché la ricchezza al di sopra di questa soglia vada redistribuita. A questo scopo, Robeyns propone una giustificazione strumentale anziché intrinseca: l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale non dev'essere limitata in quanto di per sé immorale, bensì perché limitarla permetterebbe di salvaguardare altri ideali.

> Limitarianism as a distributive view is justified in the world as it is (the non-ideal world), because it is instrumentally necessary for the protection of two intrinsic values: political equality, and the meeting of unmet urgent needs (Robeyns 2017, 3)[4].

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[4] Cfr. Robeyns *et al.* 2021 per uno studio empirico che corrobora l'ipotesi di un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale su base strumentale.

Da qui i due argomenti invocati a favore di questa teoria: quello dei bisogni urgenti non soddisfatti (Robeyns 2017, 10-14) e quello democratico (Robeyns 2017, 6-10). Entrambi gli argomenti prendono avvio da problematiche reali che minacciano ideali specifici. Per la precisione, il primo si basa sull'evidente mancanza di risorse per supplire a determinati bisogni, sia individuali che collettivi; mancanza che pregiudica l'idea secondo la quale alcuni bisogni sono talmente urgenti da dover essere risolti nell'immediato. Il secondo, invece, si sviluppa a partire dal dato di fatto che, siccome alcune persone godono di un ampio potere politico grazie alla loro ricchezza in eccesso, l'ideale democratico per cui ogni cittadino dovrebbe avere eque opportunità di influenzare il processo decisionale risulta compromesso[5]. Alla luce di questi problemi, tuttavia, si tratta di capire perché si dovrebbe optare proprio per un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale – ovvero, di esplicitare, infine, i due argomenti di Robeyns a favore del limitarianesimo.

L'idea di partenza dell'argomento dei bisogni è che esistono esigenze urgenti, le quali necessitano risorse economiche per essere affrontate. Ciò dipende da specifiche condizioni empiriche; Robeyns ne enumera principalmente tre: l'estrema povertà globale, la situazione locale e globale delle persone più svantaggiate e l'esistenza di problemi che esigono l'azione collettiva per essere risolti, e.g., la crisi climatica (Robeyns 2017, 10-11). Se queste problematiche non sussistessero non ci sarebbe una prima ragione per promuovere il limitarianesimo. Tuttavia, non è

[5] Come sostiene Thomas Scanlon (2018), qui non si tratta di avere la stessa probabilità di successo nel determinare l'esito democratico, quanto di avere le stesse opportunità di influenzarlo. Altri fattori, infatti, contribuiscono alla probabilità di avere successo – e.g., l'intenzione di prendere parte alla politica, le capacità oratorie, eccetera. Tuttavia, ciò che minaccia l'ideale democratico è che i/le partecipanti non abbiano «equal access to the *means*» per influenzare il processo decisionale (Scanlon 2018, 80, corsivo nel testo). Sebbene Robeyns non specifichi questo punto, utilizzando genericamente l'espressione «political equality», il riferimento in nota a Knight e Johnson (1997) per cui, se si va a leggere il testo, l'eguaglianza politica richiede «*equal opportunity of access to political influence*» (280, corsivo nel testo), sembra suggerire che condivida quest'interpretazione. Si veda anche (Cohen 2001). In quanto segue, le espressioni "eguaglianza politica", "influenza politica" e "potere politico" sono da intendersi tenendo in mente questa precisazione.

difficile osservare come tutte e tre contraddistinguano la realtà attuale. A quest'idea di base si aggiunge la convinzione che i bisogni derivanti da queste circostanze abbiano un'urgenza morale maggiore rispetto ai desideri che i/le più ricchi/e potrebbero esaudire con il surplus di denaro in loro possesso: «certain needs will have a higher moral urgency than the desires that could be met by the income and wealth that rich people hold» (Robeyns 2017, 12). Convinzione basata sull'assunto che la ricchezza posseduta al di sopra della soglia stabilita rappresenti un surplus del quale i singoli possono fare a meno perché non indispensabile alla loro piena realizzazione umana. Questo surplus avrebbe, difatti, «zero moral weight» per chi lo detiene e, di conseguenza, non sarebbe un problema utilizzarlo per far fronte ai suddetti bisogni; anzi, una volta appuratone l'assenza di valore per coloro che lo possiedono, sarebbe addirittura «unreasonable to reject the principle that we ought to use that money to meet these urgent unmet needs» (Robeyns 2017, 12).

L'argomento democratico, d'altro canto, si costruisce a partire da presupposti differenti. Innanzitutto, è un dato di fatto che le persone più abbienti godano di un'ampia influenza sul processo decisionale. Dato corroborato da studi empirici che dimostrano come le democrazie contemporanee favoriscano – o perlomeno non contrastino – gli interessi della fascia benestante della popolazione (Gilens e Page 2014)[6]. In secondo luogo, non avendo nulla da perdere nell'investire il proprio surplus di ricchezza in politica, «the wealthy are not only more able but also more likely to spend money on these various mechanisms that translate money into political power» (Robeyns 2017, 6). Robeyns ne riprende principalmente quattro, precedentemente introdotti da Thomas Christiano (2012): il finanziamento di campagne elettorali, il condizionamento dell'agenda politica, il controllo dei mezzi di informazione e il potere indipendente conferito dai soldi (Robeyns 2017, 7-8). Alcuni di questi meccanismi, infine, eludono limitazioni formali, come la separazione della sfera economica da quella politica teorizzata da Michael Walzer (1983) oppure la scelta tra ricchezza o diritti politici a cui Dean Machin (2013) sottoporrebbe le persone più ricche. I vantaggi della ricchezza, infatti, eccedono la semplice conversione diretta del potere da economico a politico.

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[6] Cfr. Dahl 2020 [1998]; Gilens 2005; Bartels 2008.

Pur non potendo sovvenzionare direttamente le campagne elettorali, per esempio, coloro che possiedono ingenti quantità di denaro potrebbero influenzare l'opinione pubblica finanziando mezzi di informazione, *social networks* o *think tanks*, così come, potrebbero plasmare la conoscenza comune investendo in specifici settori della ricerca anziché in altri[7]. Se perfino questa strada fosse loro preclusa, inoltre, essi potrebbero sempre fare affidamento su quello che Christiano chiama «indipendent political power» per cui, anche senza intervenire nel processo decisionale, chi controlla le risorse materiali è in grado di determinarne l'esito, giacché nessuno ha interesse a contraddire le sue preferenze provocando conseguenze complessivamente svantaggiose, quali la fuga di capitali a fronte di politiche fiscali esigenti (Christiano 2012, 250-253; 2010). A ciò si aggiunga una vasta gamma di privilegi supplementari: da un certo tipo di educazione, a un più generico capitale sociale, garanzia per le persone più ricche di una fitta rete di conoscenze influenti (Robeyns 2017, 9-10; Timmer 2019, 1337). Robeyns conclude, quindi, che «[i]mposing formal institutional mechanisms in order to decrease the impact of money on politics is thus feasible only to a limited extent» (Robeyns 2017, 10). Di conseguenza, per preservare l'ideale democratico di eguaglianza politica non resta che porre un tetto all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale – risolvendo così il problema alla radice.

Ricapitolando, il limitarianesimo *à la* Robeyns si delinea come quella dottrina per cui la ricchezza individuale eccedente le risorse indispensabili a una piena fioritura andrebbe redistribuita in nome della soddisfazione di determinati bisogni urgenti e dell'ideale democratico di eguaglianza politica. Tuttavia, come si evidenzierà nel prossimo paragrafo, il connubio di questi due argomenti non è così lineare come sembra.

3. L*a tensione tra i due argomenti*

Esaminando le diverse ipotesi di aliquota marginale massima (Robeyns 2017, 35-37), la stessa Robeyns riconosce l'esistenza di una tensione tra i due argomenti proposti. In linea di principio, il limitarianesimo do-

[7] Per approfondire questo tema cfr. Cagé 2018.

vrebbe prediligere un'aliquota marginale massima del 100 per cento. Tuttavia, se l'obiettivo è riscuotere le risorse necessarie a soddisfare determinati bisogni, si dovrà ipotizzare una riduzione della percentuale per non cadere nella trappola del disincentivo, cioè per impedire che le persone più abbienti siano demotivate a produrre ricchezza di cui non possono usufruire personalmente. Così facendo, però, la ricchezza al di sopra della soglia potrebbe continuare a trasformarsi in influenza politica compromettendo il processo democratico.

Ciononostante, a detta di Robeyns, si tratterebbe semplicemente di trovare un compromesso tra le diverse implicazioni empiriche. Per esempio, si potrebbe optare per un'aliquota marginale massima dell'80 per cento al fine di ricavare le risorse necessarie a soddisfare determinati bisogni urgenti e poi promuovere riforme che impediscano al denaro di trasformarsi in potere politico – qui Robeyns fa riferimento all'«optimal top marginal taxation rate», ovvero il tasso al quale le entrate fiscali sarebbero massimizzate, che secondo le scienze economiche si aggirerebbe intorno al 70 per cento (Robeyns 2017, 35). Questo compromesso non sarebbe in disaccordo con la logica complessiva del limitarianesimo giacché esso si definisce come una teoria parziale da completare con, o a complemento di, altre teorie.

Eppure, mi sembra che la tensione tra i due argomenti sfoci in un conflitto più profondo – l'analisi del quale meriterebbe maggior attenzione. Da un lato, tassando il surplus individuale a meno del 100 per cento, e.g., all'80 per cento, in nome dei bisogni urgenti non soddisfatti, non si risolverebbe il problema della diseguaglianza di influenza sul processo democratico dovuta all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale; dall'altro, tassando il surplus individuale al 100 per cento in nome dell'eguaglianza politica, si ostacolerebbe la presa in carico dei bisogni urgenti non soddisfatti. Per chiarire in che senso si tratti di una tensione irriducibile, analizzerò le due istanze singolarmente.

In primo luogo, il limitarianesimo dovrebbe abbassare le sue pretese, cioè optare per un'aliquota marginale massima inferiore al 100 per cento di modo da non disincentivare le persone più ricche dal produrre ricchezza. Tuttavia, ciò non impedirebbe a coloro che si trovano al di sopra della soglia di continuare ad avere un surplus, anche elevato, da investire in politica. Per esempio, se la soglia fosse fissata a 10 milioni di euro, i/le super-ricchi/e sarebbero sia coloro che possiedono 15 milioni, per i/le quali l'80 per cento in meno al di sopra della soglia comporterebbe una riduzione significativa del proprio surplus, sia coloro che possiedono un miliardo, che rimarrebbero con un surplus di 198 milioni, capitale che appare più che sufficiente per continuare a esercitare influenza politica. Un'aliquota inferiore al 100 per cento sembrerebbe, quindi, problematica per l'argomento democratico, giacché progressivamente il surplus netto aumenterebbe e con esso la possibilità di alcune persone di influenzare il processo decisionale. Anzi, ciò avrebbe perfino la malaugurata implicazione di ridurre il numero di persone in possesso di quantità di risorse significative vis-à-vis il processo politico, circoscrivendo sempre di più l'élite di potenti.

Come suggerisce Robeyns, si potrebbero promuovere riforme che impediscano al restante surplus di trasformarsi in potere politico. Se queste riforme funzionassero, tuttavia, non sarebbe chiaro perché le stesse non potrebbero funzionare sempre. Si ricordi, infatti, che uno degli assunti dell'argomento democratico è che la ricchezza individuale al di sopra di una certa soglia è in grado di trasformarsi in potere politico eludendo eventuali vincoli formali. In caso contrario, un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale non sembrerebbe necessario, giacché sarebbero specifiche riforme, anziché il limite stesso, a impedire alla ricchezza di trasformarsi in potere politico (Volacu e Dumitru 2019, nota 19). In questo senso, un'aliquota marginale massima inferiore al 100 per cento non risolverebbe il problema della sproporzionata influenza politica di alcune persone dovuta alla ricchezza.

In secondo luogo, perciò, per evitare che l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale si traduca in potere politico, compromettendo l'ideale democratico di eguaglianza, il limitarianesimo dovrebbe prescrivere un'aliquota del 100 per cento sul surplus economico degli individui. Tuttavia, un'aliquota di questo tipo disincentiverebbe gli stessi dal produrre codesto surplus. Si tratta della già citata obiezione dell'incentivo (Robeyns 2017, 34; Volacu e Dumitru 2019, 256): se le persone dovessero rinunciare completamente alla propria ricchezza al di sopra di una certa soglia questa ricchezza diminuirebbe. Eppure, quest'obiezione sembra avere risvolti differenti in base alla tipologia di ricchezza che si considera: laddove un'aliquota marginale massima del 100 per cento inciderebbe notevolmente sulla ricchezza legata all'attività produttiva – i.e., una persona sarebbe fortemente disincentivata dal lavorare ore extra se dovesse restituire in tasse tutto il guadagno relativo a quelle ore – non è chiaro come la stessa si ripercuoterebbe sulla ricchezza slegata dall'attività produttiva, per esempio, su quella relativa ai patrimoni ereditati – controversia ancor più dirimente se si pensa che generalmente il cosiddetto surplus economico è composto per la maggior parte da quest'ultima. Ciononostante, altre forme di disincentivo sembrano entrare in gioco. A fronte di un'aliquota come quella proposta, le persone più ricche sarebbero disincentivate non solo dal donare la propria ricchezza – come «the benevolent rich» di Volacu e Dumitru (2019, 256) – attività di cui si tende a sopravvalutare l'efficacia e la desiderabilità (Timmer 2019, 1336), ma anche dall'accumularla; allo stesso modo in cui un sistema fiscale così esigente potrebbe incentivarle a trasferirla. Ciò ridurrebbe almeno in parte la quantità di risorse ricavabile attraverso codesto schema di tassazione. Quest'ultimo sarebbe, perciò, controproducente nell'intento di ottenere ingenti somme di denaro per far fronte ai suddetti bisogni – non a caso l'«optimal top marginal taxation», di cui sopra, non si spinge fino a un tasso del 100 per cento.

A detta di Robeyns, si potrebbero promuovere «non-monetary incentive systems», i.e., meccanismi capaci di incentivare i/le super-ricchi/e nonostante il limite imposto (Robeyns 2017, 36). Tuttavia, proprio l'introduzione di questi ultimi mette in luce l'esistenza di un cortocircuito: sebbene il limitarianesimo aspiri a ricavare ampie quantità di risorse, la sua stessa applicazione (i.e., la detrazione del 100 per cento della ricchezza individuale al di sopra di una data soglia) diminuirebbe le risorse disponibili. In altre parole, il disincentivo causato dall'imposizione di un'aliquota marginale massima del 100 per cento sarebbe tale da rendere il limitarianesimo un ostacolo alla soddisfazione di determinati bisogni. Siccome le persone più ricche sarebbero portate a produrre e/o accumulare meno ricchezza, si ridurrebbero, infatti, anche le entrate fiscali utili al raggiungimento di tale scopo. Di nuovo, per salvaguardare un ideale il limitarianesimo andrebbe a discapito dell'altro.

Mi sembra, perciò, che questa tensione sfoci in un *aut aut*: o il limitarianesimo preserverà l'eguaglianza politica laddove un'altra teoria distributiva si occuperà dei suddetti bisogni, oppure il limitarianesimo si occuperà di tali bisogni mentre altre riforme preserveranno l'eguaglianza politica. Diversamente da Robeyns, inoltre, ritengo che non si possa relegare questa scelta sul piano pratico, giustificando il limitarianesimo sulla base di entrambi gli argomenti e cercando un compromesso tra le diverse implicazioni empiriche, bensì la si debba affrontare a livello teorico: il conflitto tra i due argomenti è tale che occorrerà chiedersi quale dei due giustifichi questa teoria. La mia tesi è che si debba optare per l'argomento democratico, giacché esso mi pare più adatto a giustificare un limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale. Tuttavia, per avvalorare questa posizione, nei paragrafi seguenti analizzerò entrambe le ipotesi a partire da quella opposta, ovvero l'idea che il limite sarebbe giustificato, invece, dall'esigenza di supplire ad alcuni bisogni urgenti non soddisfatti.

4. L'*argomento dei bisogni e il valore del surplus*

La prima ipotesi che considererò è che l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale debba essere limitata per soddisfare i bisogni urgenti. Questa sembra essere la tesi sostenuta da Alexandru Volacu e Adelin Costin Dumitru (2019). A partire da una biforcazione simile a quella da me esposta nel paragrafo precedente, Volacu e Dumitru identificano, infatti, due versioni di limitarianesimo: «strong» se prevale l'argomento democratico e «weak» se prevale quello dei bisogni (Volacu e Dumitru 2019, 250)[8]. Tra queste due opzioni, i due autori prediligono la seconda, giacché un principio limitariano a favore di un'aliquota minore del 100 per cento appare come un compromesso più verosimile e funzionale. L'obiezione dell'incentivo risulta talmente invalidante, che i sostenitori e le sostenitrici del limitarianesimo sembrano avallare l'ipotesi per cui questa teoria dovrebbe ridurre le sue pretese (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 14), cioè optare per un'aliquota marginale massima inferiore di modo da non di-

[8] Non è chiaro se per loro si tratti di scegliere l'uno o l'altro argomento a giustificazione del limitarianesimo, come da me sostenuto, oppure, in linea con Robeyns, se il limitarianesimo sarebbe giustificato da entrambi gli argomenti ma nella sua realizzazione l'uno prevarrebbe sull'altro. Il fatto che nella loro critica a «strong limitarianism», versione ad hoc per l'eguaglianza politica, riappaia l'obiezione dell'incentivo, cioè l'idea che questa versione non sia in grado di soddisfare i bisogni urgenti (Volacu e Dumitru 2019, 256), sembra suggerire questa seconda opzione. Ciò non toglie che in questa sede sia possibile analizzare la loro preferenza per «weak limitarianism» come una preferenza per l'argomento dei bisogni.

sincentivare i/le più ricchi/e dal produrre e/o accumulare ricchezza utile a ovviare i suddetti bisogni urgenti non soddisfatti. Come ho sostenuto in precedenza, così facendo, però, il limitarianesimo non risolverebbe il problema della sproporzionata influenza politica di alcune persone dovuta alla ricchezza. Il limite sarebbe, perciò, giustificato dal *solo* argomento dei bisogni: siccome esistono bisogni che necessitano risorse economiche per essere affrontati ed essi hanno un'urgenza morale maggiore rispetto ai desideri che le persone più abbienti potrebbero esaudire con il surplus di denaro in loro possesso, i.e., quel denaro non necessario alla loro piena realizzazione, quest'ultimo dovrebbe essere redistribuito in favore dei primi.

Ora, mi sembra che quest'argomento non miri tanto a limitare la ricchezza individuale quanto a individuare dove si debbano prelevare le risorse per far fronte a determinate problematiche. Alla premessa che alcuni bisogni sono più urgenti dei desideri che gli individui potrebbero esaudire grazie al cosiddetto surplus non segue, infatti, che esso debba essere limitato, ma che, per risolvere certi bisogni, sia più ragionevole usare dapprima le risorse prelevate tassando questo surplus. Ciò non toglie che, in linea di principio, la quantità di risorse da prelevare per raggiungere tale scopo dovrebbe equivalere alla quantità di risorse necessarie a soddisfare gli stessi bisogni urgenti. Se la quantità di risorse necessarie a soddisfare i bisogni urgenti fosse inferiore alla quantità di risorse prelevate tassando il cosiddetto surplus, basterebbe prelevare le risorse necessarie. D'altra parte, se la quantità di risorse necessarie a soddisfare i bisogni urgenti fosse superiore alla quantità di risorse prelevate tassando il cosiddetto surplus, ci si potrebbe chiedere perché limitarsi a tassare quest'ultimo. Perché stabilire la soglia a partire dalle risorse necessarie a una piena fioritura umana anziché calcolarla sulla base di quelle utili ad affrontare le problematiche che si mira a risolvere? (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 9).

Per rispondere a quest'interrogativo si potrebbe far leva sul fatto che, sebbene a priori bisognerebbe prelevare tante risorse quante sarebbero quelle utili a raggiungere tale scopo, il diritto di ognuno/a ad autorealizzarsi pienamente impedirebbe una tale domanda di redistribuzione. Il limitarianesimo aspirerebbe a prelevare la quantità di risorse necessarie a soddisfare i bisogni urgenti, tuttavia, siccome non può esigere che i singoli rinuncino alle risorse necessarie alla propria piena fioritura, si limita a tassare il cosiddetto surplus. Così facendo, sfuggirebbe all'obiezione di «overdemandigness» mossa al «Rescue Principle»; ridurrebbe, cioè, la domanda di redistribuzione alle sole risorse in eccesso rispetto a quelle utili a una completa realizzazione personale (Robeyns 2017, 12). Si fisserebbe dunque un limite al limite: laddove al di sotto della linea di fioritura massima non si può prelevare un'ampia porzione di ricchezza individuale senza contrastare il diritto dei singoli di investirla nella propria realizzazione, si può al di sopra della linea, giacché le risorse che i singoli hanno in più eccedono quelle necessarie alla realizzazione personale e perciò non hanno valore per chi le possiede.

Come spiega Robeyns, ciò non significa che questo surplus non abbia alcun valore *soggettivo*, anche perché se così fosse sarebbe difficile rendere ragione della sua esistenza – perché una persona dovrebbe produrre e/o accumulare ricchezza che considera priva di valore? Al contrario, significa che, sebbene il surplus possa avere un valore soggettivo, *oggettivamente* esso sarebbe «morally insignificant *for the holder*» (Robeyns 2017, 13, corsivo nel testo) poiché inutile alla sua piena fioritura.

> [I]t is possible for people to still *want* their surplus money, for example to spend it on luxurious lifestyles, or to simply accumulate it. Yet the account of flourishing is an objective account of well-being: Flourishing should not be confused with a desire-satisfaction account of well-being. (Robeyns 2017, 13, corsivo nel testo).

Ciononostante, vista la pluralità di aspirazioni e preferenze individuali e/o culturali, appare difficile stabilire *oggettivamente* cosa s'intenda per piena fioritura umana. Consapevole di questa difficoltà, Robeyns propone di rimettere la decisione al dibattito pubblico; toccherebbe così alla comunità decidere «[w]hich levels of capabilities […] it is reasonable for people to claim for a fully flourishing yet not excessive life» (Robeyns 2017, 26). Tuttavia, anche questa via presenta alcuni ostacoli. Non solo il processo decisionale si scontrerebbe con la difficoltà di stabilire una soglia oggettiva di massima fioritura umana, difficoltà amplificata dal fatto che per stabilire una soglia massima si perderebbe qualsiasi riferimento ai bisogni umani fondamentali, ma, precedendo l'introduzione del limite alla ricchezza individuale, l'esito di quest'ultimo sarebbe esso stesso distorto giacché alcune persone, le più ricche, godrebbero ancora di una maggiore influenza politica (Caranti e Alì 2021, 96).

In aggiunta a queste complessità relative alla fattibilità della soluzione proposta da Robeyns, si può individuare un'ulteriore obiezione in merito alla sua desiderabilità. Perché una società pluralista dovrebbe, infatti, interrogarsi sulla definizione *oggettiva* di piena fioritura umana? La risposta intuitiva sarebbe che una società dovrebbe porsi quest'interrogativo al fine di poter utilizzare le risorse che i/le super-ricchi/e hanno in eccesso per affrontare determinati bisogni urgenti. Per far ciò, però, mi sembra che il dibattito pubblico non si dovrebbe interrogare tanto sul punto in cui le risorse perdono valore per chi le possiede, quanto sul punto in cui esse hanno per chi le possiede un valore inferiore rispetto a quello che avrebbero se redistribuite. Non si tratta di decidere se oltre una certa soglia la ricchezza individuale abbia un valore oppure no, ma di decidere quanto valore essa abbia date le condizioni empiriche generali. In questo senso, il surplus avrebbe sì un valore, anche oggettivo, per chi lo possiede, ma esso sarebbe oggettivamente minore, agli occhi della comunità, dell'urgenza di certi bisogni: «whatever can be gained from having surplus wealth is less valuable, morally speaking, than other normative concerns» (Timmer 2021, 761)[9].

Se la questione è stabilire una gerarchia valoriale, tuttavia, le cose si complicano. Un conto è affermare che al di sopra di una certa soglia la ricchezza non ha valore per chi la possiede, come vorrebbe Robeyns; un altro è sostenere che sebbene la ricchezza abbia un valore per chi la possiede, esso è minimo paragonato a ciò che si potrebbe fare con le stesse risorse se redistribuite. In questo secondo caso, diventa più complicato fissare il limite. È evidente che il desiderio di alcune persone di possedere un'auto di lusso ha meno valore dell'urgenza di altre di assicurarsi il cibo per sopravvivere, meno evidente però è se abbia più valore il desiderio di alcune di comprarsi una seconda utilitaria rispetto alla medesima urgenza. Intuitivamente la necessità di un individuo di sostentarsi, infatti, dovrebbe valere di più tanto del desiderio di comprarsi un'auto di lusso quanto di quello di comprarsi una seconda auto. Così però si

[9] Sebbene in un articolo più recente, Robeyns (2022) prenda in considerazione l'ipotesi che possa esserci ulteriore fioritura umana al di sopra della soglia, l'autrice sembra ribadire che, fissando la soglia, la comunità politica determinerà a che punto la ricchezza diventi oggettivamente priva di valore per chi la possiede.

ricadrebbe nella critica di *overdemandigness*. Per uscire da quest'impasse, si potrebbe sostenere che, giacché i desideri delle persone più ricche rappresentano quelli con valore oggettivamente inferiore, le loro sarebbero le risorse da redistribuire maggiormente. Ciò non toglie, tuttavia, che la gerarchia valoriale non sembra riguardare solo le situazioni di ricchezza estrema ma anche quelle immediatamente sottostanti – i.e., non saranno solo i desideri dei/le super-ricchi/e ad avere un valore minore dell'urgenza di determinati bisogni, ma anche quelli dei/le ricchi/e e (perché no?) dei/le benestanti. Seppur sarebbero le persone più ricche a contribuire in maggior misura, anche le altre dovrebbero farlo in proporzione alle risorse di cui dispongono.

Di conseguenza, l'argomento dei bisogni non mi pare giustificare tanto un tetto massimo alla ricchezza individuale, quanto uno schema di tassazione progressivo. In altre parole, vista la difficoltà di fissare la soglia oltre la quale il surplus non ha valore (oggettivo o soggettivo che sia) per le persone che lo possiedono, l'argomento dei bisogni non rappresenta un buon argomento per il limitarianesimo. D'altronde, la stessa riduzione dell'aliquota marginale massima a seguito dell'obiezione dell'incentivo mi sembra suggerire una conclusione simile: lungi dal legittimare la limitazione della ricchezza individuale entro una certa soglia, l'argomento dei bisogni si limiterebbe a ridurla. Per questo motivo, in quanto segue, propongo di abbandonarlo a favore dell'argomento democratico.

5. L'*argomento democratico e la nozione di limite*

A questo punto non resta che testare l'argomento democratico, ovvero quell'argomento per cui l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale dovrebbe essere limitata al fine di preservare l'eguaglianza politica. Dato che alcune persone godono di un'influenza spropositata nel processo decisionale grazie alla propria disponibilità economica e i privilegi derivati da quest'ultima eludono eventuali confini formali, la ricchezza individuale stessa si dovrebbe ridurre per garantire ai/le partecipanti eque opportunità.

Infatti, non solo i/le super-ricchi/e possono dominare l'opinione pubblica finanziando mezzi di comunicazione, *social networks*, *think tanks*, così come investendo in determinati settori di ricerca, ma, come si è visto, godono anche di un potere economico indipendente che, pur non fuoriuscendo dalla sua sfera di appartenenza, si ripercuote inevitabilmente sulla sfera politica. Affinché ciò avvenga, però, non occorre solo che essi/e possiedano ingenti quantità di ricchezza, ma anche che siano tra le poche persone a possederla: è la concentrazione della ricchezza nelle loro mani a permettere loro di controllare le risorse materiali e, così facendo, determinare il successo o l'insuccesso delle scelte pubbliche (Knight e Johnson 1997; Christiano 2010). In linea con la definizione di Machin, i/le super-ricchi/e sarebbero, perciò, coloro che «possess significantly more wealth than both the average citizen and the next wealthiest category of citizen» (Machin 2013, 124). Tuttavia, diversamente da quanto egli sostiene, escludere le persone più abbienti dal processo decisionale non avrebbe l'effetto sperato; i/le partecipanti, difatti, dovrebbero comunque «make decisions with an eye to what powerful economic entities do in response to those decisions» (Christiano 2012, 250). Si pensi a un'ipotetica discussione sul minimo salariale: la decisione in merito non potrà prescindere dalla *minaccia implicita*, come la chiamerebbero Knight e Johnson (1997, 294), di una riduzione delle assunzioni a fronte di un eventuale aumento del salario minimo – minaccia resa credibile dall'esistente diseguaglianza economica che permette a poche persone di controllare la maggior parte dell'attività produttiva. In questo senso: «the liberal hope for distinct "spheres of justice" with "their boundaries intact" seems naively fastidious and quite probably ineffectual» (Bartels 2008, 344).

Questa riflessione apre a un'ulteriore considerazione. Sebbene qui mi concentri sulla ricchezza individuale – in linea con la logica limitariana – non posso fare a meno di menzionare l'ampia influenza politica di attori quali *lobbys* e *corporations*, poiché essa sembra rappresentare un pericolo altrettanto grave per l'ideale democratico. Un limite alla ricchezza individuale dovrà pertanto essere accompagnato da altre riforme volte ad affrontare questa problematica. Laddove alcune potrebbero ispirarsi al limitarianesimo, e.g., si potrebbe immaginare un limite alla ricchezza delle imprese private, seppur con le dovute differenze, giacché esso dovrebbe tenere conto delle dimensioni e composizioni di queste ultime; coerentemente con la natura parziale di questa teoria, altre, potrebbero distanziarsene, e.g., anziché limitare la ricchezza delle imprese, si potrebbe ipotizzare di suddividerla tra un maggior numero di persone al fine di evitarne la concentrazione nelle mani di poche – già la limitazione dell'eccessiva ricchezza individuale sortirebbe un effetto simile, diminuendo il potere d'acquisto dei singoli azionisti. Lungi dal voler esaurire la questione, queste poche righe mettono in luce la necessità di approfondire la discussione in merito, soprattutto se si vuole sostenere il limitarianesimo sulla base dell'argomento democratico[10].

Ora, come si è visto, quest'argomento predilige un'aliquota marginale massima del 100 per cento. L'obiettivo, infatti, non è quello di sopperire alla mancanza di risorse, ma di impedire che l'eccessiva ricchezza individuale in sé si trasformi in potere politico. Per di più, questo scopo non si raggiungerebbe delimitando formalmente l'ambito in cui le risorse economiche si possono utilizzare, bensì sottraendo ai singoli la ricchezza in eccesso. Finché alcune persone possiedono risorse tali da poter influenzare in modo spropositato il processo decisionale, l'ideale democratico di eguaglianza politica non sarà, infatti, garantito. Diversamente dal precedente, quest'ideale sembra, pertanto, esigere esso stesso un tetto massimo alla ricchezza individuale.

La prima domanda che bisognerà porsi è se questo tetto si offra effettivamente come garanzia dell'eguaglianza politica. Si tratta di confrontarsi con l'obiezione sollevata da Volacu e Dumitru (2019, 257-258), la cosiddetta obiezione dell'efficacia, come la definisce Dick Timmer (2019, 1332). Secondo i due autori, infatti, fissare un limite massimo alla ricchezza individuale si rivelerebbe inefficace, giacché nulla al di sotto della soglia stabilita impedirebbe ai singoli di finanziare il processo politico ricavando così maggior influenza grazie alle proprie disponibilità economiche. Per alcune persone potrebbe essere più importante influenzare l'andamento della politica che realizzarsi pienamente. Anzi, alcune potrebbero addirittura considerare il potere politico come parte di questa realizzazione e decidere di investire il proprio denaro in ciò. Non solo: i/le più ricchi/e potrebbero unire le proprie risorse a questo scopo. In altre parole, pur non possedendo quello che Robeyns chiama surplus, cioè non disponendo di *più* risorse di quelle necessarie ad assicurarsi l'insieme di *capabilities* per una piena fioritura umana, alcune persone continuerebbero ad avere maggiori opportunità di influenzare

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[10] Si ringraziano due reviewers anonimi/e per avermi spinto a prendere in considerazione questa problematica.

il processo decisionale grazie alle proprie disponibilità economiche. Il limite alla ricchezza individuale sarebbe perciò una misura insufficiente. D'altra parte, come suggerisce la stessa Robeyns (2017, 36), al di sotto della soglia stabilita si potrebbero promuovere altre riforme per impedire alla ricchezza individuale di interferire nel processo politico. Se ciò funzionasse, tuttavia, sarebbero queste misure formali, anziché quella sostanziale, a preservare l'eguaglianza politica (Volacu e Dumitru 2019, nota 19). Di conseguenza, ci si potrebbe chiedere perché le stesse non dovrebbero funzionare anche al di sopra della soglia. Il limite alla ricchezza sarebbe così una misura non necessaria.

Tuttavia, quest'obiezione si applica al limitarianesimo così come definito da Robeyns poiché in esso la linea della ricchezza è calcolata indipendentemente dalla quantità di ricchezza necessaria ad attivare quei meccanismi (specialmente indiretti) che compromettono il processo decisionale nonostante eventuali separazioni formali. Come sostiene Tammy Harel Ben-Shahar mancherebbe, perciò, il nesso logico tra la demarcazione del limite e l'ideale che questo limite intenderebbe preservare, i.e., l'eguaglianza politica.

> In order to ensure that excessive wealth does not jeopardise political equality, the threshold should be set at the point where the risk materializes. There is no reason to assume that this will always (or ever) be the point of flourishing satiation (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 9).

Di nuovo, occorre domandarsi perché si debba definire la soglia a partire dalle risorse materiali che gli individui hanno il potere di trasformare nell'insieme di *capabilities* sufficienti al conseguimento di una piena fioritura umana, anziché calcolarla sulla base di quelle che mettono in pericolo il processo democratico. A questa provocazione si potrebbe rispondere, come per l'argomento dei bisogni, che il limitarianesimo pone un limite al limite: sebbene a priori bisognerebbe sottrarre ai singoli tante risorse quante quelle che rappresentano una minaccia per l'eguaglianza politica, il diritto di ognuno/a ad auto-realizzarsi pienamente impedirebbe una tale domanda di redistribuzione. Tuttavia, così definito il limite alla ricchezza individuale rimarrebbe suscettibile all'obiezione dell'efficacia: fissare la soglia laddove i/le super-ricchi/e raggiungerebbero la piena fioritura non impedirebbe infatti la loro eccessiva influenza politica[11]. In linea con quanto sostenuto da Harel Ben-Shahar, bisognerà, invece, fissare il limite laddove il pericolo si materializza.

Ora, ciò che minaccia l'ideale democratico non è tanto che oltre una certa soglia il denaro non ha più valore per chi lo possiede e perciò può essere investito a costo zero, come sostiene Robeyns, quanto che alcune persone possiedono molto più denaro di altre e ciò permette loro di mettere in moto i fattori di conversione di cui sopra. A tal proposito si ricordi che, affinché la ricchezza si trasformi indisturbata in influenza politica, un individuo non deve solo possedere un'elevata quantità di risorse, ma anche essere tra i pochi a possederla. I/le super-ricchi/e rappresentano una minaccia per la democrazia non perché possiedono tante risorse, quanto perché ne possiedono tante in più dei/le loro concittadini/e: «influencing politics requires not only having resources, but also having more resources than one's opponent» (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 10). Il pericolo che s'intende scongiurare scaturisce dunque dall'ampia differenza di ricchezza esistente tra le persone più ricche e il resto della popolazione; ne consegue che il limite dovrebbe calcolarsi in termini relativi anziché assoluti.

Per sostenere quest'ipotesi, in primo luogo, occorrerà fare i conti con le obiezioni di Robeyns (Robeyns 2017, 16-18). Robeyns nega, infatti, la possibilità di stabilire la linea di ricchezza in termini relativi, i.e., calcolando la distanza dal centro della distribuzione, poiché, nonostante le analisi empiriche vadano generalmente nella direzione opposta, «[f]rom a theoretical point of view, relative riches measures seem arbitrary and suffer from the same problems as relative poverty measures» (Robeyns, 2017, 16). Nello specifico, questi problemi sono due. Da un lato, le misure relative appaiono insensibili a qualsivoglia variazione complessiva delle risorse, sia in meglio che in peggio. Se a tutte le persone venissero dati 100€, il numero di ricchi e poveri rimarrebbe esattamente lo stesso. Dall'altro, se definiti in termini comparativi, ricchi e poveri esisterebbero sempre anche in situazioni di grave povertà. In una comunità dove tutte le persone hanno zero, avere uno può già considerarsi ricchezza. En-

[11] Nonostante i quattro argomenti formulati da Timmer per cui «limitarian policies are both effective and needed» (Timmer 2019, 1337), mi sembra che, in assenza di una discussione sulla natura del limite, anche la sua posizione incontri lo stesso vicolo cieco.

trambe le implicazioni appaiono controintuitive, motivo per cui Robeyns preferisce misurare la ricchezza in termini assoluti[12].

Ciononostante, queste perplessità sembrano mancare l'obiettivo. Se tutti/e fossero più o meno poveri/e, il limite alla ricchezza individuale non si applicherebbe, giacché «[t]he danger of political inequality is caused by large material inequalities» (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 10)[13]. D'altro canto, se in situazioni di povertà complessiva alcune persone fossero sufficientemente ricche rispetto alle altre da compromettere l'eguaglianza politica, non sarebbe «objectionable to tax them» (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 21). Inoltre, se tutta la popolazione possedesse 100€ in più, la situazione non cambierebbe: che un limite relativo sia insensibile ad aumenti o diminuzioni della ricchezza complessiva non rappresenta un problema per l'argomento democratico.

Risolte queste obiezioni, occorrerà interrogarsi su come questo limite relativo vada calcolato. Secondo Harel Ben-Shahar, esso si dovrebbe misurare «by limiting the ratio of the resources that the poorest member of society to the resources that the richest member have» (Harel Ben-Shahar 2019, 7) [14]. In altre parole, bisognerebbe delimitare la forbice tra ricchi e poveri fissando un rapporto massimo, e.g., 1:100. Un limite al divario tra la persona più ricca e quella più povera non mi sembra, però, cogliere la specificità del problema, giacché renderebbe contestabili si-

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[12] Successivamente Robeyns (2022) sembra ammettere che l'eguaglianza politica possa richiedere un limite relativo anziché assoluto, tuttavia, mantiene il riferimento all'idea di piena fioritura umana, che, come si è visto, risulta problematico. Cfr. Nicklas 2021 per un'obiezione all'assenza di valore del surplus nell'argomento democratico.

[13] Quest'intuizione appare corroborata da studi empirici, e.g., Dahl 2020 [1998]; Gilens 2005.

[14] Una posizione simile si trova in Caranti e Alì 2021. Nella loro critica al limitarianesimo i due autori sottolineano che ciò che si dovrebbe limitare non è tanto l'eccessiva ricchezza in sé quanto il divario economico esistente tra gli individui. Sebbene la loro «proportional justice» raccomandi una formula più sofisticata di «ratio» in grado di evitare alcune delle difficoltà che metterò in luce, essi abbandonano l'idea di «top threshold» sostenendo, mi sembra, una teoria più egualitaria che limitariana. Per ragioni di spazio, perciò, in questa sede, non approfondirò ulteriormente l'analisi della loro posizione e delle differenze con la mia argomentazione. Cfr. anche Alì e Caranti 2021.

tuazioni che non lo sono e, viceversa, accettabili altre che sarebbero da riformare. Da un lato, se il rapporto fosse 1:100, ma una sola persona si trovasse al gradino più basso (1) e la maggioranza delle persone occupasse il gradino più alto (99), l'ideale democratico non mi parrebbe minacciato dal fatto che alcune si trovino appena sopra la soglia (e.g., 120). Dall'altro lato, se il rapporto fosse 1:100, ma la maggioranza delle persone occupasse uno dei gradini più bassi (e.g., 3), già trovarsi al gradino più alto (99) garantirebbe ad alcune opportunità di influenzare il processo decisionale grazie alle proprie disponibilità economiche tali da compromettere l'ideale democratico.

Per questo, mi sembra più opportuno stabilire il limite tenendo conto della distribuzione della ricchezza all'interno della popolazione. Più precisamente, propongo di stabilirlo facendo riferimento alla mediana, i.e., la linea di ricchezza al di sotto della quale ricade il 50 per cento degli individui, e calcolando quante volte la ricchezza mediana un individuo debba possedere per poter esercitare un'influenza politica significativa[15]. Dove questo limite vada fissato sarà da definirsi sulla base di studi empirici – d'altronde, lo stesso vale per il rapporto massimo proposto da Harel Ben-Shahar, così come per il limite assoluto di Robeyns. Tuttavia, due mi paiono i parametri chiave da tenere in considerazione: da un lato, la quantità di risorse necessarie ad attivare i meccanismi di conversione (diretti o indiretti), dall'altro la densità di popolazione avente queste risorse. Meno persone possiedono la ricchezza necessaria, più essa eluderà eventuali barriere.

Si risponderebbe così all'obiezione dell'efficacia. Al di sotto della soglia la ricchezza sarebbe distribuita più equamente (Timmer 2019, 1338) e ciò limiterebbe la possibilità che si concentri nelle mani di pochi/e e si converta in influenza politica raggirando barriere formali[16]. In questo caso, il fatto che codeste barriere possano funzionare entro una certa soglia non significa automaticamente che esse funzionino oltre, poiché la

[15] Ciò sarebbe in linea con soglie esistenti, quale quella della povertà stabilita dall'Unione Europea, si veda: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.

[16] Con la stessa logica si eviterebbe anche l'obiezione di Nicklas (2021): sebbene al diminuire della ricchezza diminuisse la quantità di denaro necessaria per influenzare il processo politico, il potere dei/le più ricchi/e sarebbe comunque limitato giacché le differenze economiche tra i/le partecipanti sarebbero ridotte.

soglia stessa sarebbe da fissare nel punto in cui la ricchezza individuale raggiunge livelli così elevati e il numero di persone che la possiedono diventa così ridotto da ostacolare qualsivoglia tentativo di separare le sfere. Il limite si delineerebbe quindi come una condizione necessaria; di più, data l'inefficacia delle barriere formali, oltre la soglia stabilita esso si delineerebbe come l'unica misura efficace per ostacolare la trasformazione della ricchezza individuale in influenza politica. Ciò non implica, tuttavia, che si dia anche come condizione sufficiente, altre misure saranno necessarie per contrastare ulteriori interferenze economiche nell'ambito politico – in fin dei conti il limite all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale rimane una disposizione parziale.

Diversamente da quanto sostenuto da Robeyns, questo limite sarebbe relativo perché ciò che minaccia l'ideale democratico non è tanto che alcune persone possiedano ricchezza in eccesso, quanto che esse possiedano molta più ricchezza dei/le loro concittadini/e. Per questo è importante fissare il limite in relazione alla ricchezza mediana, piuttosto che al divario tra la persona più ricca e quella più povera come vuole Harel Ben-Shahar; così calcolato esso sarebbe, infatti, sensibile alla distribuzione della ricchezza tra tutti/e i/le partecipanti al processo democratico. Ciò permetterebbe anche di distinguere il limitarianesimo dalle teorie dell'eguaglianza più in generale: laddove queste ultime implicano una riduzione della forbice tra ricchi e poveri, il limitarianesimo si delinea per l'appunto come teoria del limite. Per salvaguardare l'eguaglianza politica, infine, non si tratta né di fissare una soglia di massima fioritura umana, né di promuovere uno schema di tassazione progressivo, ma di impedire che alcune persone abbiano così tante risorse in più di quante ne detengono i/le loro concittadini/e da poter influenzare significativamente l'esito del processo decisionale. In questo senso, l'argomento democratico così formulato non incorrerebbe nei problemi precedentemente discussi per l'argomento dei bisogni, offrendosi come una valida giustificazione di un tetto massimo alla ricchezza individuale.

Se il limitarianesimo è quella teoria che si occupa di fissare una soglia oltre la quale la ricchezza dei singoli possa dirsi in eccesso e spiegare perché al di sopra di questa soglia essa si possa detrarre, la mia versione di limitarianesimo potrebbe riassumersi come segue. La soglia oltre la quale la ricchezza individuale può dirsi in eccesso è quella relativa alla quantità di risorse che il singolo può possedere in più della ricchezza mediana, senza godere pertanto di opportunità illimitate – e illimitabili – di influenzare la politica; al di sopra di questa soglia, la ricchezza dei singoli dovrebbe essere detratta per preservare l'ideale democratico di eguaglianza. Per fare un esempio, si potrebbe limitare la ricchezza individuale a un massimo di 100 volte la ricchezza mediana. In Italia dove nel 2016 la ricchezza mediana era 132.266€[17], significherebbe fissare la soglia intorno a 13 milioni di euro. Se si considera che le persone milionarie nel 2020 si aggiravano intorno al 3 per cento della popolazione italiana[18] non si tratterebbe di imporre la suddetta aliquota marginale massima del 100 per cento a una percentuale molto alta di individui. Nondimeno ciò non costituirebbe un problema per la mia teoria poiché quello che si vuole limitare è esattamente che un'élite possieda così tante risorse da poter giocare un ruolo determinante nel processo democratico.

6. C*onclusione*

Sebbene la mia analisi prenda avvio dalla medesima volontà di fissare un tetto alla ricchezza individuale che muove il ragionamento di Robeyns, diversamente da lei, non credo sia possibile stabilire un limite che soddisfi contemporaneamente l'esigenza democratica e quella dei bisogni. Al contrario, penso che occorra scegliere. Non tanto quale sia il compromesso più ragionevole, come suggeriscono Volacu e Dumitru sostenendo una versione soft di limitarianesimo, quanto quale sia l'argomento che giustifica codesto limite.

Siccome l'urgenza di soddisfare determinati bisogni mi sembra rivendicare uno schema di tassazione progressivo, anziché una soglia massima alla ricchezza individuale, la mia tesi è che quest'ultima sia giustificata piuttosto dall'esigenza di salvaguardare l'ideale democratico di eguaglianza. Per far ciò, tuttavia, in linea con l'ipotesi di Harel Ben-Shahar, il limite sarà da definirsi in termini relativi invece che assoluti – sebbene nella mia riformulazione ciò significhi calcolarlo a partire

[17] Dati disponibili via https://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm (consultato il 21 gennaio 2022).

[18] Dati disponibili via https://www.credit-suisse.com/about-us/en/reports-research/global-wealth-report.html (consultato il 21 gennaio 2022).

dalla ricchezza mediana e non dal divario ricchi-poveri come vorrebbe lei. Per avere un'influenza politica spropositata, infatti, una persona necessita di tante più risorse dei suoi concittadini e delle sue concittadine quante sono quelle indispensabili a raggirare qualsivoglia separazione tra la sfera economica e quella politica; lì andrebbe fissato il limite.

Si noti che, così formulato, il limitarianesimo rimarrebbe una teoria *parziale*, giacché al di sotto della soglia altri criteri regolerebbero la distribuzione delle risorse. Si tratterebbe, inoltre, di una teoria *politica*, avente come obiettivo l'introduzione di norme volte a implementare questo limite. Tuttavia, diversamente dalla sua accezione originaria, questa riformulazione si applicherebbe anche in società *ideali*, poiché il limite diventerebbe una condizione necessaria al buon funzionamento della democrazia. A meno che non si ipotizzi un sistema democratico su scala globale, esso si adotterebbe perciò solo all'interno di confini statali.

In conclusione, se si vogliono preservare le democrazie dalla pericolosa influenza dell'eccessiva ricchezza individuale, limitare quest'ultima sembra imprescindibile. Ciò non vuol dire tanto che l'argomento democratico sia l'unico argomento a favore del limitarianesimo[19], quanto che esso rappresenti un argomento valido. La presente analisi, infatti, non aspira a determinare se ci sia un argomento migliore, ma se sia possibile formulare almeno un argomento per fissare un tetto all'eccessiva ricchezza individuale.

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FRONTIERE LIBERALI

Crises and the Limits of the Possible

Jonathan White

A crisis on the scale of Covid-19 leaves its mark on the political imagination, but what kind of mark is less clear. In one perspective, periods of crisis are enhancing. They provide demonstration of the fragility of the *status quo* and the possibility of doing things differently – things that expand our horizons. Variations on this idea have recurred in Europe and North America for several years. In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, many observers felt that the scope for political agency, especially that of the state, had been reaffirmed. Neoliberal discourses about the limits of authorities' capacity to act in economic affairs seemed to have been undone by governments' moves to support failing banks. Faced with an unpalatable alternative, institutions suddenly found the resources and will to act. Never again, felt some, would authorities be able to present themselves as incapable of intervention – they could present themselves only as unwilling. In this reading, the extraordinary policy measures taken in response to a crisis open new political vistas, showing that other worlds are possible. Once drastic measures have been taken, albeit in the name of necessity, a precedent exists for their redeployment in the future, this time perhaps of volition.

In a second perspective, the political meaning of a crisis is quite the reverse – it is to introduce new constraints on the possible. The effect of taking drastic measures to handle a difficult situation is seen as being exactly to rule out further actions of this kind. This was the argument that underpinned the austerity policies adopted by EU states through much of the 2010s. The claim was that the debts incurred in 2008 had placed such a burden on state finances that spending would now have to be radically reduced. Actions taken in the crisis were thus cast as wholly exceptional. In this view, not only

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does it not follow that measures taken of necessity may later be repeated: rather, the very fact that they have been adopted once rules out the possibility of their adoption for the foreseeable future. Rather than opening new political horizons, in this view crises close them down.

Variations on these two positions, which are part of political discourse as much as analysis, have been prominent in the context of Covid-19.[1] One sees the idea that crises broaden the scope of the possible in the notion that the pandemic response provides a template for fighting climate change.[2] The willingness of governments to impose lockdowns and restrict travel, slowing economic activity and profit accumulation for an indeterminate period, has been widely highlighted as evidence that action on climate change is possible if only governments recognise the seriousness of the threat. Crises in this view demonstrate the potential for more ambitious, activist forms of government. (Such arguments recall the early-twentieth-century origins of the welfare state in the transferral of wartime mobilisation to peacetime government.) Conversely – often by the powerful – the pandemic has been cast as presenting new *obstacles* to political agency. It has been recruited to justify sticking more closely to the status quo ante, on the idea that alternatives are now harder to pursue. As a British Conservative MP declared in spring 2021, "everybody in an ideal world would love to see nurses paid far more […] but we are coming out of a pandemic where we have seen huge borrowing and costs to the government" (Dorries 2021). Nurses would have to make do with a 1% rise.

In truth, neither the crisis-as-enabling perspective nor the crisis-as-disabling one gets it right. Contra the second perspective, there is no necessary reason why crises should signal a major diminution of

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[1] For simplicity in this short piece I restrict discussion to these two paradigmatic approaches, but it is worth noting the existence of variations, including transformations that are dystopian rather than progressive. Consider, for instance, how the use of new technology during the pandemic – for remote learning, public health surveillance, and healthcare – has been embraced by some as demonstrating the potential to do away with a range of jobs in the public and private sectors, albeit at the cost of heightened unemployment and worsened working conditions. On the 'Screen New Deal', see Klein 2020.

[2] https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-55498657.

agency. Not all initiatives cost more money than they generate, and to the extent that they do there tend to be borrowing options available. The suggestion that there are not was the great fallacy of austerity. Policy-makers have been able to 'find the money' more than once – in the banking crises of the early 2000s, but also in the lockdowns of the early 2020s. Yet contra the first perspective, one needs to be cautious in assuming that crisis-led actions demonstrate the breadth of options available. First, the condition of these acts of agency may be that they can be credibly presented as responding to necessity – pursued in other contexts, they would surely be harder to carry off. Second, another condition of their adoption is likely to be belief that they do not challenge existing interests and priorities in a fundamental way. However activist crisis decision-making may be, and however many policy innovations it may include, very often it is in the service of existing commitments and the status quo ante. New means are adopted, and old ones discarded, but generally for the sake of established ends – this is change in the name of fidelity (White 2017), and agency that is kept in the hands of the few. The prospects for redeploying such agency for transformative, democratically-chosen ends are therefore a separate matter.

The European Union as it emerges from Covid-19 is the object of such competing interpretations today. Invoking the optimistic logic of enablement, many herald the policy measures associated with N*ext*G*eneration*EU as something more than a temporary regime, as evidence of the obsolescence of austerity thinking and the beginning of something new. In this view, policy-makers have been forced of necessity to develop innovative mechanisms of collective borrowing, common debt and quantitative easing, and however much they may have presented these as exceptional measures to stabilise the situation at hand, the effect is to establish a lasting precedent. Confronted with the crisis, authorities are said to be on the cusp of a new economic outlook that can be harnessed for a new set of projects, including a Green New Deal.[3]

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/recovery-plan-europe_en. Important to note here is that policy-makers can use extreme circumstances to rationalise shifts they were inclined to make anyway, either because previous (austerity) policies were increasingly dysfunctional or unpopular. An emergency context allows decisions to be presented as responses to necessity. Whereas under 'normal'

It seems premature though to see the pandemic response as transformational in this way, for it remains consistent with the reassertion of existing economic priorities. Not only was the R*ecovery and* R*esilience* F*acility* agreed by the European Council in July 2020 explicitly presented as temporary.[4] The grants it makes available come with additional monitoring powers for the Commission and Council, and an emergency brake allows any national government to suspend the process should it have concerns about the direction of reform.[5] Access to its funds is thus conditional on commitment to the agenda of existing policy,[6] and the possibility of turning the tap off, even if temporarily, becomes a way to enforce this agenda. There have been no moves to write off the sovereign debts of eurozone member-states. It is hard to exclude then that austerity policies may return as a way to balance budgets. It was the mistake of many social democrats in the wake of 2008 to assume that a taboo on high public spending had been definitively broken – that the crisis would be enabling in this sense. This overlooked the resonance that the austerity argument would have, including with mass publics. How far things have really changed today is likely to become apparent only when a left-wing government comes to power in a eurozone member-state and embarks on a policy of high spending and wealth redistribution.

The handling of the pandemic as an opportunity for retrenchment is also evident in the sphere of migration. Since March 2020, EU member-states have invoked the health emergency as a pretext for stripping back the assistance given to refugees and asylum seekers. Securing the public health of the national population has been taken to warrant closing national borders to outsiders, hence e.g. quarantine ships in Italy

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conditions a policy reversal may invite charges of inconsistency or lack of principle, taken under emergency conditions it can be cast as a pragmatic response to changed conditions. Emergencies help policy reversals to be rationalised in a way that upholds the credibility of the policy-maker.

[4] See Art. 4 of the Council Conclusions: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf.

[5] Arts. 18-19.

[6] I.e. that anchored by the 'European Semester', as emphasised by Economy Commissioner Gentiloni: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_20_960.

and the suspension of asylum applications in Greece.[7] At a European level, the Commission's new P*act on* M*igration and* A*sylum* of September 2020 states one of its aims as hardening the EU's external borders, and it allows states to derogate from asylum commitments in situations of crisis.[8] The P*act* seeks also to increase the involvement of third countries (e.g. Turkey) in controlling migration and processing claims, externalising responsibility beyond Europe's borders and encouraging return migration.[9] Frontex meanwhile has expanded its activities into the air, with drones that can monitor migrants at sea at lower cost and without being diverted into rescue.[10] In these ways, Covid-19's double threat to public health and to public finances has been used effectively but not progressively. The crisis acts as the occasion for new measures, but these are directed at reinforcing existing goals and entrenching the *status quo* rather than cultivating the agency with which to break from it.

Crises then, just as they promise to push back the limits of the possible, give defenders of the existing order a pretext on which to seek to consolidate it and to argue the impossibility of meaningful change (White 2019). We should be cautious in seeing the EU as fundamentally transformed by recent events, or newly capable of transformation. Certainly there has been extensive policy activity, and quite possibly there is the opportunity to push for more change – the idea that crises are disempowering in a general sense is false. One can only find the boundaries of the possible by testing them, and to this extent there is reason to cultivate public pressure. But it is too early to say that these boundaries have been significantly pushed back. Politically it may be useful to act as though they have been, but analytically there are reasons to hold back.

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[7] https://theconversation.com/how-covid-19-became-a-cover-to-reduce-refugee-rights-156247.

[8] 23 September 2020: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1706); for critical commentary see https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/08/pact-migration-and-asylum.

[9] See also the N*ew* EU S*trategy on voluntary return and reintegration* (27 April 2021), to be supported by Frontex (https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_1931).

[10] https://fragdenstaat.de/en/blog/2021/08/24/defund-frontex-build-sar/.

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Critical Exchange on N*ext*G*eneration*EU

'Once in a Lifetime'? An Immanent Critique of N*ext*G*eneration*EU

Kalypso Nicolaïdis

> "N*ext*G*eneration*EU is more than a recovery plan – it is a once in a lifetime chance to emerge stronger from the pandemic, transform our economies and societies, and design a Europe that works for everyone. We have everything we need to make this happen. We have a vision, we have a plan and we have agreed to invest €806.9 billion together".[1]

To help the continent "emerge stronger and more resilient" from the worst pandemic in 100 years, member states created the N*ext*G*eneration*EU (NGEU) programme almost as soon as the crisis hit in the Spring of 2022. 'Once in a lifetime' to describe the NGEU could sound pretty bombastic in light of three facts: 1) the sums constitute only a small proportion of EU GDP; 2) many of the projects supported have been part of existing commitments; 3) the new facilities are for the moment presented as temporary and will eventually need to be paid back by some sort of tax (inflationary, corporate, or customs).

If this were the whole story then, we could be forgiven for deflating the 'once in a lifetime' claim. As Jonathan White cogently argues in his contribution, crisis can be horizon-expanding or horizon-shrinking. They can lead to policies that open new political vistas, pushing back the limits of the possible, or on the contrary policies that constrain our collective agency, giving defenders of the existing order a pretext on which to seek to consolidate it. NGEU might talk-the-talk, but it may not be as transformative as it sounds.

[1] This figure is in current prices. It amounts to €750 billion in 2018 prices (https://europa.eu/next-generation-eu/index_en).

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Here, I cautiously push back against this argument from an immanent critique standpoint, by juxtaposing the ideals articulated by the pandemic response against their inadequate but potentially promizing realization. Accordingly, we ought to consider the potential open by the NGEU not just as the material injection of funds that it is, nor even the legal-institutional implication of a first European mutualisation of debt, but rather as both a potential trigger and an expression of two (incomplete) shifts in EU policies with important implications for the EU polity.

The first shift has to do with what we can call 'deference with purpose.' Considering that relations between states are characterised by an ever shifting balance between mutual deference and mutual interference, crisis tend to lead to new equilibria between the two that may or may not be enshrined in new rules. In this sense, the EU is constantly revisiting Europe's Westphalian bargain, which simultaneously enshrined sovereign recognition and therefore deference, and its conditionality and therefore interference, reminding us that states' recognition of each other's autonomy tends to be predicated on their *droit de regard* inside each other's realm, as a function of mutual trust. The Euro-crisis will be remembered as a moment when EU institutions presided over a radical jump in asymmetric mutual interference allowance under the cover of debt, combining in effect the traditional creditors playbook *à la* IMF, with the much more far reaching core competences of the EU, which turned the shared polity into the kind of enforcer which hitherto had been a role reserved for externally and temporarily involved agents like the IMF.

Against this backdrop, NGEU on the other hand, can be seen as a shift of the pendulum back to deference, based as it is on a bottom up process of national commitments. In order to access the funds, the member states need to present ambitious investment programme which integrate the digital and climate transition imperatives. The Commission allocates budgetary envelopes to the member states which generate their own distribution key between projects. To be sure, EU monitoring and its concurrent emergency break is still part of the equation but linked less to financial solvency than to the contribution to shared purposes.

The second shift is more tentative and has to do with the modes and extent of accountability associated with the first shift. It may be premature to say that horizontal interference between states has been replaced by accountability *all the way down* at the domestic level bolstered by transnational networks. Here the mutual engagement which accompanies the sharing of funds extends beyond the diplomatic realm, taking place under the implicit auspices of the public sphere and the interconnected democracy spaces of the member state. At stake is indeed the question of whether the agency regained by EU institutions in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic can be put to work for transformative, democratically-chosen ends, as Jonathan White puts it.

Whether this double shift is actually at work remains to be seen but I believe that it has to do as much with our political imagination as with the constellation of economic interests that will direct the combined hands of the market and the state involved in delivering NGEU. Put simply, what is at stake with the NGEU is whether it will serve as a conduit for the reinvention of Europe's greatest asset in the face of the global autocratic onslaught: democratic authorship and the collective intelligence that comes with it.

This appeal to our democratic imagination rests on a simple diagnostic regarding public opinion in the EU. Scholars like Virginie Ingelgom, Catherine DeVries or Sarah Hobolt have demonstrated that 'the median European' is neither Eurosceptic nor Europhile but that Europeans tend to be integrationist in substance and sovereigntist in method. They approve of 'more Europe' to address crisis like a pandemic, but also of more decentralised, local engineering of crisis response. In this spirit, we need to manage democratic interdependence between its member states all the way down, progressively promoting norms and processes that connect national democratic conversations horizontally supported but not captured vertically by Brussels.

This is what I mean when I say that the EU can be understood as a 'demoicracy' in the making, a union of peoples who govern together but not as one, where a shared political identity resides with the empowerment of national democracy by the center and with caring about what happens in our respective national or subnational democratic space, spaces that are becoming increasingly politically vulnerable to each other. For sure European demoicracy is unstable and vulnerable, given the centrifugal and centripetal forces of bureaucratic centralization and populist renationalization that feed each other's justificatory narratives. But this makes the challenge all the more appealing.

I like to take up the challenge through a metaphor: I suggest to imagine post-WWII Europeans who, contemplating a sea of possible futures ahead of them, argued intensely over the better way to leave behind the dreary land of anarchy, nationalism and war. There was a sense that they should all board the same ship together, but to chart what route? If we further imagine the waters to be a very wide Rubicon, many felt that it was time to cross it to reach the promised land on the other side, a land of unity where Europeans would become one and forge a new entity together from the ashes of their defunct nations, thus transcending together the old European order of states. Some boarded the ship believing this would happen.

But the ship of European states, instead of crossing to the other side, ended up tracing a different route. They would not sail to reassuringland of unity – reinventing themselves as a Euro-wide nation, same old on a bigger scale. They would not exchange a failed order of nation-states for a continental European state. They would neither maintain nor transcend Europe's state system but instead transform it by taming the exclusionary nature of sovereignty. Away from both shores, they would remain on the choppy waters of the Rubicon for the foreseeable future. On the waters in between the journey would have to continue in search of a compass but without a telos to justify it all.

Such a demoicratic vision of what the EU is about, I believe, is much more ambitious than the dream of those who advocate making it ever more state-like, ever more centralised and harmonized (or 'federal' in the traditional way). Refusing to cross the Rubicon it is the most ambitious reading of what European integration is about: deep horizontal mutual recognition through democratic agency to allow for togetherness among utterly diverse peoples. The paradox of this EU third way is thus: the most densely institutionalised cooperation among states in the world, yet between the most deeply entrenched nation-states in the world. Hence the Rubicon.

We have long bemoaned the fact that something is clearly missing in European politics these days, asking how the union can better catch winds in her sail. The conference on the future of Europe taking place this year is exploring ways to experiment with transnational democratic innovation. Indeed, these efforts are not happening in a vacuum. In the decades to come, 'democracy in Europe' is bound to be part of a bigger story about democratic geopolitics or, to use grand words, system resilience in the competition between autocracies and (imperfect) democracies and their respective capacity to generate investment in the long term. Bolstered by the pandemic response, autocrats are shaping a new kind of technology-centric cyber-citizenship governance that will make their own people pawns in the grand chess game. To face this ominous prospect we need nothing less than all-out democratic mobilization– accelerating the spin of a circular democracy which (just like calls for a circular economy and circular migration) advocates exploiting the connectedness between spaces and levels of democratic practices in all their guise.

This is a global story. In fact, when it comes to reinventing democracy, Europe would be well inspired to reverse its gaze. Europe's founding fathers may be forgiven to have brought into being a highly 'constrained' democracy given the ambers on which it was built. But today, EU decision makers and shapers, and the citizens who call for taking part can't be comfortable with a construct in the name of democracy built by democracy-sceptics.

If NGEU were to set off a process of genuine public accountability there would be hope for the EU to stand out in the landscape of democratic experiments not by claiming to be 'more advanced' than the rest of the world, but by investing in scaling up the kind of participatory and digital democracy that has burgeoned around the world from the national or subnational level to the transnational, and from the vertical to the horizontal. In this spirit, we must pay close attention to how effective democratic control of NGEU will in the next months and years connect taxation, representation and participation, following the triple rationale of democratic imperative which I will sketch here in closing.

1) N*o spending without taxation*. The NGEU cannot escape the old imperative: new debts are bound to imply new responsibilities. There will be mighty political fights in the future which will unfold in the public arena: whether the spending will be covered by old or new taxes. How to balance EU fiscal autonomy with national fiscal primacy and the distributional implications for richer and poorer member states. To what extent EU-wide taxes ought to mirror EU-wide benefits – from taxes on GAFAs for the benefit of EU-wide digital infrastructures to a carbon border tax for the benefit of an EU-wide ETS. After all, the new taxes will bare important

implications for each European citizens, even if on corporations and/or at the border, given fiscal crowding out, induced inflation etc. The core democratic tensions between considerations of distributional fairness and electoral savviness are bound to be at play. In all of these ways and more, the hike in taxation opened up by NGEU will need have crucial democratic implications.

2) N*o taxation without representation*. Whereby extensive monitoring and reporting mechanisms have been put in place to support the R*ecovery and* R*esilience* F*acility* (RFF) as the key instrument at the heart of N*extGeneration*EU. They provide benchmarks to the public on how the funds are used in different countries according to alternative criteria of output and outcome, collated in databases such as FENIX. The implementation of the RFF raises the fundamental question of who 'represents' in this game with competing claims of representativeness from different institutions and levels of governance. If, unsurprisingly, the disbursement of funds has led to a shift of power from the co-legislators to the Commission, and therefore a significant increase executive power, how do we balance the latter's claim to represent the public interest (backed by the European Court of auditor), the Council's claim individually to represent national legitimacy and collectively to represent states anchored in democratic process, and the European parliament's claim to represent 'European citizens' (as reflected by the debates and statements of the EP's standing working group on parliamentary scrutiny).In this context, democratic ownership and scrutiny may have shifted to national level but this shift has been embedded in transnational debate on shared purposes.

In short, the NGEU offers two modes of scrutiny: First, a policy mode where country programmes are assessed and audited on the basis of performance based criteria, gathered in an aptly named FENIX data base (is this about the rebirth the structural fund machinery?) where disbursement follows investment performance. Second, an ethical mode based first and foremost on national systems which control ex-post for fraud or conflict of interest, monitored by the Commission (see ARARCHNE data base).

On both counts, this gap in reimbursement opens up the potential for expanded scrutiny since assessing whether funds have been spent appropriately tends to require time. But how democratic has this scrutiny been until now or is likely to be? Have governments published the data in accessible ways? What is the optimal democratic division of labour in the process?

These questions vary depending between two different moments in the RFF cycle:

a) The *ex-ante* approval process of the spending plans where one would expect a primary (budgetary) role for national parliaments to mitigate the risk that executives both be judge and party. Up to now however, and while of course every country operates under a different tradition of parliamentary control, such scrutiny has generally been wanting. Some argue that national parliaments cannot be involved in the details of every sectoral allocation but need to set budgetary priorities and overall rules of conduct (in Italy for instance the parliament added an obligation to channel 40% of the funds to the South). Is this sufficient? How should this process relate to electoral cycles? What happens with a change of government in the middle of the procedure? Should the European Parliament fill the gap of time consistency?
b) When it comes to the execution of the plans through procurement and specific projects, question of scrutiny become all the more critical. To what extent should control remain mainly retroactive as it is today? The current process emphasizes targets and the role of national control and audit system (CAS) which needed to be in place before the plans. (rooted in national legislation and the structural funds machinery). In theory the EU acts as a power of enabler, allowing for instance parliaments to hold hearing and ask the CAP agency for detail. But what kind of data is made available to them? On what grounds can they assess projects? Should the European parliament be given a greater role to assess performance on top of the Commission's more narrow or technical assessment of outcomes based on milestones and targets? And if the EP's role is to introduce greater political judgement in these assessments, should it not work closely with national parliaments?

3) N*o representation without participation*. This is indeed the broader context in which the unfolding of NGEU takes place, a context where the EU increasingly recognises that participatory democracy is no longer a mere

appendix to representative institutions but deserves an eco-system in its own right. Under this premise, the spending of the funds needs to be scrutinized by any actor who wishes to and is able to do so, thus bringing to bear the wealth of collective intelligence in deploying the EU's resources. The general public, the media and the organisations involved in formal and informal activism may stand at the end of long chains of scrutiny, but they are the ultimate stakeholders in the kind of democratic control called for by such an ambitious programme. Unfortunately, beyond being informed on their country's or region's performance of specific targets, monitoring does not extend to the project level whereby the public would be granted the means for granular assessment of ‘where the money goes’.

To be sure, even if degrees of transparency vary between member states, and between different levels of government, no member states seems to have embraced the idea of radical transparency to enhance the legitimacy and efficacy of the funds. To counter this state of affairs, the recovery files project initiated by the Dutch company follow the money, has gathered journalists from about 20 member states to conduct their own assessment and transparency advocacy. As they point out, even the European Court of Auditors has recognised that it does not have enough resources to scrutinise properly. An early mover, the C*oalición* P*ro* A*cceso* and the Open Generation EU Platform have publicly called on the Spanish government to open the files. And the Helsinki committee in Hungary have demonstrated risks of government led corruption in its preliminary reports, nepotism, with EU moneys often used to subsidise political messaging against EU. More generally, social partners across countries have started to question on what grounds country strategies can assess what is ‘incomplete reforms’ (as in judiciary, pensions, labour markets, tax) which were traditionally negotiated with social partners and stakeholder.

The compass for such a journey has an old democratic pedigree: inclusion. In some ways, the process of deepening the reach of democracy remains the same as it has been: a series of struggle to expand the franchise, to include more citizens under its tent. This time around, it is a franchise that does not necessarily express itself through the right to vote in periodic elections, but rather through widespread inclusion in the political process in all its forms, including the process of allocating the biggest funding drive ever available in the EU. I have suggested elsewhere the idea of subverting the ominous idea of Bentham's surveillance panopticon to herald the creation of a *democratic* panopticon, whereby decision-makers, like Bentham's prison inmates, will be effectively compelled to regulate their own behavior under the assumption that citizens might be watching at least some of the time, their power both visible and unverifiable. Publicity takes the place of surveillance, a way to guard the guardians, and social control becomes control by society, not of society. In effect, what we should be advocating in the age of the internet and widespread literacy is a kind of monitory democracy on steroids, as one element of a broader democratic ecosystem in the EU. The implementation of the NGEU can serve as the testing ground for such a democratic panopticon. Forget la revolution permanente, long live la participation permanente.

Prone to Crisis but Resilient? EU Building as a Balancing Act

Maurizio Ferrera

The 2010s put the EU to a severe test of political sustainability. The sequence of sectoral shocks produced a 'deep' crisis, which has unsettled basic assumptions and practices regarding the exercise of authority and its legitimation. Over time, tensions and disagreements unleashed three foundational conflicts: over sovereignty (who decides), solidarity (who gets what when and why) and identity (who we are). Around the middle of the decade, the idea of an 'existential crisis' became something more concrete than just a rhetorical metaphor.

Against the odds, however, the destructive spiral stopped short of driving the Union into self-destruction. After the Brexit referendum, opinion data and the aggressive proclaims of many Eurosceptic parties showed alarming signs of a possible withdrawal domino – from the EU altogether or from the Euro-area. Yet the only member state which risked to succumb to confusion and, in some crucial moment, internal implosion was the UK itself. The other 27 manifested an increasing willingness to keep together and displayed a remarkable unity in Brexit negotiations, reconfirming their loyalty to the integration project.

In its turn, the pandemic outburst in early 2020 triggered off initially another spiral of mutual hostility and acrimony between the member states. Yet, in the space of just a few months, the acute tensions between the frugal and the solidaristic coalitions rapidly subsided and a financial plan of unprecedented size and ambition was adopted in July 2020. While – as rightly argued by Jonathan White – it is still too early for proclaiming the end of the deep crisis, it seems safe to say that in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis the Union has been able to increase the political and institutional capital for its own polity maintenance.

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Is it possible to identify a general mechanisms which can account for both the crisis-proneness exhibited by the EU during the long 2010s and at the same time its capacity to survive and exploit crises for mobilising self- maintenance resources? Answering this question requires a preliminary discussion about the nature of the EU as polity – more precisely, a polity which has opted for navigating along the Rubicon (as aptly put by Kalypso Nicolaïdis) instead of crossing it and joining the ranks of federal states.

EU-building has been an incremental process aimed at embedding and bringing together previously autonomous nation-states in the pursuit of 'peace and prosperity'. Integration was launched within a historical context in which the state-national form had already reached its apex. Thus the construction of the EU polity had to take place in the least favourable constellation, i.e. on top of those compact and robust political entities which had resulted from the long term process of state- and nation-building.

These genetic constraints posed to EU builders a double bind: creating a de novo polity through piecemeal reconfigurations of the pre-existing state-national structures; managing this delicate political and institutional process in the presence of 'the ordeals of mass politics', i.e. under the limitations and pressures linked to nation-based process of consensus-building and democratic legitimation. Thus EU building has called for a constant and delicate balancing act between unity and diversity, functional and political dynamics: a feature which can be captured by defining the Union as an 'experimental' polity. Experimentalism is a mode of governing typically associated with federations, which have to reconcile unitary constitutional foundations with high degrees of local differentiations and a fragmented division of powers. In the lack of a fully-fledged constitution, experimentalism has characterised EU polity formation from the start. This process has in fact involved the search for new ways and modes of combining the classical triad of boundaries, authority and social bonds as well as defining what it means for the member states to remain together and to engage in an 'ever closer union'.

This mode of development has inherently exposed the EU to the challenge of political disruption. Take the process of providing the new polity with a coherent and sustainable configuration of boundaries and binding authority. In historical state building, this was essentially a one-way process of external demarcation and power centralisation, facing a limited and manageable resistance from relatively weak local rulers. In EU building, this process has instead split in two parts: a *pars destruens*, i.e. the internal removal of pre-existing inter-state boundaries and the gradual disempowerment of domestic authorities, and a *pars construens*, i.e. the reconstruction of pan-EU boundaries and central institutions. This double process has been much more complicated than historical state building and has inevitably raised formidable challenges: boundary removal and power transfer tend to undermine national political structures and prompt their resistance to 'opening'; the EU finds it hard to reconstruct an adequate and coherent boundary and authority configuration and to counterbalance domestic instability, possibly unleashing vicious disintegrative dynamics. A similar syndrome affects the also a third dimension, i.e. the Europeanisation of identities and solidarities.

More than six decades of increasing integration show however that the EU has been able to make a virtue of necessity. Observing the way in which integration has advanced, one is tempted to quote the lapidary comment that Samuel Johnson once made about a dog walking on its hind legs: "it was not a good walk, but what is surprising is that it managed to do it somehow". EU polity builders have so far "managed to somehow" reconcile two apparently contrasting goals: 1) thinning/hollowing out pre-existing national polities without disrupting them, 2) consolidating the wider 'host' polity (the EU, precisely) and safeguarding its overall durability.

The lesson seems clear: the experimental building of the EU can advance only to the extent that it does not undermine multi-level polity maintenance (i.e. the maintenance of both domestic polities and the EU polity as a whole). This exercise is experimental not only because it requires inventiveness and discovery, but also because it remains constantly sensitive to unexpected events, miscalculations and unintended effects, amplifying uncertainty. In perforating and re-moulding the hard shell of member stateness, the EU has to follow the winding route of political and institutional 'ice-breaking', faced with contingent risks of failure – but also with opportunities of success and even occasional serendipity. To return to our initial question, this is the overarching mechanism which accounts for both crisis-proneness and resilience.

How has this mechanism operated during the Covid-19 crisis? The pandemic re-opened – with a vengeance – the foundational controversy over 'who owes what to whom' when members states are hit by severe adversities. The divisive imagery of saints and sinners, good and bad pupils which had plagued the Euro-crisis reappeared in Europe's public sphere, often formulated in the crude language of the early 2010s. In March 2020, the specter of a new existential crisis made a second sinister appearance. This time around, however, worried about the specter and building on past experiences, some EU leaders (in particular Von der Leyen, Macron and Merkel) engaged in a deliberate strategy of multi-level polity maintenance. First, the rules of the S*tability and* G*rowth* P*act* and on state aids were suspended and the ECB guaranteed its quantitative easing, thus creating immediate room for adequate fiscal responses, also on the side of the most indebted member states. National polities were thus 'rescued' from the risk of functional and possibly political collapse. Behind the scenes, technical negotiations started in their turn to search for acceptable common solutions to the emergency, capable of safeguarding the EU polity as such. Principled disagreements and policy disputes did not subside, but leaders started to converge towards the basic logic of the N*extGeneration*EU plan outlined by the Commission, i.e. that of addressing the crisis by "walking the road together", without "leaving countries, people and regions behind".

The maintenance of the EU polity required a two pronged strategy. The first prong was the construction of an ambitious experiment of cross-national solidarity – the NGEU plan – through a package of initiatives for the recovery and resilience of the member states – a package including also non-repayable grants to the economically more fragile ones. The second prong was a communicative campaign aimed at bolstering a sense of community among domestic publics, especially those of "core" member states. Germany was the main protagonist of the strategy. After decades of absolute opposition to any form of debt mutualisation and transnational transfers, this country not only accepted, but resolutely promoted the activation of the most morally demanding type of solidarity for a compound polity, implicitly based on the principle: to each constituent unit according to its fiscal capacity, to each according to its fiscal needs (for investments and reforms).

The communicative efforts made to (re)build the EU's solidaristic ethos deserve particular attention: never before had so much commitment been directed towards EU community building. G*emeinsamkeit* is a precious system good, which territorial authorities mainly produce through symbolic actions, with a view to infusing value in common belongingness. Togetherness must be discursively constructed, addressing different publics: political and social élites – especially the media – ordinary voters – "the people" – international observers, the markets and so on. Leaders must engage in a communicative discourse aimed at generating sympathy and affection towards the community as such, by stressing (dramatizing, even) the seriousness of the crisis, evoking symbols of togetherness and solidarity and underlying the latter's key role for overcoming the crisis and defeating the polity's alleged enemies.

While she was not the only leader engaged in the symbolic valorization of the EU as community, Merkel did play the decisive role. The sequence of speeches pronounced by the Chancellor between April and July 2020 reveals all the typical traits of community-oriented communication. At the beginning of the crisis, Merkel used mainly a 'public health' frame (the crisis as pandemic) and an 'economic frame' (the crisis as a huge threat of recession). With the intensification of inter-state conflict, she switched however to a 'political-ethical frame' (the crisis as a polity challenge), pinpointing the EU political enemies: "the anti-democratic forces, the radical, authoritarian movements, [who] are just waiting for economic crises to be politically abused". And, more importantly, she emphasized that the challenge could only me overcome through joint action: "We must make bold proposals, otherwise we just let things happen… Europe must act together, the nation state alone has no future". Acting together meant to revive and bolster the spirit of solidarity: "I am convinced that the social dimension is just as decisive as the economic one. A socially and economically just Europe is crucial for democratic cohesion. It is the best way to counter all those who seek to weaken our democracies and question all that binds us together".

In order to fully appreciate the significance of the German shift, we must interpret it on the backdrop of two factors: 1) the rise of the so-called constraining dissensus about integration on the side of public opinion (including in Germany) and the ensuing difficulties that domestic leaders encountered in promoting EU building without jeopardizing their domestic support and risking dangerous forms of politicization; the self-inflicted , antisolidaristic 'rhetorical trap' built over the years by Germany's ordoliberal intelligentsia. After all the Covid-19 crisis affected directly the situation of German voters and their economic interests: why transfer resources to other member states? Angela Merkel was well aware of such obstacles and made a systematic endeavor to reconcile at the symbolic level the logic of EU building with the logic of national interest. This was achieved mainly by using an ethical-political rationale, according to which supporting Europe and promoting its integration was in the interest of the German state and even represented its historical 'destiny'. In the speech delivered at the Bundestag on 23 April 2020, the Chancellor explicitly raised the question of Germany's role in Europe: "The commitment to European unification has become an integral part of national 'reason of state" […] The European Union is a community of destiny […] At this juncture, Europe is not Europe if it does not stand alongside each country, starting with the most indebted ones. What is good for Europe is always very important for Germany".

With her communicative discourse during the Covid-19 crisis, Merkel not only revived the backbone of German policy (the Europeanization of Germany) which she had allegedly broken ten years earlier, but also redefined it as, no less, as a matter of 'fate', resting on explicit normative commitments and historical justifications. One must also consider that Merkel chose a very difficult type of political investment: an investment in solidarity, even involving a sacrifice of German money, on one hand, and "giving something for nothing" (the NGEU grants) on the other. It is more than plausible to interpret developments during 2020 non only as a short-term, pandemic-specific type of policy experimentalism, but as the result of longer term process of polity maintenance learning through operational conditioning. In other words, the main actors (Germany most prominently) were able and willing of reflexively building on previous failures at the polity level and therefore calibrating their choices based on the 'meta-goal' of holding the polity together.

Liberal and democratic polities thrive on policy conflicts driven by material and ideal interests. But they break apart without a constant gardening of their 'bounding', 'binding' and 'bonding' foundations, with a view to reconciling opening with closure, conflicts with togetherness, authority with loyalty, competition with solidarity. Navigating as it does along, rather than across, the Rubicon, the construction and maintenance of the EU polity is particularly demanding. EU leaders must operate as constant gardeners of a double stability: that of the member states and that of the Union as a hosting polity and 'holding environment'. Crises open up the margins of the possible, but the latter can be a blessing as much as a curse. The relative balance between the two (curse and blessing) is shaped by a complex set of factors. But a Weberian metaphor comes to mind: that political leaders as "ferrymen" between the realm of the possible (*Möglich*) and the realm of the actual (*Wirklich*). For this operation to positively impact on human life chances, the ferrymen must have "long gaze and a responsible heart". Such political virtues are especially important for Europe and its future. The pandemic is not over yet, climate change jeopardizes the planet's survival, the Ukrainian war raises unprecedented security threats. The waters of the Rubicon are getting increasingly rough: can we trust the gaze and hearts of Europe's current ferrymen?

Abstracts

Alexandar Damjanovski

'Buffering' the US-China Tech Rivalry: The EU Strategy in the Era of Technological Competition

Technology has always been an important factor for assessing a state's international leadership and its strategic autonomy. As a key variable in the 'security dilemma', technology, and its application, influences polarity and is a crucial variable in comprehending the intricacies of international alignments in an era of great-power competition. By focusing on balancing and its cognates approaches, traditional realist analysis has proven insufficient to fully account for the EU's strategies in the struggle for technological power and sovereignty. While 'buck-passing' and 'chain ganging' perspectives may shed some light on the EU's foreign relations under multipolarity, 'buffering' better explains the EU's positioning vis-à-vis US-China tech rivalry, in an era still dominated by the US hegemony. The case of the EU's 'buffering' approach is illustrated here by the empirical evidence of EU initiatives over semiconductor technology, fundamental for its strategic autonomy. The research will also inflate the academic debate revolving around the EU's attempt to ascend as new 'defence technological power' and how trade politicisation has also reached the security domain.

Loretta Dell'Aguzzo and Emidio Diodato

The Belt and Road Initiative: An Opportunity or a Threat for the European Union?

This article discusses the stances adopted by EU institutions and Member States towards the Belt and Road Initiative and aims at accounting for the factors that shaped EU's response over time. In particular, through the analysis of official documents, publications and policies, this article shows that at first EU's reaction was more favorable and later, starting from 2016, its attitude changed to become more hostile. This shift towards a more 'protectionist' stance reflects a change in the perception of China's external policy occurred not only at the EU, but also at some Member States' level. Whereas during the first two years after its launch, the BRI appeared as a carrier of opportunities for development, when the first BRI-related projects were implemented, both EU and its core Member States started to see it as a threat not only from an economic, but also from a political and security perspective. In particular, EU worries concern both the threat that this initiative poses to the rules-based current international order and to EU cohesion, as the BRI affects in different ways European sub-regions. Moreover, this paper argues that, even though EU and US have different interests and attitudes towards the BRI, the EU involvement in this initiative has not negatively affected transatlantic relations and over time EU and US reactions to the BRI evolved in similar ways. However, whereas on the one side the EU has started to counterbalance the ascendance of China, on the other side it has pursued this goal autonomously from the US and without overlooking the fact that China is not only a rival and a 'systemic competitor' but also an important negotiating partner.

Elena Icardi

Why Limit Excessive Individual Wealth? Reasons and Problems of Limitarianism

Can excessive individual wealth be restricted? This is the provocative question addressed by limitarianism, a recent theory of distributive justice put forward by Ingrid Robeyns. On this account, the fortune of the super-rich should be restrained both to prevent their disproportionate political influence and to cope with some contemporary issues, e.g., global poverty or climate change. Indeed, Robeyns proposes two arguments in favour of limitarianism: the democratic argument and the argument from unmet urgent needs. However, while for preserving the democratic ideal of political equality a top marginal taxation rate of 100% should apply, for raising the needed resources to tackle the unmet urgent needs such a top marginal taxation rate should decrease not to disincentivize individuals from collecting these resources in the first place. Given this tension, in the present

paper, I argue that only the democratic argument justifies limitarianism. Firstly, I explain why the friction imposes a choice between the two arguments. Secondly, I show how, by calling for a progressive taxation scheme rather than for an actual ceiling to individual wealth, the argument from unmet urgent needs is not a good argument for limitarianism. Finally, I argue that, if limitarianism is justified by the democratic argument, the limit should be sensitive to the overall economic distribution – namely the limit should be relative rather than absolute as Robeyns upholds. More precisely, in my view, the threshold should be established with respect to how much median wealth a citizen might own without enjoying boundless political influence.

Costanza Marcellino

Between Autocratic Linkage, Support and Non-interference: An Assessment of China's Influence in South-Eastern, Central, and Eastern Europe

The enthusiasm driven by the third wave of global democratization during the 1970s recently rolled back at the onset of a new wave of autocratization and the simultaneous rise of authoritarian powers such as Russia and China. Whether the empirical phenomenon of recent autocratization is connected with the increasing Chinese engagement with other countries remains unclear. This article addresses this gap by investigating the impact of the Chinese external influence on the evolution of regimes located in South-Eastern, Central and Eastern Europe. By employing data from different sources such as V-Dem dataset, WITS and CEPII database and by running random- and fixed-effects regression analyses, this study presents a comprehensive picture of the Chinese engagement's role on other countries' autocratization tendencies and their shifts in democratic quality.

Biographical notes

Alexandar Damjanovski is a PhD Candidate at the School of International Studies of the University of Trento. His doctoral research applies Game Theory to European defence cooperation. He holds an MA in International Relations and European Studies and a BA in International Studies (University of Florence), and he has a Master in Diplomatic Studies from the Italian Society for International Organisation (Rome). He has interned at the Communication Service of the European University Institute and worked as a junior researcher in the OSCE project "Confidence-Building Measures to Reduce the Risks of Conflict Stemming from the Use of ICT". Furthermore, he has worked as BlueBook trainee at the European Commission at the DG Defence Industry and Space. Currently, he is a Lecutrer in Geopolitics to undegraduate students at the Unicollage Scuola Superiore Mediatori Linguistici, Florence.

Loretta Dell'Aguzzo is Adjunct Professor of Strategic Geopolitics at Unicollege - Scuola Superiore per Mediatori Linguistici of Florence. Her research focuses on comparative authoritarianism, democratization and state formation with a regional focus on post-communist and MENA countries. Among her publications are *Conflitti separatisti. Caucaso meridionale, Europa orientale e Balcani* (Carocci, 2020) and the edited volume *The 'state' of pivot states in south-eastern Mediterranean: Turkey, Egypt, Israel, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring* (Stranieri University Press, 2016).

Emidio Diodato is Full Professor of International Politics and Political Science in the Department of International Human and Social Sciences at the University for Foreigners of Perugia, Italy. His research focuses on geopolitics, foreign policy and international relations theory. Among his publications is *Berlusconi. The Diplomat* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).

Maurizio Ferrera is Professor of Political Science at the University of Milan. He has been Visiting Professor at several universities, including UC Berkeley, London School of Economics, Science PO (Paris). His work has mainly focused on social welfare and European integration. His latest books are L*a verità al potere* (with Franca D'Agostini, Einaudi, 2019), L*a* S*ocietà del* Q*uinto* S*tato* (2019, Laterza) and R*otta di* C*ollisione*: E*uro versus* W*elfare* (Laterza, 2017). He is currently completing the volume P*olitics and* S*ocial* V*isions* for Oxford University Press (2023). He has been a columnist for "Corriere della Sera" since 2003. In 2013 Ferrera won an ERC Advanced Grant (REScEU: www.resceu.eu). In 2019 he won an ERC Synergy Grant (SOLID: www.solid.eu). In 2021 he was awarded the Mattei Dogan Prize for "high achievement in political science" by the International Political Science Association.

Elena Icardi is a PhD Candidate in Political Studies at the Network for the Advancement of Social and Political Studies (NASP) of the University of Milan (Political Theory curriculum). She is currently working on her doctoral thesis on contemporary republicanism and distributive justice. She spent a period abroad at the Ethics Institute of Utrecht University. Her research interests mostly focus on Neo-republicanism, Rousseau's political thought, freedom as non-domination, equality, and democratic participation.

Costanza Marcellino is a PhD Candidate in Politics at LUISS Guido Carli University. She holds a Double Research Master in European Studies from Maastricht and Cologne Universities and a BA in Politics and Economics from the University of Milan. Her research interests include public opinion, European identity, political participation and voting behaviour.

Kalypso Nicolaïdis is professorial Chair of Global Affairs at the EUI School of Transnational Governance in Florence, where she convenes the EUI Democracy Forum. She is currently on leave from the University of Oxford and was professor at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and at ENA. She has worked with numerous EU institutions, including as a member of the European Council's reflection group on the future of Europe chaired by Felipe González (2008-10). Her research revolves around internal and external aspects of European integration as well as global affairs, theaters of recognition, demoicratic theory, transnational legal empathy and social solidarity, global governance and international trade, sustainable integration, post-colonialism, myth and politics and the import of new technologies on international relations. Her last books are: *A Citizen's Guide to the Rule of Law - Why We Need to Fight for the Most Precious Human Inventions of All Time* (with Adis Merdzanovic, 2021) and *Exodus, Reckoning, Sacrifice: Three Meanings of Brexit* (2019). Her website: http://kalypsonicolaidis.com/.

Jonathan White is Professor of Politics at the London School of Economics. His most recent book is *Politics of Last Resort: Governing by Emergency in the European Union* (Oxford University Press, 2019); previous titles include *The Meaning of Partisanship* (with Lea Ypi, Oxford University Press, 2016), and *Political Allegiance after European Integration* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). He was awarded the 2017 British Academy Brian Barry Prize for Excellence in Political Science.

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