

# THE EU'S GLOBAL GATEWAY

BUILDING CONNECTIVITY AS A POLICY

Tyyne Karjalainen

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The European Union's Global Gateway, adopted in December 2021, marks the continuation of efforts by numerous international actors to limit China's increasing influence in global infrastructure diplomacy. This FIIA Working Paper analyzes the role of the EU's connectivity agenda in this crowded market and positions the Global Gateway in the context of EU external relations. Based on a conceptual and policy analysis, and a review of analyst debate and cross-cutting literature, the paper makes three key observations.

Firstly, the EU institutions, sometimes siloed, as well as the member states, divided in their China politics, have managed to agree on a comprehensive policy programme which – on paper – connects existing economic tools to a foreign policy vision of the Union. Secondly, successful delivery of the high-politics yet hands-on programme will, however, require connecting diplomatic and technical expertise, and public and private financing. Thirdly, the normative agenda embedded in the Gateway builds on a conventional role for the EU as a global actor, but can be expected to face challenges with its simultaneous goal of achieving a comprehensive reach.



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# THE EU'S GLOBAL GATEWAY

## BUILDING CONNECTIVITY AS A POLICY

### INTRODUCTION

In December 2021, the European Commission and the High Representative<sup>1</sup> of the European Union introduced the “Global Gateway”, a new European vision and a funding scheme with 300 billion euros to be mobilized in the timeframe from 2021 to 2027 to build “smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems” around the globe.<sup>2</sup> The communication by the EU political lead implied that not all investments in digitalization, infrastructure, transportation, or energy connections are of sufficient quality, with the EU duly committing itself to a development programme characterized by high standards, good governance, transparency, and sustainability.<sup>3</sup> The framing consolidated the Gateway as a European countermove to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the nine-year-old, massive infrastructure development and loans programme undertaken by China.<sup>4</sup>

The BRI, launched in 2013 and formerly known as the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative, already operates in some 70 countries on several continents,<sup>5</sup> advancing its core mission to create overland trade routes for the “belt” in Eurasia in particular, in addition to the maritime “road”.<sup>6</sup> The EU’s Global Gateway (henceforth EUGG) is only the most recent addition to a continuum of efforts to offer alternatives to China’s infrastructure diplomacy, and to limit its increasing global influence. In June 2021, the United States adopted a global development and infrastructure investment programme “Build Back Better World” (B3W) with the support

of the G7 countries,<sup>7</sup> building on similar prior programmes initiated by the US.<sup>8</sup> Japan<sup>9</sup> and Australia,<sup>10</sup> among others, have already published similar agendas.

The increased international interest in connectivity originates from the intensifying global power competition, particularly in the economic realm. In the 21st century, using economic means for power politics is a growing trend.<sup>11</sup> While both the EU and the US have attempted to develop geoeconomic strategies to limit the rise of China’s global role,<sup>12</sup> the BRI has also been interpreted as originally motivated by rivalry with the West, and the US in particular.<sup>13</sup> The trade war that started between the US and China in 2018 blocked multilateral processes in global trade, narrowing the EU’s strategic leeway.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, the EU has developed a mission to gain more strategic autonomy, not least in economic terms.<sup>15</sup>

Using economic means to advance foreign policy objectives is not a new *modus operandi* for the EU, whose global clout has been built on a solid share of global trade. The EU has been proactive in establishing free trade agreements (FTAs), including region-to-region agreements, Association Agreements, Economic Partnership Agreements, and bilateral FTAs with foreign partners, many of whom will also be targeted by the EUGG. The trade agreements have ranged from having a close link to foreign and security policy to more purely commercial objectives.<sup>16</sup> Today, both economic cooperation agreements and targeted economic sanctions are some of the most popular tools of the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP),<sup>17</sup> with states in the 21st century generally opting for economic instead of military means in international crisis situations.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the EU has also consolidated a leading role in the world as a provider of development aid,<sup>19</sup> a field of

1 High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

2 European Commission 2021 A.

3 European Commission 1.12.2021 C: President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen argued that the few available options for infrastructure investment too often come with a lot of “small print” with big consequences (financially, politically, and socially), and hence, new trusted partners are needed, the EUGG being “this positive offer” (esp. 04:00–05:00).

4 Policy analysts have been unanimous in framing the EU Global Gateway as a European response to the BRI (e.g. Tagliapietra 7.12.2021; Gavas & Pleeck 6.12.2021; Tanchum & Murphy 29.9.2021; on the previous EU connectivity strategy, see e.g. Biedermann 2019), but the EU official communication has, however, avoided such explicit characterizations (see the official response to the question “Is Global Gateway a response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and how does it relate to others?”: European Commission 1.12.2021 E).

5 World Bank 2019. In the absence of an official list of participating countries, there are different ways to assess the scope of the BRI. By 2019, 125 countries had signed BRI collaboration agreements, but only 71 countries were by their geographic location defined as “Belt and Road corridor economies” by the World Bank 2019 report (p. xi).

6 Ibid.

7 The White House 12.6.2021.

8 See Käpylä & Aaltola 2019.

9 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015.

10 Australian Government A & B 2017; AIFFP 2019.

11 Scholvin & Wigell 2018; see also Blackwill & Harris 2016.

12 On the US–China competition, see Li 2020.

13 E.g. Jie & Wallace 13.9.2021; see also Li 2020.

14 Herrero 2019.

15 See Helwig 2020.

16 E.g. Woolcock 2007, pp. 2–4.

17 Olsen 2017; see also Helwig et al. 2020 and Rapnouil 2017.

18 Scholvin & Wigell 2018.

19 European Commission F.

external action with a recognized foreign and security policy aspect.<sup>20</sup>

This Working Paper analyzes two key questions: Firstly, what connectivity signifies as an EU policy; and secondly, what the Global Gateway adds to the EU external relations framework, based on its initial outlook and reception. Both questions are examined in the context of increasing power competition and against the backdrop of competing connectivity initiatives by other international actors. The first question is addressed through a conceptual reflection combined with policy analysis (Section 2), while the second part of the paper makes a more practical attempt to reflect on recent analyst debate and expert commentaries<sup>21</sup> in addition to cross-cutting academic literature, in order to understand the EU's connectivity policy in its internal (EU) and external (international) context (Section 3). Reflecting on findings from both parts, the paper also devotes a section to analyzing the EU's normative agenda embedded in the Global Gateway, based on official communication and documents (Section 4). The concluding section summarizes observations from the analysis, noting that the EUGG represents an ambitious policy programme whose success depends on developing institutional and financial abilities, and makes a few forward-looking reflections about implementing the connectivity agenda in the post-Covid-19 era.

## SHAPING GLOBALIZATION BY BUILDING CONNECTIVITY

The policy relevance of connectivity increased in the Asia-Pacific region in particular in the late 2000s, following a need for infrastructure investments.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, the concept started to gain popularity in political discourse. Despite being a relatively new notion, connectivity has already turned into a buzzword, often ill-defined, and constituting a central “paradigm of global organisation” today.<sup>23</sup> Ries has defined connectivity as “all the ways in which states, organisations (commercial or else) and societies are connected to each other and interact across the globe”, including “physical flows of people and goods as well as information flows”,

representing “a property (of being connected or interconnected)” rather than “a policy”.<sup>24</sup> While the definition is aligned with the use of the connectivity concept in the EU policy discourse, this Working Paper suggests that for the purpose of analyzing EU connectivity policy and the Global Gateway, also understanding connectivity as “a policy” is useful for two reasons. Firstly, there seems to be more agency embedded in connectivity than in sister concepts such as globalization; and secondly, the normative content conveyed by the concept in EU policies and policy discourse stands for more than an apolitical “property”, as demonstrated in the fourth section of this paper – ‘Building bridges with EU norms and standards’.

While the relationship between connectivity and globalization can be described as ‘sisterly’, with some seeing the two as synonymous, the connectivity concept has been interpreted as lacking some of the negative connotations associated with globalization.<sup>25</sup> The two concepts also seem to form a useful pair, with connectivity regarded as infrastructure (discussed below) or as “being connected”, contributing to globalization. Globalization as a phenomenon has typically been associated with US unipolar magnitude (i.e. Americanization),<sup>26</sup> whereas connectivity lacks links to any particular “pole”. While the notion of globalization is popularly used to refer to trends of a global hyper-scale that continue to exist without active re-construction, seeming impossible to erase even at the time of a pandemic when less interconnectedness would be desirable,<sup>27</sup> connectivity is reflected instead in EU policy discourse as something to be planned and constructed. As demonstrated by extracts from EU policy documents in the following subsection, the notion of connectivity is used to communicate an effort to control how globalization takes place. As elaborated in the fourth section, in EU policies, connectivity exports the idea of European regionalism to other regions, and aims to define which values, norms and standards are applied to the building of the connections.

Attaching a politico-strategic level of intentionality to technical development projects, the connectivity concept is also closely linked to the study framework of geopolitics, and to geoeconomics in particular. The geoeconomic aspect in the EU's connectivity policy is most visible in how it is articulated and interpreted

20 E.g. Merket 2012.

21 At the time of writing, academic literature on the one-month-old Global Gateway remains in the pipeline, but several scholars have already published short commentaries and blog posts on it, constituting a key reference point in this analysis. The author also expresses her gratitude to experts and officials with whom background interviews were conducted, crucially supporting the analysis.

22 Pascha 2020, p. 688.

23 Gaens 2021, pp. 216, 215.

24 Ries 2019, p. 1.

25 Gaens 2019, p. 23.

26 See Aggarwal & Fogarty 2004.

27 See e.g. van de Pas 2020.

as a response or competitor to China's infrastructure projects.<sup>28</sup> Geoeconomics, an umbrella concept with a contested definition and varying applications, signifies the practice of power politics and geopolitical competition through economic means<sup>29</sup> or, in other words, "the admixture of the logic of conflict with the methods of commerce".<sup>30</sup> Connectivity is considered to be deeply entrenched in geoeconomics,<sup>31</sup> interconnected infrastructure having replaced conventional arenas of international conflict, at least for some actors.<sup>32</sup> Hence, despite the fact that this Working Paper devotes little attention to the field of study that emerged in the years after Luttwak's groundbreaking paper, the framework remains crucial in this paper's attempt to understand the competitive and power political context of infrastructure investments in and around the EUGG in particular.

At the same time, connectivity also refers to the very tangible, concrete measures of being connected, covering both "'hard' infrastructures as well as 'soft' regulatory measures or socio-cultural ties".<sup>33</sup> Connectivity translates the geoeconomic strategies of competing international actors into a practical construction of airports, fibre-optic cables, or railways, enabling people-to-people, production-to-market and supplier-to-consumer connections to take place. Infrastructure is another concept systematically used where connectivity is concerned, typically entailing few different meanings from it.<sup>34</sup> Linked to this concrete outlook, connectivity also seems to be spatially locatable; it is planned for and built in certain geographical locations, in this canal or on that seabed (cf. globalization is rarely understood as constructed in any specific location) and, in keeping with the EU agenda, typically in a certain region.

The notion of regionalism goes hand in hand with connectivity.<sup>35</sup> As pointed out by Gaens, some consider connectivity to equate with regional integration.<sup>36</sup> Regionalism as a subject of scholarly interest gained increasing relevance in the 2000s, to some degree in the context of and as a challenger to the globalization paradigm.<sup>37</sup> In the global economy field of study, the

rise of the concept has empirical confirmation: since the millennium, regional trading arrangements and other forms of regional economic cooperation have increased significantly.<sup>38</sup> While scholars disagree on how to define regionalism, this paper refers to it rather loosely as signifying a political process and efforts linked to regional integration and cooperation, including economic means and institution creation.<sup>39</sup>

As this paper points out, interregionalism in particular seems central to understanding the EU's connectivity policies. Aggarwal & Fogarty suggest that if globalization reflects an American view of organizing the world, interregionalism could instead project the EU's ideas of regionalism through trade relationships to other regions.<sup>40</sup> Starting from the 1990s, the EU has increasingly emphasized region-to-region relations in its external policies.<sup>41</sup> Several scholars have investigated the politics through which the EU promotes regional integration in other regions, and exports its own model of regionalism abroad.<sup>42</sup> From early on, following the perception that there is a connection between regional integration and development, the EU has linked the two together.<sup>43</sup> The region-to-region FTAs have also served as a means of promoting the European model of integration in other regions.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, understanding the objectives and the intended lever arm of the EUGG requires visiting the conceptual framework of normative power. European normative power is a highly theorized and debated concept, whose core can be summarized as European principles, norms and ideas being transferred to foreign countries, relying on persuasion and the appeal of their ideational power, instead of force or material incentives.<sup>45</sup> Material incentives, however, constitute the starting point for analysis in this Working Paper, since the infrastructure investment programme in focus – the EUGG – carries normative objectives and power only peripherally. Hence, the paper does not analyze normative power as envisioned by Manners,<sup>46</sup> but the analysis includes elements that support this theoretical framework. The analysis also touches upon regulative power, which previous research has considered the

28 E.g. Biedermann 2019; on the EUGG, see Tagliapietra 7.12.2021; Gavvas & Pleeck 6.12.2021; Tanchum & Murphy 29.9.2021.

29 See Wigell, Scholvin & Aaltola 2018.

30 Luttwak 1990, p. 19.

31 Wigell & Mikkola 2021.

32 Gaens 2021, p. 216.

33 Ries 2019, p. 1.

34 Pascha 2020, p. 690.

35 See Gaens, Sinkkonen & Vogt 2021 on superregional connectivity.

36 Gaens 2019, p. 23.

37 See Buzan & Waeber 2003.

38 Plummer 2019, p. 16.

39 See Behr & Jokela 2018 or Mansfield & Solingen 2010 for a review of different definitions.

40 The 2003 version of the paper, p. 23.

41 Söderbaum & Van Langenhove 2005, p. 250.

42 E.g. Behr & Jokela 2018; Börzel & Risse 2009.

43 Söderbaum & Van Langenhove 2005, p. 251.

44 E.g. Woolcock 2007, p. 4.

45 Manners 2002, 2009.

46 Ibid.

EU's key asset in the international arena.<sup>47</sup> While the "Brussels effect" captures the phenomenon of the EU being able to unilaterally regulate the global marketplace based on regulation transmission by global market actors,<sup>48</sup> the EUGG ostensibly represents a logic of injecting EU norms and standards into foreign markets even more directly.

### What connectivity signifies as an EU policy

The EU approach to building connectivity has developed as a patchwork. Many regard the 2018 strategy "Connecting Europe and Asia – building blocks for an EU strategy"<sup>49</sup> as a pioneering communication that placed connectivity at the core of the EU's Asia politics, but the 2016 EU Global Strategy had already lumped China and connectivity together,<sup>50</sup> following policies from the 1990s when the "Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor" was established to connect Europe with China.<sup>51</sup> The 2018 strategy understands connectivity based on a definition agreed at an earlier Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) summit, namely as "bringing countries, people and societies closer together", as it "is a means to foster deeper economic and people-to-people ties", including "hard and soft aspects", "the physical and institutional social-cultural linkages", covering "all modes of transport (aviation, maritime, rail and road)", "institutions, infrastructure, financial cooperation, IT, digital links, energy, education and research, human resources development, tourism, cultural exchanges as well as customs, trade and investment facilitation".<sup>52</sup>

The 2018 strategy established the European way to connectivity, with sustainability, comprehensiveness, and a rules-based approach as the key objectives.<sup>53</sup> Some of the normative principles stem back to the preceding ASEM meeting, which also referred to a "level-playing field, free and open trade, market principles, multi-dimensionality, inclusiveness, fairness, openness, transparency, financial viability, cost-effectiveness and mutual benefits", as well as to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development targets.<sup>54</sup> A connectivity partnership with Japan in 2019 further elaborated the EU objectives; mentioning a number of principles, "sustainability as a shared value, quality infrastructure and

[...] belief in the benefits of a level playing field" seem to form the core of the normative framework jointly developed.<sup>55</sup>

In July 2021, Council Conclusions on a "Globally Connected Europe" were adopted.<sup>56</sup> The conclusions start with a note that highlights the nexus between the EU's foreign and security policy and economic and development policies, stating that "a geostrategic approach to connectivity has long-term implications for advancing the EU's economic, foreign and development policy and security interests".<sup>57</sup> The conclusions specify that a strategic implementation of the connectivity agenda can enhance both the EU's global role as well as have specific effects on global interconnectedness, namely by diversifying value chains, reducing strategic dependencies, and contributing to a more secure, resilient, and human-centric digital ecosystem.<sup>58</sup> While China is not mentioned in particular as the one being challenged, the conclusions refer to "other key economies" that have developed "their own approaches and tools for connectivity".<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the conclusions set the agenda for the Commission and the High Representative to develop a communication on an EU global connectivity strategy by spring 2022, with a particular funding framework, and ensuring visibility, including a unified narrative, of the EU's actions.<sup>60</sup> The first part of the task was fulfilled in December 2021 when the European Commission and the High Representative launched the EU Global Gateway. Aiming to boost "smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world",<sup>61</sup> the EUGG announced the objective of raising investments of 300 billion euros by 2027, covering the areas of digitalization, climate and energy, transport, health, education and research, and including soft and hard infrastructure.<sup>62</sup> As a natural continuation of the normative agenda developed in the preceding documents, the joint communication on the EUGG starts with an appeal to democracies to "demonstrate their ability to deliver on today's global challenges",<sup>63</sup> also tying the strategy to the US-led B3W programme. In addition to democratic values, the EUGG's other principles include high standards, good governance

47 Bradford 2020.

48 Ibid.

49 European Commission 19.9.2018.

50 EEAS 2016, pp. 37-38.

51 See Gaens 2021, p. 219.

52 ASEM 2017, p. 1. This definition is also broadly cited in the academic literature.

53 See Biedermann 2019; European Commission 19.9.2018.

54 ASEM 2017, p. 1.

55 EEAS 2019, p.1.

56 Council of the EU 12.7.2021.

57 Ibid., p. 2.

58 Ibid., p. 3.

59 Ibid., p. 3.

60 Ibid., pp. 4-6.

61 European Commission 2021 A.

62 European Commission 2021 A & 1.12.2021 C.

63 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 1.

and transparency, equal partnerships, greenness and cleanliness, security, and “catalysing private sector investment”.<sup>64</sup>

To clarify the financial commitment, the funding of the EUGG builds on the “Team Europe” approach, which indicates that not all of the 300 billion euros between 2021 and 2027 will come from the EU budget. It is planned that up to 135 billion euros of investments will be mobilized from the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+, an arm of NDICI Global Europe), part of which still depends on (i.e. was made conditional upon) investments by the European Investment Bank (EIB). A total of 18 billion euros was announced as “grant funding” from the EU External Assistance Programmes, while it is estimated that the remaining 145 billion euros will be contributed by other European financial and development finance institutions.<sup>65</sup> To this end, the joint communication on the EUGG devotes a separate section to elaborating an “investment-friendly environment” which aims to ensure that private investment is attracted to support the public financing of the agenda.<sup>66</sup>

In practice, the EUGG projects will be delivered through “Team Europe Initiatives”, which signifies combining efforts by the EU institutions, member states and European financial institutions, while the governance and steering of the EUGG’s implementation seems to be divided between the Commission and the EEAS in particular. “On the ground”, EU Delegations are supposed to take a key coordinating role, reaching out to partners, and matching identified projects with financing. Moreover, the close involvement of the member states is mentioned several times.<sup>67</sup> In terms of the practical mechanisms to launch EUGG projects, existing instruments will be used, and their connectivity-linked activities henceforth marked with the Global Gateway label.<sup>68</sup>

## PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENTS OF THE GLOBAL GATEWAY

When the EU connectivity strategy was adopted in 2018, it was as considered as a key facet of the messaging that it offers an alternative to the Belt and the Road Initiative,

inserting European values and principles into the global market.<sup>69</sup> Criticized for a lack of clarity in terms of funding and for its inability to combine European investment channels, the strategy’s shortcomings in terms of partnerships and the clarity of its objectives were also highlighted.<sup>70</sup> The EU Global Gateway would appear to be a relative success in comparison, scaling up, specifying, and harmonizing largely existing tools on the EU agenda. Yet the initial reception to the EUGG has also been ambivalent; on the one hand, the programme has been assessed as an achievement compared to previous EU efforts to formulate connectivity policies, while on the other hand, the credibility of the programme as a genuine challenger to China’s BRI is doubted.

China’s national English language newspaper labelled the EUGG as another Western “rubber check”, with a non-convincing financial framework and hypocritical aims of claiming moral superiority to the BRI,<sup>71</sup> with some Western policy commentators making partly aligned assessments.<sup>72</sup> Some analysts are in general disappointed by the EUGG’s final outcome,<sup>73</sup> while others interpret it as being capable of competing with the BRI, at least in some geographical areas.<sup>74</sup> Many concerns seem to relate to the implementation of the programme, about which a number of technical details remain open,<sup>75</sup> while also the late timing of the EUGG – almost a decade after the BRI’s adoption – evoked concerns.<sup>76</sup>

In terms of the credibility of the funding scheme, the fact that the EUGG mostly draws from and repackages existing financial instruments did not convince commentators.<sup>77</sup> Many observed that in comparison to the EUGG’s 300 billion euro objective, BRI total investments have been estimated at one trillion US dollars by 2027.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, there are some qualitative differences in the numbers, since BRI funding mostly consists of loans, while the EUGG is also expected to deliver grants and direct investments.<sup>79</sup> The key problem is that it still remains open how the EUGG will succeed in tempting the private sector on board, with private investment constituting a significant share of the financial package.

64 European Commission 2021 A.

65 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, pp. 8–9.

66 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 11.

67 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 12; European Commission 1.12.2021 D.

68 Interview with an EU official, 19 January 2022.

69 Gaens 2019, p. 22.

70 Gehrke 2020, p. 242.

71 Qiaoyi & Fandi 1.12.2021/Global Times.

72 E.g. The Economist: “Why bullshit rules in Brussels”, 4.12.2021.

73 Gavvas & Pleeck 6.12.2021.

74 Tanchum & Murphy 29.9.2021 on Africa.

75 Colnaghi 20.12.2021.

76 Lau etc./Politico 30.11.2021.

77 Gavvas & Pleeck 6.12.2021.

78 Morgan Stanley 14.3.2018; or according to Pascha 2020, p. 695, the expectations are 1–2 trillion US dollars (only partly realized thus far).

79 European Commission 1.12.2021 D on EU; Gaens 2021, p. 217 on China; FRANCE24/Seibt 3.12.2021: quote from an interview with Francesca Ghiretti/Mercator Institute for China Studies.

There are rational problemata in incentivizing private actors to invest in public goods, such as infrastructure, while underinvestment in connectivity has also been explained by the internationality of the goods, similarly decreasing public actors' interest in investing.<sup>80</sup> While getting the private sector and member state financial institutions on board might take some time, the first EUGG projects could be expected to be launched with EU funding.<sup>81</sup>

Even relatively modest European connectivity investments can play a positive role in terms of the EU's foreign policy objectives, if well prioritized. Capable of offering alternative financing guarantees, grants and loans, the EU should be able to diversify (albeit not take over) the China-monopolized market in strategically relevant locations. Even modest investments, if strategically prioritized, can have significant security impacts for the partner countries as well as advance the EU's foreign and security political objectives.<sup>82</sup> Attaching a foreign policy vision to the infrastructure investments, however, remains a challenge on its own, as discussed below.

### **Connecting infrastructure projects to EU foreign policy?**

The EU has not always succeeded in connecting economics to foreign policy, with alleged miscalculations including, for example, the underestimation of the (foreign and security) policy aspect when agreeing on the Association Agreement with Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> Before the launch of the Global Gateway and the preceding Council Conclusions, some scholars such as Pascha estimated that the formulation of such a policy programme in the EU framework could be difficult.<sup>84</sup> At the time of adoption, the EUGG, however, combines a coherent and relatively large policy agenda with a financial framework and the political leverage of both the Commission and the EEAS.

The process of policy planning has required overcoming institutional silos between the foreign and security and economic and development policy sides of the Union. The EU's commercial policy is an exclusive competence of the Union, international trade being one of the first policy areas in which member

states transferred their sovereignty and mandated the Commission to act on their behalf.<sup>85</sup> In contrast, the EU CFSP remains highly intergovernmental, with member states in principle having to make decisions in unanimity, causing decision-making in the two policy fields to follow different logics. The EU External Action Service (EEAS), carrying out the CFSP and serving as the diplomatic representation of the Union abroad, was also only established in 2009, leaving some of the inter-institutional relations still to develop. While both the Commission and the EEAS play a role in EU development policy, previous research has pointed to a detachment between development cooperation and the CFSP in particular, with the two following different rules and procedures.<sup>86</sup>

The Global Gateway makes an effort to narrow down silos between the EU institutions, in addition to aiming to connect with the member states. Reflecting a recognition that the connectivity programme has a strong foreign and security policy aspect, institutional arrangements are expected to ensure coordination between the Commission, the EEAS and the member states in particular. A Global Gateway board, whose exact composition and mandate remain open, will play a central role in ensuring the strategic steering and cohesive implementation of the policy programme, starting with offering a framework for key stakeholders to agree on the principles and criteria of the Gateway projects. In the Council, a new working group is expected to be formed to reflect the elevated agenda. The Commission will also establish a Business Advisory Group, bringing together financial institutions and companies to ensure private sector involvement.<sup>87</sup> A key challenge for the EU will be to combine the necessary economic and technical know-how of infrastructure investments with diplomatic and foreign policy expertise.<sup>88</sup> While the EUGG mobilizes instruments that existed before the label, attaching a new foreign policy vision to ongoing activities is what the institutional arrangements should enable.

In addition to institutional bridge-building, the Global Gateway represents an effort to overcome political blocks between member states. To highlight the political challenge – and with the adoption of the joint programme, a political achievement – 11 of the EU member states are part of the 16 +1 cooperation framework

80 Pascha 2020, p. 692.

81 Interview with an EU official, 19 January 2022.

82 Interview with a policy analyst, 10 December 2021.

83 Xavier-Bender 2016, p. 2.

84 Pascha, p. 699.

85 European Parliament 2021.

86 E.g. Merket 2012.

87 Interview with an EU official, 19 January 2022; European Commission 1.12.2021 B.

88 See Olsen 2017.

between China and Central and Eastern European states, with Lithuania having dropped out last year,<sup>89</sup> and 18 of the 27 EU member states having already endorsed the BRI. The dependence of EU countries on good China relations has made joint critique towards China less likely to occur, and runs the risk that China could influence policymaking in the Union.<sup>90</sup> With this starting point, a level of difficulty can also be expected to continue after the adoption of the EUGG. While the Commission and the EEAS will have a key role in steering the implementation of the programme, successful delivery will require working together with the member states.

China constitutes a case in point in using connectivity politics as part of foreign policy, and the EU Global Gateway marks an attempt in the same direction. The joint communication on the EUGG notes that “In assisting others, the EU will also be contributing to the promotion of its own interests, to strengthening the resilience of its supply chains, and to opening up more trade opportunities for the EU economy”.<sup>91</sup> In the press conference after launching the EUGG, Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen started her speech on the Gateway by declaring that “this is the Geopolitical Commission in action”.<sup>92</sup> The rhetoric signals a serious effort by the EU to take a step towards more strategic actorness at the global level. While previous EU connectivity initiatives were criticized for lacking a marketable image when compared to the BRI,<sup>93</sup> one of the already achieved merits of the EUGG is that it communicates the European approach to connectivity at the highest EU level, combining the diplomatic lever arm of the President of the Commission and the High Representative. The following section will look into the norms and ideas ingrained in the “European approach”, and the EUGG in particular.

## BUILDING BRIDGES WITH EU NORMS AND STANDARDS

While normative power has long been referred to as a strength of the EU in the international arena, the

characterization relies on relative merits, both in the sense that the EU’s other advantages, such as military clout, remain inferior to its normative competences, and in the sense that other international actors have not developed similar strategies or capabilities.<sup>94</sup> As revealed in the analysis of EU policy documents and strategies, promoting European values, standards and norms is a coherent theme in EU connectivity policies, representing a conventional role for the EU as a value-based global actor, and in particular separating the European infrastructure programmes from China’s unregulated BRI.<sup>95</sup>

The EU’s normative connectivity policy differs from the logics of EU norms spreading abroad without material incentives,<sup>96</sup> or unintentionally: by virtue of the Brussels effect, international companies are incentivized by the attractiveness of the EU single market to adapt their worldwide operation and production to EU regulation, and to lobby their home governments to do so too, granting EU regulation a global reach.<sup>97</sup> The Global Gateway, instead, is directly aimed at inserting European values and standards into infrastructure projects outside the European region. In this section, three separate, yet partly overlapping, logics of the Gateway are briefly illustrated: firstly, an attempt to define standards for infrastructure; secondly, promotion of EU values (not necessarily directly linked to the infrastructure built); and thirdly, support for regional integration.

One of the criticisms of China’s infrastructure investments has been their alleged poor quality or incompetence.<sup>98</sup> Both the US-led B3W and the EUGG have declared to do better, while Japan’s connectivity strategy, for example, has also relied on offering “quality infrastructure”.<sup>99</sup> In the EU’s connectivity policy, the focus on standards not only implies the high quality of the infrastructure, but also specific EU-defined standards. Reading the EUGG communication, the standards could concern, among other things, network interoperability, intellectual property, emissions, and governance. Convergence with “European standards” is specifically mentioned, as well as European regulation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).<sup>100</sup> While regulation and other “standards” convey normative substance at different levels of institutionalization and

89 E.g. Lau/Politico 21.5.2021.

90 E.g. Gaens 2019, pp. 21–22; Gaens 2021, pp. 217–218. In the absence of a joint policy, some member states have already published their national strategies vis-à-vis Asia, with connectivity featuring as one theme. See for example France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy (Ministère de l’Europe et des affaires étrangères 2019, pillar 2), the German Government policy guidelines on the Indo-Pacific region (Federal Foreign Office 2020), or the Netherlands policy paper on China (Government of the Netherlands 2019).

91 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 2.

92 European Commission 1.12.2021 C.

93 Gaens 2021, p. 221.

94 Interview with a policy advisor, 9 December 2021; see also Bradford 2020.

95 See also Biedermann 2019.

96 As envisioned by Manners 2009 (normative power in its purest form).

97 Bradford 2020.

98 Crabtree 2021, p. 82.

99 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015; Gaens 2021.

100 European Commission 1.12.2021 B.

imperativeness, in the EUGG communication the two seem to form a bundle, whose eventual nature remains unclear.

Building on the established role of the EU in global regulation, the EUGG attaches a new level of foreign political intentionality to the dissemination of EU standards abroad. Anticipated challenges regarding the approach include, firstly, that standards in general might not be a priority for low-income partner states if accompanied by a higher price or a delay, and secondly, that the receiving countries might not share the European vision of optimal standards.<sup>101</sup> Thirdly, standards and regulation are not an area free of international competition,<sup>102</sup> and the EU should be prepared for competing actors to challenge its attempts, if not by offering alternative regulation, then certainly by criticizing it.

EUGG principles also include many that do not directly link to the infrastructure delivered, but rather reflect the EU approach to the design and governance of projects, as well as their societal and environmental impact (some of the mentioned standards also fall into this category). These EU values embedded in the EUGG include, for example, democratic values and good governance, as well as sustainability in both social and ecological terms.<sup>103</sup> While many of the partner countries share at least some of the promoted norms, previous research has pointed to potential incompatibility problems in the ASEAN countries, for example.<sup>104</sup> One of the risks for the EU connectivity agenda is a potential conflict between the normative agenda and a comprehensive outreach; if the EU policy is based on the partners accepting certain norms and values, the latter could also opt for norm-free alternatives offered by China, for example.<sup>105</sup>

However, not all EUGG values are innately European, with green transition, for example, being a necessity in the partner states even without a European push or conditionality.<sup>106</sup> “Transparency” as an objective constitutes another interesting case as a seemingly universal concept that is still utilized to compete with the BRI investments. One of the key critiques towards BRI has revolved around the question of debt traps, unsustainable loans by China that turn out to be difficult to pay back, the outcome being Beijing’s increasing political grip on the recipient governments, or even seizure of strategically important infrastructure by China – yet

scholars and commentators disagree on the prevalence and intentionality of the phenomenon.<sup>107</sup>

Finally, the EUGG communication provides empirical support for the notion that the connectivity agenda itself should be understood as supporting regional integration as well as region-to-region connections (interregionalism). Example projects mentioned in the EUGG communication, some ongoing, some yet to be launched, include: an extension of the BELLA programme that is building “a submarine cable between the EU and Latin America and a terrestrial backbone between South American countries”;<sup>108</sup> the Africa-EU Green Energy Initiative that will “contribute to the development and integration of regional energy markets and the implementation of a strong continental Africa Single Electricity Market”;<sup>109</sup> and the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme, already extended to the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the Eastern Partnership region. The latter will be followed by (support for) the adoption of the Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network (TMN-T) in the Southern Neighbourhood, as well as by a “strengthening of connections with adjacent strategic corridors in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia”, along with advancing “the regulatory environment” and promoting “EU and international standards” as a part of it.<sup>110</sup>

While regional integration is not specifically declared as an objective in the EUGG communication,<sup>111</sup> it might be the one with the greatest prospects of success. On the other hand, the communication indicates that no type of regionalism will be promoted by the EUGG, but rather the European model in particular: for example, the “EU Global Gateway will promote EU regulatory model of open and competitive markets for communications networks and services”,<sup>112</sup> and promote “regulatory convergence” linked to the BELLA project.<sup>113</sup> Coming back to the anticipated difficulties in promoting specific EU-defined standards or incompatible values, strict adherence to the European model of regionalism could come at the expense of regionalism not being supported at all.

101 See Crabtree 2021 for a similar discussion on B3W.

102 E.g. Drezner 2009.

103 European Commission 2021 A.

104 Biedermann 2019.

105 See *ibid.*, p. 587.

106 E.g. Becker et al. 2021; see also Siddi 2021.

107 Cf. Tskhay 2021; Mattlin 2021, p. 30; Calinoff & Gordon 2020; Crabtree 2021; Jie & Wallace 13.9.202; Tagliapietra 7.12.2021.

108 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 5.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

110 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

111 However, it is mentioned that the EUGG will support “regional energy integration” (European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 4) as well as prioritize “underserved regions, countries and populations” when building digital networks, “strengthening secure and trusted digital connections within them” (p. 4).

112 European Commission 1.12.2021 B, pp. 4–5.

113 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

## CONCLUSION: AFTER THE PANDEMIC

In order to sum up observations made in this FIIA Working Paper, it is necessary to begin by noting the seemingly obvious yet not-to-be-taken-for-granted situation that the EU institutions, sometimes siloed, as well as the member states, divided in their China politics, have managed to agree on a coherent and comprehensive policy programme that – on paper – connects existing economic tools to a foreign policy vision of the Union, and that clearly communicates the European approach to building connectivity abroad. While the realization of the financial plan remains the key open question and an imponderable for the success of the EU Global Gateway, even modest investments, if strategically prioritized, can have significant security impacts for the partner countries, as well as advance the EU's foreign and security political objectives. Capable of offering alternative financing guarantees, grants and loans, the EU should be able to diversify the China-monopolized market in strategically relevant locations. This, however, requires the successful continuation of the cooperation between the Commission, the EEAS and the member states, as well as an institutional connection between diplomatic and technical expertise, in addition to the need to combine public and private financing to effectively implement the high-politics yet hands-on connectivity programme.

One of the effects of the global Covid-19 pandemic is that foreign infrastructure projects have become harder to implement, causing delays or even cancellations. Should the implementation of the Global Gateway turn out to be arduous from the beginning, this could decrease the political will of the key stakeholders to deliver the ambitious plan, and intensify a negative cycle of lack of funding from both private and public sources. Geography typically plays a role in the political will to take risks and complete challenging projects; the implementation of demanding infrastructure projects seems most promising in the neighbourhood, and in countries with which the member states have deep historical connections. Conversely, more risks seem to be connected with the EU agenda further overseas, such as in the Indo-Pacific, where the geopolitical context fluctuates, and the attractiveness of European ideational power might be more difficult to predict. To start with, the EU-African Union Summit in February 2022 is expected to reveal the first concrete plans for Gateway projects.<sup>114</sup>

Previous research has considered normative or regulative power as the EU's key asset in the international arena,<sup>115</sup> but some have argued that with the increasing geoeconomic competition, the EU might be forced to abandon some of its normative mission and focus on more realist strategies instead.<sup>116</sup> By means of the Brussels effect, EU regulation spreads abroad without intentional exportation by the EU,<sup>117</sup> but the EUGG represents a more direct attempt by the EU to inject European norms, values and regulation into processes of regional integration abroad. The attempt builds on the EU's conventional role as a global actor and reflects its recognized strengths, but both old problems with normative persuasion as well as new challenges linked to the specific task of infrastructure investments need to be tackled in order for the EU agenda to succeed in the highly competitive geoeconomic context. In comparison to properties, which have a universal quality, policies, such as the EU's connectivity policy, are accompanied by power, and with power, contestation is always around the corner. The more normative underpinnings the EU aims to promote with its projects, the more contestation it should expect to face. Hence, the normative objectives of the policy programme need to be balanced with the objective of a comprehensive reach.

Finally, the pandemic had detrimental effects on the ideals of connectivity. With countries around the globe closing their national borders to avoid the spread of the coronavirus, followed by disruptions in global supply chains, and states eventually reverting to domestic production for critical supplies, globalization as the underlying trend experienced a shock – some say a turning point – towards increased recognition of the risks and drawbacks of interconnectedness. According to Gehrke, the time for considering globalization without a security aspect has now passed, and we need to adopt an idea of economic interdependence that has resilience to risks inbuilt instead. He suggests that the EU should regard connectivity as “a comprehensive offer for a new era of globalization – one which is more realistic about the risks of an interdependent economy without sacrificing its benefits”.<sup>118</sup> The Global Gateway was launched in exceptional circumstances, with additional challenges to be overcome, but also with a window of opportunity to develop interconnectedness with a greater awareness of risks and greater resilience to future shocks. /

115 E.g. Bradford 2020.

116 Postnikov 2020, p. 894.

117 Bradford 2020.

118 Gehrke p. 242.

114 Interview with an EU official, 19 January 2022. Connectivity projects were also mentioned several times in the Eastern Partnership Summit, 15 December 2021. See the Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership Summit (15 December 2021).

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