

# **Contesting (Il)liberalism**

The European Union as a Contested Actor in its  
Neighbourhood  
A Synopsis

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**CONLIB**

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# 1 THE QUESTION, THE CASES, THE CONCEPTS

## 1.1 In a Nutshell – Aim of the Project and Research Question

Why – despite the plethora of various instruments available, the offers of access to the wealth of one of the world’s largest markets and, in some cases, even promises of membership – have the ambitions and steadfast work of the EU to transform its immediate neighbourhood into an area of stability, democracy and wealth been rewarded with only limited and fragile success? Conflicts in the neighbourhood are on the rise, implementing the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) remains a fraught process and the prospect of further enlargement often seems foreboding<sup>1</sup>. Russia, instead of becoming a reliable partner is increasingly adversarial protecting its sphere of influence<sup>2</sup>. This has taken a toll on the EU’s confidence over time. The 2003 European Security Strategy<sup>3</sup> depicts a prosperous, self-confident, ambitious Union shortly before its biggest enlargement eager to contribute to a “fairer, safer and more united world”. A little over a decade later, the 2016 Global Strategy<sup>4</sup> reads more like a plan for survival.

The CONLIB project is designed to shine a light on the reasons for the EU’s limited success in the intensifying illiberal dynamics embroiling its vicinity and how this is indeed a struggle for survival. The project draws on the broader ‘end of liberalism’ debate and asks the question of how the EU is faring with these dynamics in a geographic area which is crucial for its security. While the European Union’s normal *modus operandi* is based on cooperation, a rule-based global order, the resilience of democracies, pluralism and multilateralism, it increasingly faces resistance from forces who do not share the same liberal agenda and values. However, this is not the only concern. This project builds on the hypothesis that the EU itself is being transformed in this process as external illiberal actors try to exploit the new “winds of change”<sup>5</sup> to their advantage and connect with the Union’s own internal manifestations of illiberalism.

As such, this project is not content to just focus on what the EU says and does but takes a more holistic approach by looking over the fence to understand what drives Europe’s neighbours. It wants a better understanding of why and how the EU’s offers of and demands for liberalisation (often framed in the context of conditionality) are resisted and rejected. The research analyses a wide variety of actors in the EU’s vicinity and the different forms of resistance and contestation that become manifest. It additionally engages with Russia and the multi-faceted frontlines that run along Europe’s eastern and southern borders. Furthermore, while what happens externally is important, what happens internally is crucial, hence the project examines to what degree this is having a transformative effect on the EU. Finally, using the foregoing as a solid foundation to build upon, the project considers how to build a stronger

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. 2020 Communication on Enlargement policy, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, COM (2020) 660 final, Brussels, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20201006-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy_en.pdf) (last accessed 26.11.2020)

<sup>2</sup> „Russland wendet sich wieder altem Denken zu“, FAZ 16.5.2014, online <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/kanzlerin-merkel-im-f-a-z-gespraech-russland-wendet-sich-wieder-altem-denken-zu-12941544.html> (accessed 20.11.2020)

<sup>3</sup> European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe in a Better World. Brussels, 12 December 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy, June 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Number 1 Hit in the year 1990 by the Scorpions celebrating the political change in Eastern Europe and Russia.

theoretic basis for the EU as a contested liberal actor. This is done by employing the perspective provided by the road less travelled, namely taking a sober look at the EU, not as a normative actor, but as a struggling liberal actor in a world where liberalism has, for many, lost the gloss it had shortly after the Cold War.

After a brief clarification of the concepts, we will engage with a literature which so far is overly Eurocentric and reveals scant insight into what drives Europe's neighbours to react the way they do. A change of perspective to a dynamic model is required to understand these processes and products of contestation.

## **1.2 Concepts – A Liberal EU and Illiberal Contestation**

Contestation has become a buzz-word now and recent years have seen a burgeoning amount of literature particularly on the contestation of norms of international law. Wiener (2017, 112) defines contestation as a range of social practices discursively expressing disapproval of norms, also allowing for norm deliberation across cultural differences. Contestation is thus not only a sign of norm decay, but can lead to norm strengthening through clarification (as summarised in Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2018). Still, it raises doubts about the robustness of common understandings (Niemann and Schillinger 2017, 30). Contestation encompasses a wide variety of behavioural patterns, often with regional and local distinctions, concerning norms, but also concepts and values (Del Sarto and Tholens 2020; Ejdus and Juncos 2018; Mahr 2018). Within the context of the project, contestation is defined as “engaging with the EU using behaviour that includes rejection, objection, de-legitimation and re-interpretation of EU liberalism”.

But if “liberalism” is the object of contestation, what is it that is objected to? While it has been argued that there is no “liberalism überhaupt” (Talisso 2017) because of its many facets, the core of liberalism is the self-determined individual (Börzel and Zürn 2020), human freedom and responsibility. Liberalism rests on a foundational requirement for constrained power (Freeden 1996; Freeden and Stears 2013, 14) and it was Ikenberry who most succinctly described the convictions of liberalism as openness, employing an at least “loosely” rules-based set of relations, embracing various forms of security cooperation, belief that “power politics can be tamed” and that “a liberal international order will move states in a progressive direction, defined in terms of liberal democracy” (Ikenberry 2018, 11). Democracy, trade, and international institutions are analytically linked to outcomes of peace and prosperity (Sterling-Folker 2015, 43), ideas that became global after the end of the Cold War. The EU embodies these ideas like no other existent political entity<sup>6</sup>. However, for authors such as Wagner, not only does the EU “embody liberalism’s core political values”, the liberal theoretic approach also brings to our attention that the EU’s foreign policy “results from a set of variables and causal mechanisms” leading to specific liberal

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<sup>6</sup> As early as 1961, the Birkelbach Report concluded that states wanting to join the EU had to recognise the principles of the Council of Europe (the rule of law, human rights, fundamental freedoms). Rapport fait au nom de la commission politique sur les aspects politiques et institutionnels de l'adhésion ou de l'association à la Communauté par M. Willi Birkelbach Rapporteur. [s.l.]: Services des publications des Communautés européennes, 15.01.1962. 20 p. ISBN 2837/2/62/2. (Assemblée parlementaire européenne, Documents de séance 1961-1962, Document 122).

outcomes (Wagner 2017, 1402). For the EU, a secure world is one “consonant with liberal interests” (Posen 2018) and this consonance is of particular importance in the immediate neighbourhood.

Unfortunately for the EU, in its immediate vicinity illiberalism is on the rise: indifference to liberal checks and balances, the rejection of constitutional constraints on the power of the majority (Krastev 2018, 56), aspects of “new nationalism” and “conservative values” (Popov 2019), a rejection of pluralism (Simpson 2017) and economic nationalism (Boyle 2016, 46). Illiberalism being so widespread is something of a malediction to the EU, however, what may be even worse is its cause. The concern here is that these dynamics may be a reaction to the liberal transformation process the EU wants to induce, if we take illiberalism as “post-liberalism”, the result of an encounter with and repulse against certain aspects of liberalism. If one accepts the expressed view that illiberalism represents “an interconnected set of values that come together in country-specific patterns” and that “illiberals in different settings stress different issues.” (Laruelle 2020, 115), then examining this issue further using comparative approaches is essential to increase our understanding.

### ***1.3 The Target Region – Those in Europe’s Vicinity***

“Neighbourhood” here is not synonymous with the area covered by the ENP, rather it is used in a geographical sense, as “Europe’s vicinity” or the EU’s “near abroad” to use the language of the Union’s most eminent contestator, the Russian Federation (RF). This selection of cases allows to study effects of a variation concerning incentives, mechanisms and procedures. The cases selected include accession candidate countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and quite recently Ukraine, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Moldova), but also the potential candidate for accession Kosovo, Georgia – as a country still striving for having its accession ambitions recognised - and Armenia (with its Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement). Negotiations with Azerbaijan on a framework agreement are ongoing, while the most unsuitable country in the region for such negotiations is Belarus, although current developments there involving popular protests are particularly interesting as they highlight the dynamics of (il)liberal contestation.

These countries share a comparable “communist” past as they have had historic experiences not only with authoritarianism but also been a part of an overt counter-project to Western liberalism. The end of the Cold War ushered in the need for radical social transformation, epitomized by many of the above-mentioned States embracing the various approaches made by the EU. Although this project is not about EU-RF relations specifically, the role of Russia as the principal mobiliser of contestation in the region cannot be neglected. Interestingly, while the EU uses a different parlance and toolbox than the RF, their security and stability concerns in the regions are quite similar. The Western Balkans, and particularly the Eastern Partnership countries, are the shared neighbourhood of these two powers who do not want to share (Casier 2019; Götz and Merlen 2019). Turkey is not included in this analysis as a contested neighbour but is rather perceived as another “supporter of contestation”, particularly in the Western Balkans and Azerbaijan. The EU is just one actor among many in the region: However, the question is what kind of actor?

## 2 WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE EU AS AN EXTERNAL ACTOR SO FAR – AND A CALL TO CHANGE PERSPECTIVES

The EU is not a state. This is a patently obvious truth; however, it raises important questions concerning not only the processes, but also the goals and outcomes of EU foreign policy. An extensive body of literature has developed to capture Europe's approach to foreign policy but in the following section a new perspective and more dynamic approach is proposed to venture beyond the limitations of the usual analysis undertaken for this topic to provide a more nuanced understanding.

### 2.1 *New Perspectives on the EU's Normative Actorness*

The prevailing interest in how and if the EU can effectively export its own concepts, ideas and norms across its border necessarily locks the debate into a problematic focus on “effectiveness”. Starting from the question of how a non-state-actor who is “multi-faceted (comprising the CFSP, CSDP, external action and the external dimension of internal policies), multi-method (combining intergovernmental and community methods) and multi-level (entailing the national, European and international levels)” (Keukeleire and Delreux 2014, 11) can conduct foreign policy, Bretherton and Vogler (2006) have developed the concept of “actorness” to get a better understanding how the variables of opportunity (making meaning of the external environment), presence (the perception of the EU as resourceful actor) and capability (the availability of policy instruments) explain the EU's capabilities in external relations. The multi-level quality of the EU led to a problematisation of aspects of coherence and consistency (Brattberg and Rhinard 2012) with divergent national interests hampering EU actorness (Maull 2005; Mutluer and Tsarouhas 2018; Raik 2015)<sup>7</sup>. However, when applying actorness to different areas of EU external action (recent examples of relevance are Baracani 2020; Bouris and Papadimitriou 2020; Dobrescu and Schumacher 2018; Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017) we find that presence and capability not necessarily translate into effective actorness (effectiveness being defined as ‘goal achievement’ and ‘problem-solving’ (Niemann and Hoffmann 2019, 36). However, not only have numerous authors pointed to the persistent problem of measuring effectiveness (Drieskens 2017; Rhinard and Sjöstedt 2019; Thaler 2020), this focus the dynamics of contestation on the ground, underdeveloped (Klose 2018). An additional problem is the conceptualising of the EU as a unique and incomparable actor (see also Drieskens 2017). While States have interests, the EU has goals; while States compete or co-operate, the EU strives to transform, to “europeanize” and govern externally by relying on conditionality and incentives (Börzel and Pamuk 2012; Grabbe 2001, 2006; Moumoutzis 2011; Noutcheva and Aydin-Düzigit 2012; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2004, 2020). More recent studies have analysed how actors strategically develop a Europeanisation discourse to attain specific goals (Cianciara 2016), but inevitably return to the assessment

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, only a few publications go beyond contemplating the problem of the lack of coherence and provide us with instances and explanations of dynamics which allow Member States to find consensus despite their diverging interests (see the case of Russian sanctions (Sjursen and Rosén 2017).

of performance defined as “effort, efficiency and capabilities” and thus in the end effectiveness (Papadimitriou, Baltag, and Surubaru 2017).

The idea that the EU is somehow special is particularly pronounced in Manner’s proposal to conceptualise the EU as a “normative” power (Manners 2002), as the nature of the Union predisposes it “to act in a normative way in world politics”, to lead by example (Persson 2017). But what if the EU’s proudly stated normative goals gloss over blunt interest-led policy (Del Sarto 2016; Diez 2005; Newman and Stefan 2020; Noutcheva 2009; Schumacher 2015; Tocci 2008)? “Normative” soon became contrasted with other less flattering adjectives (Cross and Karolewski 2017; Gehring, Urbanski, and Oberthür 2017; Hyde-Price 2006) leading finally to the question of whether “adverbial” qualifications of the EU make sense at all as they often build on thin empirical findings (Thaler 2020, 22). While the “normative power” concept was certainly enormously helpful in instigating a discussion on the external effects of the European integration project, if only because of the criticisms it elicited,<sup>8</sup> it also burdened us with theoretic mind-cuffs: often the approach towards Europe as a “normative power” has itself been “normative”, as European scholars seemingly want the EU to be a special promoter of “the right norms and values” (“a force for good” in the words of Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002) and not driven by self-interests.

Thus, in a nutshell, the conventional wisdom on European actorness is based on the normative power assumption, which perceives the EU as a static actor with a given, constant and normative set of values with preferences embedded in them. This has dragged the focus of an EU-centric research onto the gap between defined goals and achieved results, the mechanisms and incentives necessary to effectively change the world.

The CONLIB project adds a crucial perspective to these important debates: the constitutive effect of the outside. We must move beyond a static perception of the EU to one that sees it as a dynamic actor. Rather than approaching the EU as a self-contained universe with its own “natural” laws, we have to see that it is embedded into a broader network of global dynamics which have an effect on “what the EU can do”.

## **2.2 Addressing the Frontlines of Contestation**

Francis Fukuyama audaciously foresaw the “unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism.” (Fukuyama 1989, 3). Thirty years later, Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy looks around and sees a different world: a world, which “risks becoming less free, less prosperous, more unequal, more fragmented”<sup>9</sup>. As a consequence, the EU must develop an “appetite for power” as it has to be defended against its detractors<sup>10</sup>. According to Russian president Vladimir Putin, it is “the liberal idea” which has “outlived its purpose” as it is in “conflict with the interests of the

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<sup>8</sup> This criticism’s focus is on the „hegemonic” and “imperial” tendencies which are hidden behind the normative approach, stating that while the EU portrays itself as a “force for good”, the normative approach is plagued by contradictions, contributes to the expectations-capability gap and is a utilisation of moral norms to rationalise geo-political interests and commercial gain (Diez 2005; Harpaz and Shamis 2010; Langan 2012; Merlingen 2007; Nicolaïdis and Howse 2002; Nitoiu 2011).

<sup>9</sup> Josep Borrell, 20.5.2020, German ambassadors, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/borrell-botschafterkonferenz/2344216> (last accessed 11 November 2022)

<sup>10</sup> Josep Borrell, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/de/press-room/20200615IPR81230/covid-19-crisis-is-a-potential-geopolitical-game-changer-warn-meps> (last accessed 17 November 2022)

overwhelming majority of the population”,<sup>11</sup> and this thought is echoed as a concern in the Munich Security Report 2020 which is entitled “Westlessness”<sup>12</sup>. Liberal democracy and free trade are fragile achievements and, as some have noted, “something out there ... doesn’t like liberalism”(Menand 2018).

To address the effects of these developments on the EU’s standing in its vicinity, we need to know what happens to the EU at the frontlines of contestation. Especially for those countries which have the prospect of joining the EU, where transformation seems most relevant, we must identify the effects of contestation behind the painted façades of a “Potemkin” adaptation. With evidence of illiberal regression within the EU, particularly in Hungary and Poland, the question has been raised whether we can speak of a failure of the “Copenhagen criteria” as liberal transformation seems fragile and we have to understand the factors contributing to this fragility. If one lives within the familiar, liberal comforts of the EU, Putin may seem to be living “in another world”,<sup>13</sup> it is nevertheless crucial to understand the rationales of the contestants. While such rationales are often perceived as an irrational rejection of the promises for peace and stability created by rules, institutions and markets and an outdated adherence to blunt power-politics, this attitude hampers developing a deeper understanding of not only the attractiveness of illiberalism to many but also of how the EU is perceived outside its borders. The EU itself is not immune to illiberal contestation and we see the appeal of illiberal role-models in practically every Member State. How is the EU and its institutions affected (transformed) by the illiberal contestation that inundates the vicinity? How does this affect the EU’s external relations and standing when it relies on a domestic setting built on consensus and unanimity that it struggles to maintain as illiberal actors from outside do their best to forge alliances with those inside the EU, who could influence EU policies to their liking?

This project is not about fixed norms and values or the capabilities-expectation gap – it is about political contestation: without neglecting the existence of normative goals and pragmatic necessities (often framed as interests), the present research does not take them as given but sees them as shaped in complex processes of negotiation, compromise, and contestation. As highlighted by Wagner and in contrast to the normative approach, a liberal perspective “emphasises that ideas (norms and values) *as well as* material interests influence policy” (Wagner 2017, 1401). It depends on the actors involved and the perceived pressures that will determine what will prevail. This allows us to empirically capture the relevance of these external interests and pressures that were so well highlighted in the Global Strategy of the EU (2016) and its reference to “predictable unpredictability”.

A final, sobering thought to conclude this section is that the European integration project as we know it is liberal down to its metaphorical DNA. This integration relies on more than co-operation on specific issue-areas: it pools sovereignty, requires the reconciliation of divergent interests, builds on the acceptance of common rules and norms and rests on principles such as pluralism, tolerance and solidarity. The values of Article 2 TEU (and their translation into Article 21 TEU for external relations) are thus not arbitrary normative standards but the genetic code of the EU. As such, losing the battle to illiberalism

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<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin says liberalism has ‘become obsolete’, Financial Times, 27.6.2019, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/670039ec-98f3-11e9-9573-ee5cbb98ed36> (last accessed 10 Oktober 2022)

<sup>12</sup> Munich Security Report 2020, Westlessness, Munich Security Conference, available at: [https://securityconference.org/assets/user\\_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/user_upload/MunichSecurityReport2020.pdf) (last accessed 17 September 2022)

<sup>13</sup> ‘Pressure Rising as Obama Works to Rein in Russia’ in: The New York Times, March 2, 2014, available at [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/world/europe/pressure-rising-as-obama-works-to-rein-in-russia.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/03/world/europe/pressure-rising-as-obama-works-to-rein-in-russia.html?_r=1) (last accessed 21 November 2022).

because of either internal or external failings would, in essence, threaten the existence of the Union as we know it (for some deliberations on the possibilities of an “illiberal Europe” see Grabbe and Lehne 2018).

The CONLIB project thus connects EU studies and IR theories of actorness and power, to move from a structural theory of EU actorness to a dynamic theory of co-constitution as a better way to highlight how the EU is shaped by other actors in its vicinity and to point to the dialectics between the EU’s role as a promoter of a liberal order and its engagement in geo-political competition. This research’s focus is on the perception of the EU’s offers by illiberal contestants, the different patterns of (illiberal contestation) understood as rejection, objection, de-legitimation and reframing in different settings as well as the effects this has on the EU itself as a liberal actor.

The project will add to and deepen the debate on liberalism a changing world, a topic with particular poignancy. Börzel and Zürn introduced the concept of script, which is defined as “descriptive and prescriptive knowledge about the organization of society”. This script is challenged by alternative plots and ideas of how to organise societies. Although this project does not draw on the analytical concept of script, it connects to it through the focus of contestedness and the interaction between liberal and illiberal ideas. As previously stated when defining illiberalism as post-liberalism, this project is particularly interested in the patterns of illiberalism in the EU’s vicinity as reaction to the region’s most visible liberal actor – the EU. An edited volume by Del Sarto and Tholens tackles the practices of resistance against the EU in the MENA region. One of the most interesting aspects of this volume, is the reference to “hidden” contestation, which quietly undermines the publicly promoted image of yielding to European liberal pressures (here characterized as “Potemkin” adaptation).

In the following section, the research design is presented: it lays out the expectations when approaching the field, explains the mapping process, and explains the methods used for analysis before finally establishing the necessity for further theory development.

### **3 ADDRESSING THE DYNAMICS OF CONTESTATION**

CONLIB approaches the dynamics of contestation based on the following expectations:

- 1) As illiberalism is seen as a reaction to liberalism, it produces country-specific patterns, depending on variables such as history, language, religion, economic dependencies, security considerations etc. We will therefore also see different alliances of contestants engage in different forms of contestation. We have to establish who the contestants are and how they align themselves with or against other such actors.
- 2) Contestation can be hidden behind a façade of compliance. These forms of “Potemkin” adaptation occur irrespective of the incentives offered. While interests and short-term strategies may be adapted and norms imitated, “deep transformation” is hampered by difficulties to truly embed identities and ideas. We have to establish how EU demands and offers resonate in particular social contexts,



understand how actors rationalise and argue strategies vis-à-vis those demands and which EU policy offers have genuine and lasting impact.

- 3) The EU's Foreign Policy is being progressively politicised as actors in the bloc's vicinity try to exploit the illiberal dynamics inside the EU, build alliances and export their interpretation of values, norms and order into EU debates. Unsurprisingly, this serves to further challenge the coherence and cohesiveness of EU's external action. We need to better understand these dynamics and the attractiveness of illiberalism beyond the obvious "populist" parties connections.
- 4) Observing the dynamics of the illiberal contestation will allow us to connect EU-studies to the broader IR literature, which has thus far primarily focused on the "end of liberalism" being tied to the end of US hegemony. Moving away from static, *sui generis* and normative concepts of the EU allows us to develop new theoretic approaches to European (regional) hegemony and geo-strategic competition.

### 3.1 Mapping the Arena of Contestation: Actors, Frontlines, Forms

CONLIB focuses on the contestants and their engagement with EU liberalism. The first step in mapping the field in which this contestation occurs requires us to establish some parameters:

- 1) Which actors are contributing to illiberal contestation? Different contestants participate in the process, and they shape and are shaped in the various frontlines of contestation. This involves not only political elites but also civil society organisations, religious groups, media outlets and even individuals as social media shapes discourses for the citizenry. Illiberalism is not simply a discourse that is "out there somewhere" but is carried and framed by identifiable actors.
- 2) How do these actors perceive, and assign meaning to European demands and offers? Illiberalism as "post-liberalism" is a reaction and consequence of an encounter with liberalism, it is also a direct reaction to the EU's demands which are often framed in terms of "conditionality".
- 3) What strategies do contestants adopt going forward? An important aspect to remember here is that Europe is not in a one-horse race as it has competition from Russia, China and a number of other "counter actors" (Babayán 2015; Melnykovska, Plamper, and Schweickert 2012). Russia's "neighbourhood policy" employs a tool-box of different and varied instruments such as promoting the attractiveness "sovereign democracy", providing access to labour markets and is often perceived as making "more credible commitments" than the EU (Wilson and Popescu 2009). Russia's presence provides contestants in the region with the possibility to build a broader variety of strategies, as the interdependence with the RF can either constrain or incentivise EU-demanded policy change (Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk 2016).
- 4) What coalitions do contestants build? Liberalism draws strength from free markets, open societies, rule-based order and the protection of individual freedom. Not all of these aspects are necessarily equally contested when offered to various actors and a variety of coalitions may form around specific aspects. An interesting prospect here is the possibility of "illiberal learning". "Diffusion of norms" is often analysed with a "good norm bias" but "illiberalism" also travels.

- 5) How are identities, ideas and interests mobilised? Wendt, in his seminal work, stressed that actors do not have “portfolios” of interests they “carry around independent of social context”. Identities are the basis of interests, they are shaped in institutional setting and ideas about self and others are crucial when determining possible courses of action, compliance, cooperation and contestation (Wendt 1992). Liberalism, and those actors subscribing to it, carry specific ideas about how the world should be ordered, meaning that ideas and identities enable or constrain specific actions (Vogler and Bretherton 2006). This information helps us to understand how actors rationalise what they are doing.
- 6) Do different policy offers of the EU make a difference? The question asked here is whether we see different patterns of contestation depending on the incentives, rewards, and tools employed when deploying various conditionality mechanisms. The expectation is that while conditionality (irrespective of the concrete incentive) is able to shape the interests of actors, their ideas and identities in a more persistent manner. This comparison of different institutional settings also allows us to shed light on the question whether liberal institutions are able to constrain and shape “illiberal” cultures in any meaningful ways (Dawson and Hanley 2019).

This data contributes to the debate around the contestation of the “Western narrative” (Lehti, Pennanen and Jouhki 2019), as actors engage selectively with particular patterns of the liberal order (Alcaro 2018). Various frontlines of contestation form as actors engage in processes of rejection (refusal to engage), objection (evoking protest), de-legitimation (actively adopting antagonistic positions) and reframing (assigning new meaning). Contestation may arise with regard to concepts such as robust liberal democracy as opposed to sovereign weak democracies (Crowther 2017; Langdon and Tismaneanu 2019) or there may be value contestations such as “competing understandings of what is good, desirable, and appropriate in our collective communal life” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Alternately, frontlines may form based on a rejection of normative hegemony (Casier 2019), norm contestation (reading substantive conceptions of world society into legal concepts and categories (Koskenniemi 1990) or even order contestation where liberalism is not perceived as progress but as an intrusion (Menon 2014).

The research objective is to effectively map the varieties of contestation arising in Europe’s vicinity, to address how and why actors engage in contestation and which “local patterns of illiberalism” we can discern. This builds the basis for comparative analysis and for further theoretical reflections on the EU as a contested liberal actor.

### ***3.2 The Transformative Power of the Vicinity***

There is a reasonable expectation that the EU does not and cannot remain unaffected by the dynamics of the contestation which lap at its border. Two aspects are of particular interest for this project, namely:

1. The transformative power of the outside: Pardo and Gordon pointed out the dynamics that are brought into play by external actors to try to exploit “illiberal” debates and dynamics within the EU for their own political aims (Gordon and Pardo 2015, 403). The dynamics thus reverse – it is no longer only about the “transformative power” of Europe but how the EU itself is transformed by a coalition of external and internal actors. An essential aspect involves asking how the debate inside the EU is

changing as liberal contestation is (re-)imported and what effect this is having on the Union's strategies towards its vicinity.

This requires a better understanding how actors within the Union are perceived, which coalitions are built outside-in, how the dynamics of illiberal contestation within the Union are framed from the perspective of the outside, which issues are perceived as particularly salient and which strategies are devised accordingly. The focus here cannot be restricted purely to external contestants as the perspectives and actions of actors within the EU play an intrinsic part in the process. Building on the results of the mapping process, specific case studies will be selected to exemplify and help verify these dynamics and patterns of illiberal co-operation.

2. The increasing politicisation of European external action: Recent publications have taken a particular interest in the way the EU's external relations are being shaped by the populist parties that have received a groundswell of support in the last few years (Balfour et al. 2016, 19). This is of key importance because of the multi-faceted ways external relations shape domestic conditions given the modern era's globalisation dynamics; the increased politicisation of EU foreign policy manifests in the rising awareness, mobilisation and polarisation of public and political opinion (Barbé and Morillas 2019; Wilde and Zürn 2012, 140). The focus is on the "liberal or illiberal substances of policies that are Europeanized and what their outcomes are" (Rivera Escartin 2020, 1200). This area is particularly suited to a liberal theoretic perspective which would help link the external and internal factors influencing illiberal contestation within Europe. Wagner (2017) reminds us that while the "normative power" approach depoliticises EU foreign policy, the liberal perspective challenges the unified identity of the EU and allows one to look at the politics of external action by bringing the Member States, their preference settings, ideas, interests, the identities of their respective representatives and the pressures in home constituencies back into the analytical framework. It is here where in a "perpetual loop of interaction between the international and domestic arena" (Balfour et al. 2016, 52) the future of EU liberalism is shaped.

### **3.3 Theorising the EU as a Contested Liberal Actor**

CONLIB asks not only whether a liberal EU can remain a "norm proposer" but also how a liberal EU is itself changing and adapting as a result of the dynamics of contestation. Building on the results of the case studies, the questions that arise are:

1. How is the actorness of the EU challenged by this illiberal contestation?
2. How is the EU itself actively contributing to the contestation by being caught in the contradictions of a liberal order which produces resistance in the neighbourhood?
3. How is the EU changing in response to this contestation?

Within IR studies, the debate on which theoretic approach can best explain the current dynamics of the existent global order is primarily concerned with the hegemonic position of the United States (see Ikenberry 2018; Mearsheimer 2019). But the EU is a different case, particularly because it is a "liberal creation", its survival hinges on liberal principles and a liberal world order and we have to understand

how it fares in dynamics where liberalism is becoming a precarious setting. A number of authors have voiced the view that the liberal world order “is under threat on various fronts” (Cross and Karolewski 2017, 3; Duncombe and Dunne 2018, 31). The question then arises of how can the EU, finding itself at this tipping point, expect to find resonance among its neighbours to its own liberal “security proposals”? The sudden arrival of liberalism at this crossroads is increasingly challenging multi-lateralism and even commercial peace no longer seems a realisable goal as the freedom of international markets is countered by demands of economic nationalism (Haggard 2014). Here, it is also worth noting that the EU is an active source for its own contestation: the openness of its societies and markets, the demands for pluralism, including value pluralism, produces new winners and losers while dis-embedding populations from their traditional understanding of social relations. Furthermore, democracy is now being perceived by some as ineffective and inappropriate in societies with increasingly irreconcilable polarisations (Krastev and Holmes 2019). Being the norm-taker forever is tiring, especially if significant gains are not realised. Do these developments require a further strategy shift on the part of the EU? Do they require a stronger reliance on realist power mechanisms, including a strengthening of military capacity. Do they require a shift away from unanimity to allow the majority to be more decisive in foreign policy? How will the EU change – or how does it need to change – in a more competitive multi-polar world, particularly if not all of its Member States are gravitating towards the same pole?

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