





## POLICY BRIEF

### EU and United Nations: How to Revitalize Multilateralism in the 76th UN General Assembly?

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## **Background: It is critical for the EU to Step in for the Reinforcement of Multilateralism**

Multilateral diplomacy, defined as the practice of collegial engagement of countries to develop and implement diplomatic solutions to supranational problems, is at a turning point in its history. The structure of the international society increasingly tests its relevance, and the risk that we could enter in an era where unilateral politics will prevail needs to be taken seriously. With the coming 76<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly next September, the EU has the opportunity to stand for the reinforcement of institutionalized cooperation among nations to cope with global challenges.

The EU has a major role in the United Nations system: it is the largest financial donor to the UN (one quarter of all financing contribution) and the largest development donor in the world (€75.2 billion in 2019)[1]. This strong partnership between the EU and the UN found its origin in the implementation of the European Security Strategy (ESS)[2], which established a doctrine engaging EU foreign policy in the promotion of multilateralism. This partnership was also built as a means by which the EU can expand its international influence[3].

This approach was described as “effective multilateralism” and set the guideline for European External Action Service doctrine[4]. It was described through the argument that the world should not be based on a unipolar international system, hence the need to build a strong multilateral structure to sustain a pacified multipolar world[5]. Following this logic, the European Council conclusion of 2019 “EU action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism”[6] states in its 2§: “as reflected in the Global Strategy on EU Foreign and Security Policy, multilateralism with the UN at its core is a cornerstone of the EU's external policy”.

Because the U.N. is perceived by EU institutions as the pivot of the multilateral system, its promotion was raised from a pragmatic view for a successful cooperation at the global level[7]. Moreover, since multilateralism is a concept at the core of EU institutions, its advancement in the U.N. framework is perceived as a way to foster European values as well as to promote EU “actorness” in international relations[8]. The EU, unlike most contemporary international organizations, is built around the concept of *community of values*, an idea consistently applied as a benchmark to foster its soft power[9].

Implemented in the realm of international politics, some scholars have described Europe’s soft power with the idea of “civilian power”[10] and “normative power”[11]. The first concept framed the idea that, since its lack of competences in military matters, the EU establishes its power through diplomacy, trade, and aid policy to develop its interest in world affairs. The second idea defines EU posture in international relations as a commitment to spread norms and thus transforming what is considered as ‘normal’ in the international society. It then is crucial to understand the commitment of the EU in the UN as being a way to legitimize it as an international actor as well as promoting its value. The EU credibility in the international scene therefore depends on “multilateralism proving to work”[12].

The role of the EU in the U.N. is not only relevant to support the agenda of the United Nations regarding global common challenges. This commitment for multilateralism in the U.N. arena has also the capacity to be an opportunity for the EU to foster its value, promote its interests, and enhance its role as a legit actor in world politics. In the context of the approaching end of the 75<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the UN, this policy brief will be framed around the following research question: how can the EU delegation strengthen EU-U.N. partnership in order to promote the European value of multilateralism in the context of the 76<sup>th</sup> UNGA?

## **Current State of Play: The Spirit of UN was Tested in the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA. What Has Been Done for the Promotion of Multilateralism Since Then?**

Started in September 2020, the 75<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly was celebrated as an important anniversary for Manhattan's institution, but was also an evidence of the decline of multilateralism. If Secretary General Antonio Guterres used this event to praise the role of the UN in preventing a third world war, he was also critic about the attitude of member states regarding the mushrooming crises which found a new magnitude in the context of the COVID19 outbreak: regional conflicts, hunger, rise of inequality and climate change[13].

The credibility and relevance of the UN to stage world affairs has never seemed that much questioned since the Second World War[14]. The development of autocratic-minded governments around the world has further contributed to the erosion of trust regarding multilateral diplomacy and the work of the UN in general[15], which opens the door to a unilateral vision of the world. The COVID19 outbreak had also reshaped the multilateral format of the UNGA into the virtual format, jeopardizing what made the general assembly indispensable: the occasion to have face-to-face meetings and informal meetings among delegations[16]. Consequently, this year UNGA received only a third of the press exposure compared to the last sessions—a Lexis-Nexis search of world coverage returns just 558 results from September 1–October 1, 2020, a number which contrasts dramatically with 1,766 for the same period in 2019[17].

In this context of an obvious challenge over multilateralism, the 75<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly still had to mitigate key problems of global scale by providing resources, rules, and arenas to debate solutions in common. Big part of the events and summit of the 75<sup>th</sup> were outlined by questions related to post-covid recovery[18]:<sup>[19]</sup>, opportunity to foster climate actions[20] and multilateral means to implement objectives of the Sustainable Development Goal as well as the Paris Climate Agreement.

More specifically, on the side of global governance, a High-level meeting was held under the theme “The future we want, the United Nations we need: reaffirming our collective commitment to multilateralism”. The Resolution 75/1 “Declaration on the commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations”[21] adopted by member states after this event affirmed the current failure of institutionalized multilateralism in its article 4 “the United Nations has had its moments of disappointment. Our world is not yet the world that our founders envisaged 75 years ago [...]

Through the global conversation launched by the Secretary-General in 2020, we have listened to the concerns and aspirations of the people. We are here to respond”. The resolution then follows by stating the urge to implement measures to foster UN action in the world and note the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a road map to act in this regard.

Even if the UN is facing critical challenge over its ability to organize and stage world affairs, we have to stress that a major step toward the renewal of its global governance model can be found in the commitment of actors of the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA to act against the decline of multilateralism as well as the emphasize that this issue constitute a major threat for international stability which have to be address. The European delegation had a major role in the promotion of this realignment around UN values and model.

In order to frame what partnership among the UN and the EU could be implemented to renew multilateralism in the 76<sup>th</sup> UNGA, we need to have a closer look at the position that has been taken regarding that matter in the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA.

## Current Approach: What Have Been the Politics of the EU in the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA?

The EU's power in the United Nations General Assembly comes from the ways the EU delegation is capable of creating coordinate positions among its Member States, leverage its diplomatic influence with third countries and put forward its interest through its representatives or through the voice of its Member States with broad support from other UN members[22].

In the “Council conclusion on EU priorities at the UN and the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA”[23], the EU Council set the development and promotion of collective action in the multilateral institutions of the UN as a top priority for its delegation: “The rules-based international order – with the UN at its core – must be upheld and strengthened if we are to deal effectively with global challenges”. To foster multilateralism, the EU Council describes an approach based on two modalities of action: 1) to “lead by the example” by promoting assistance to countries in need to address humanitarian, health, and economic consequence of the Covid-19 outbreak, but also 2) to rally behind the UN Secretary General’s efforts to coordinate global-scale responses. The EU Council also advocates for the promotion of the UN Secretariat reform agenda and the revitalization of the General Assembly and its programs.

Regarding how the EU could be an example for the support of international solidarity, the EU representation at the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA took several actions. On the side of economic recovery and finance for development, the EU Commission shared the commitment that the EU development policy would target the green and digital sector[24]. In this regard, the Commission supported an extension of the Debt Service Suspension Initiative for projects that would follow the Sustainable Development Goals.

This commitment was also supported four days later with a common call from the EU, Fiji, Rwanda, and the UK to Heads of State and Government to adopt policies and programs that will sustain the basis for a “green, inclusive and resilient recovery from Covid-19”[25]. Regarding the question of peacekeeping the EU and the UN signed a cooperation agreement[26] the 29 September. This aimed at facilitating operational alignment and enhancing complementary between EU and UN in their field mission regarding logistics, medical equipment, and security supports, allowing the enhance UN’s Action for Peacekeeping initiative while complementing existing cooperation arrangements between the two organizations.

Concerning the rallying of the UE behind Secretariat efforts, one key contribution regarding EU’s work to enhance reform of the Secretariat is its implication in “revitalizing” the General Assembly. Firstly, the speech by Deputy Head of the EU Delegation to the UN Silvio Gonzato[27] underline the critical role of the UNGA for the future reform of the UN. Being the only intergovernmental body with universal membership, the UNGA is the organ which has the greater legitimacy to enhance UN response to global challenges.

Secondly, European engagement for this topic was also raised on the EU Statement at the UN Ad Hoc working group[28], where EU delegations raised concerns regarding the promotion of multilingualism in the work of the GA where small delegations are at disadvantage for linguistic reasons. The question of the strengthening of the GA engagement with civil societies was also raised, since this partnership is currently at risk because of the pandemic context. In the same vein, EU Statement at the Ad-Hoc working group of the 14th of April[29] proposed the creation of new rules to prioritize resource allocation to agenda items in terms of relevance and added value.

This approach has the benefit of fostering both the role of the EU in the UN system and the UN in the global system. However, the success of this approach is still deeply rooted in the ability of the EU to engage its member states in a common voice in the UNGA. National interests of member states seem to be one of the main barriers on the way to a full deployment of the EU's voice in the



UNGA[30]. Furthermore, the success of the EU depends largely on the delegations compliance and commitment to reforms of the UN's system. The EU doctrine in the UN could seize this promotion as a strategic objective of its representation. Accordingly, the joint communication to the European Parliament and the Council “on strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism”[31] stance that the EU must establish “coordination mechanisms between the EU and its Member States around joint priorities, and a greater willingness to leverage the EU's collective strength to project its values and priorities abroad”, but also “deepen partnerships and alliances with third countries, multilateral and regional organizations, as well as other partners, especially those with whom we share democratic values and priorities”

## **Perspective and Recommendation for the 76<sup>th</sup> UNGA: Seizing the Opportunities of Network Multilateralism**

The “Council Conclusion on EU priorities at the UN during the 76<sup>th</sup> Session of the UNGA”[32] aimed at strengthening the role of the EU in the promotion of ruled based international cooperation and multilateralism. To do so, the EU Council recommended the implementation of a regular EU-UN Summit in order to seek to reinforce cooperation among them. The EU also committed to be a driving force behind the promotion of a “truly inclusive networked multilateralism”.

This idea was proposed during the 75<sup>th</sup> UNGA, where the Secretary General Antonio Guterres appealed for a new style of network multilateralism. This idea underlines the multistakeholder feature of the work of the United Nations General Assembly. Gaining from the work and idea of academic and scientific institutions, civil society activists, member states delegations and regional delegations, network multilateralism aims at boosting the idea of universal representations that sustain the legitimacy of UN institutions.

The European Delegation should fully seize this concept in order to enhance its agenda and to foster the development of institutional reforms the UN urgently needs by promoting the vision of the Secretariat General. However, if the EU has chosen a doctrine in which it assumed to be a key role in the adaptation and reforms of the UN system to face both external and internal challenges, its implementation will be translated into consequential action only through the compliance and collaboration of EU member states[33].

The EU delegation should then also seize this concept to its delegation to “lead by the example”; by implementing and testing modalities of network multilateralism to create consensus among its member states in a transparent fashion, backing consequently the effort of reform of the secretariat and the UNGA. This approach would permit the union of Europeans to organize in the UNGA, hence appearing stronger, while allowing strategic partnership with third parties and delegations to gain influence during the coming 76<sup>th</sup> UNGA next September.

Another axis of development of this strategy would be the strengthening among regional organizations in the United Nations under the leadership of the European Union delegation. This approach has been underlined by the European Parliament recommendation of the 9 June 2021 to the EU Council[34] which advise the EU delegation to “acknowledge the potential of direct regional involvement in the UN by supporting the possibility for other organizations, such as the African Union (AU), to request a specific status as enhanced observer; acknowledge and deploy the potential of the EU, as the most sophisticated regional organization, to play a driving role in reviving and strengthening the UN system through multilevel multilateralism”.

Indeed, in a context of increasing representation of regional organizations in the UN system, where the UN established partnership with ASEAN[35], the African Union[36], the MERCOSUR[37] or the OSCE[38], the EU could seize the opportunity to organize meetings and conferences among

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regional organizations to share projects. This perspective could enhance the voice of countries of the global south in the spirit of the “New Global Deal” promoted by the UN Secretariat[39] while supporting their multilateral model of governance for global common good management.

In brief, the EU delegation can strengthen EU-U.N. partnership in order to promote the European value of multilateralism in the context of the 76<sup>th</sup> UNGA by fully seizing the idea of inclusive and networked multilateralism and by advocating for the enhancement of regional organizations to build a multilevel multilateral structure able to advocate for the reform of the governance model of the UN. However, a relevant question that this policy brief would ask is how the EU could engage with the United Nations Security Council to foster those reforms of multilateral governance in the UN.

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