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BRIEFING NOTE No. 175

What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda? Part 1

January 2024

By Andrew Sherriff and Pauline Veron

Summary

Geopolitical and geoeconomic changes have an impact on domestic politics in European countries at an increasing pace, with implications for their foreign policy priorities and international cooperation choices. In an environment of poly- and permacrisis, European foreign policy struggles to respond. European development cooperation, increasingly presented as mutually beneficial and linked to European interests, is at a crossroads too.

We wanted to understand the drivers of these changes and approached 14 senior officials in Europe – speaking on a non-attributional basis – to get some answers. We also challenged them to share their perceptions of how the framing of international cooperation has been evolving, how their institutions are coping, how they think changes are being perceived by partners and what opportunities exist in this new agenda and environment. This first brief of a two-part series is the result of those off-the-record interviews, which led us to identify seven key factors influencing Europe's international cooperation.

2024 is a pivotal year for the leadership of the EU and its member states, with many opportunities for European and global change. In the second part of this series, we will look at ways forward for Europe's international cooperation. What clearly came out of our conversations with European senior officials is that Europe's evolving international cooperation agenda presents both challenges and opportunities – and that there is still time for seizing the latter.

Introduction

There is no longer any doubt that the world is moving to an era of multipolarity with a much less dominant West and increasing volatility. Old certainties regarding the global order of the post-Cold War era are changing at an increasing pace. These geopolitical and geoeconomic changes are also impacting the domestic political level within European countries which is in itself having consequences for their foreign policy priorities and international cooperation choices. While much of this is 'event' driven (see Figure 1), there are wider trends. This first brief of a two-part series explores what is driving change as articulated by senior European officials, while the second brief explores what could constitute a potential new agenda for Europe's international cooperation in a rapidly changing world.[1] It is based on ECDPM's ongoing analysis and the structuring of "off the record" confidential interviews with 14 senior officials in Europe.[2]

The global environment is increasingly fractured and fraught, with dramatic consequences for many citizens. Progress on more than half of the globally agreed targets of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across key social, economic, political and climate issues is weak and insufficient; and, as a major UN report notes, on one-third, it has stalled or gone into reverse (UN 2023). More engagingly, UN Secretary-General António Guterres has noted, "*humanity has opened the gates to hell*" in relation to its inaction on the climate emergency. Beyond a polycrisis of interlinked factors, many in Europe's policy corridors also talk of an era of perma-crisis, with no real discernable end in sight as the world and Europe lurch from one major crisis to the next with the European economy remaining sluggish.

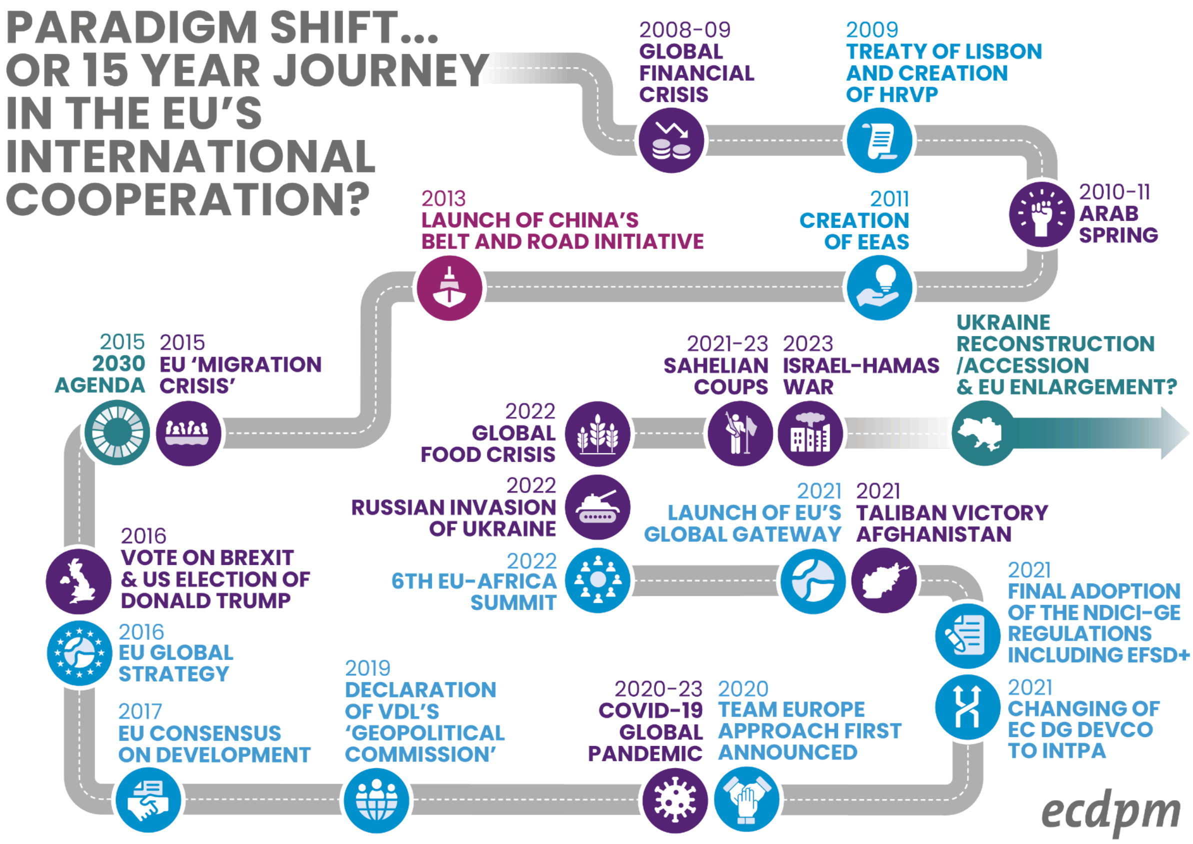
European officials talk behind closed doors about **European foreign policy not being up to the task, and the era of traditional European development cooperation**

reaching a *“tipping point”*, *“crossroads”* or being *“over as we have known it”*. Development cooperation is increasingly being presented as mutually beneficial, either as one tool to address aspects of the global polycrisis or to more specifically link the commercial, security or political interests of European countries with those of partners. Beyond the *“win-wins”* of international cooperation, a more openly transactional approach to foreign policy and economic relations is gaining credence as a response to the changing global environment and more open global competition. It is the drivers for these changes that this first brief seeks to explore.

Box 1: International cooperation – what is new?

While foreign policy is concerned with the interests and projection of stated values of states, development cooperation, at least officially, was meant to be cooperation between rich countries and poorer countries in the interest of developing states and societies. The most tangible aspect of this development cooperation is official development assistance (ODA). The critiques of ODA and reducing development cooperation to merely ODA are legion, as are various attempts to reimagine it. Most European foreign policy analysts pay limited attention to ODA in the grand scheme of international relations and economists also note its limited global transformational role compared to other financial flows related to trade, commerce and other types of public spending. Yet a significant part of many EU member states’ foreign ministries and the European Commission are still devoted to it and it is one of the differentiating factors of cooperation from Europe (as opposed to other regions of the world minus North America and Japan). For many of the least developed countries (LDCs), ODA is a vital and significant source of resources and for particular sectors of intervention, grant finance remains important. International cooperation has a long history and is not defined as cooperation between predominately rich and poorer countries but as something more global in nature and more mutually beneficial. It has a strong partnership and relationship dimension given that international cooperation has to be undertaken together, with climate action, human rights, scientific exchange and facilitating economic interaction also being part of it. International cooperation resides – for European countries and the EU institutions – between traditional foreign policy and trade concerns and traditional approaches to development cooperation. It is relatively ill-defined in policy, but increasingly apparent in practice, political rhetoric and even the (re)naming of parts of institutional entities mandates. While the aspiration at least in the European institutions is to go beyond international cooperation to more robust international partnerships, this is equally ill-defined. This is because the EU's institutional architecture is still evolving to meet these changes and most internal processes are still structured around either a traditional foreign policy or development cooperation architecture that has been much the same for decades. Ultimately, the definition and importantly the success of Europe's international cooperation is as much in the eye of the beholder and partner as it is in the corridors of European bureaucracies.

Figure 1: Key moments in the EU's international cooperation since 2008



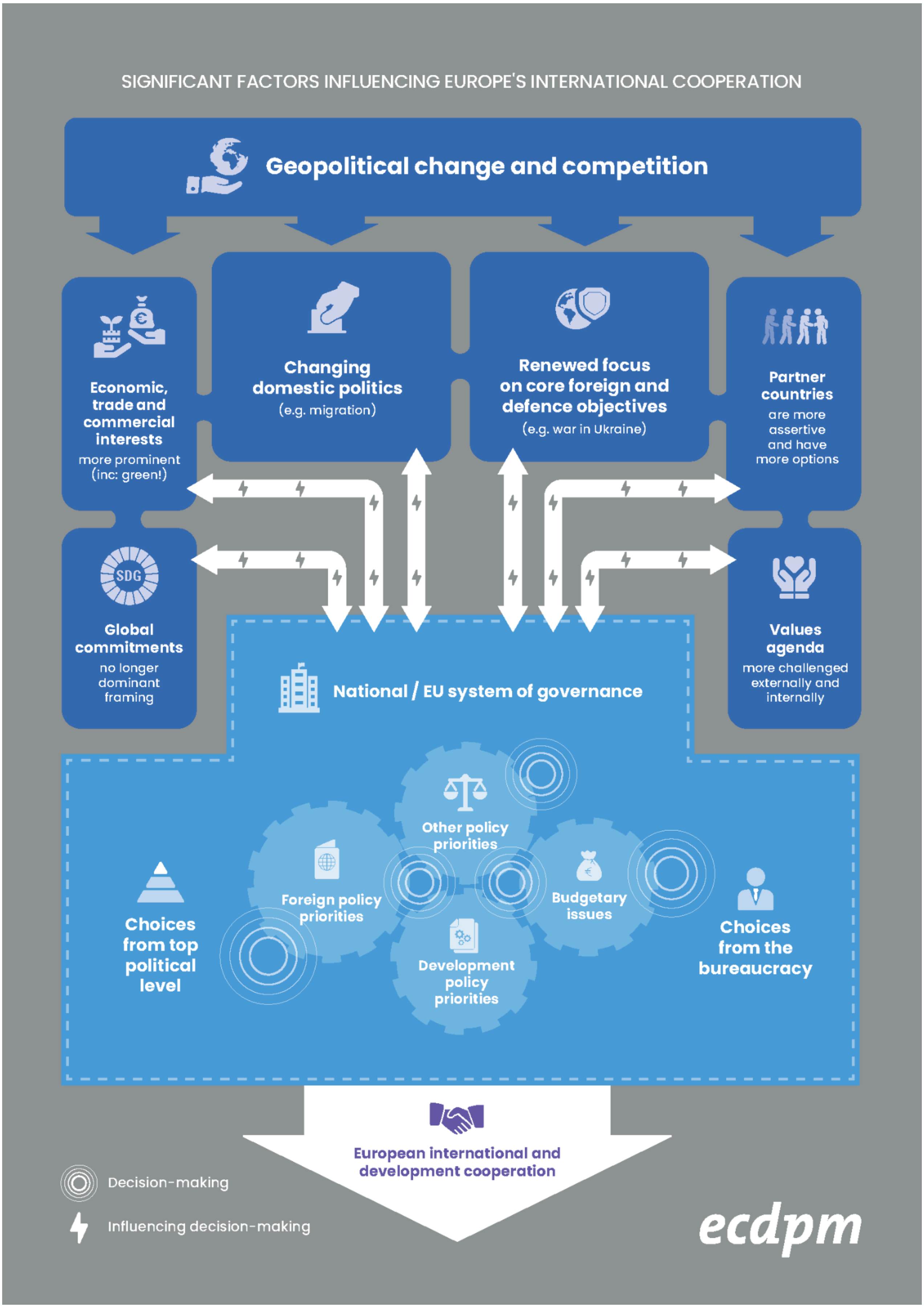
Source: ECDPM

Key questions we asked senior officials

Q1. What is driving change in Europe’s international cooperation?

Our first question when talking to senior European officials was **what is driving change** in the international cooperation they were responsible for in the past few years. The bottom line is that international cooperation of the EU and member states has **increasingly been impacted by major external events and crises** (see Figure 1), which have unfolded at an accelerated pace in recent years. Yet beyond this events-led impact, some more **structural recurring themes** were discernible from the conversations. To understand the interconnected nature of what is influencing international cooperation, ECDPM developed a diagram to illustrate the key influencing factors and how they are filtered through the governance system (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Significant factors influencing Europe’s international cooperation



Source: ECDPM

Factor 1: Geopolitical change and shift in global order – the biggest driver

When asked what were the main drivers of change, most of our interviewees mentioned that the single most important factor having a profound impact on all aspects of development and wider international cooperation was the increased pace of global transformations brought about by the shifting **geopolitical landscape and increased power rivalry and competition.** This is because it is contributing to a profound change in global order, which explains why it is represented as an 'overarching' factor in Figure 2, filtering down to all other factors as well as the system shaping international cooperation. While a number of players in this shifting global order were mentioned, China came out as a major player in the evolving geopolitical climate. In the past few years, some European analysts have expressed concerns that international relations were on the verge of a significant geopolitical transition and about the erosion of what they saw as the rules-based international order, a theme which also came up in the interviews. The **war in Ukraine**, as a symptom of this changing geopolitical era, was overwhelmingly mentioned as a factor bringing geopolitics into traditional development policy, although the trend was not new. In 2022, net ODA to Ukraine contributed to the significant increase in ODA and amounted to $16.1 billion, representing 7.8% of total ODA. Total ODA by EU institutions rose by 30.3% in real terms mostly due to support for Ukraine (OECD 2023a). Yet the war can also be seen as an **accelerator of overarching trends in relation to geopolitics and geoeconomics** (Klingebiel 2023). Some argue that today, no single policy can exist without a reference to geopolitics. The geopolitical environment has pushed the EU and member states to focus more on enhancing their visibility, standing and political leverage in partner countries, particularly in Africa. The senior officials clearly noted that the evolving global order and 'systems change' it is inducing will significantly impact the character and nature of international cooperation in the coming years overturning old certainties, priorities and ways of working.

Factor 2: Shifts in domestic politics – another significant force

Changing domestic politics is another key driver of change, as shown in Figure 2. It should not come as a surprise that domestic political considerations impact international cooperation priorities. Our interviewees were concerned by the nature of this **more narrowly self-interested and more short-term approach** as it crowded out other issues that held more promise for mutually beneficial international cooperation, promoting human rights or addressing global poverty. The domestic political agenda of EU member states and the shift rightwards on the political spectrum generally and within governments is increasingly influencing priorities, including in development and international cooperation.

Migration particularly has become the hottest domestic policy issue for almost a decade in Europe and an expression of national politics affecting international cooperation policy, not to mention an increased share of ODA spending within many European countries. Indeed, while total ODA in 2022 rose by 13.6% in real terms compared to 2021, the increase was primarily due to in-donor refugee costs (OECD 2023b)[3] which amounted to $29.3 billion in 2022 and represented 14.4% of DAC member countries' total ODA (and up to 25% in some member states) (OECD 2023a).

However, here again, the stance towards development and international cooperation in public debates varies across member states. In some countries, such as Luxembourg and Ireland, there is a broad consensus that development cooperation as traditionally shaped by the SDGs and with a poverty focus remains the primary framing of engagement. In others, such as Sweden and Denmark, the debate increasingly revolves around a smarter use of resources to combat poverty and achieve concrete results, with expectations from the public to see more connection between what the country has put in and what has come out (Government Offices of Sweden 2023). While this can be interpreted as more impactful aid, there is also a desire to see reduced irregular migration, stronger security and better win-win economic opportunities. This approach includes looking at international cooperation and aid as part of a broader relationship and in a more conditional/transactional way rather than as a contribution to global normative development goals alone. The response to climate change was also mentioned as an *"explosive domestic issue"* suffering from a lack of consensus (albeit less so than migration) with implications not only for the economy and internal priorities and spending but also for international cooperation. Climate change has become contentious because of more open divergence in national and international politics about the policy responses needed.

Factor 3: Renewed focus on core foreign policy and defence objectives

The third key factor – as influential as changing domestic politics – concerns the **renewed focus on core foreign and defence objectives**. The shock to the system that the Russian war in Ukraine provided was palpable amongst all those we interviewed. World military expenditure rose by 3.7% in real terms in 2022 (compared to an average of 2.6% growth in the past five years and an average of 1.4% growth in the past ten years), to reach a record high of $2240 billion. Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a major driver of the growth in spending in 2022. Military expenditure in Europe rose by 13% during the year, which was the **largest annual increase in total European spending in the post-Cold War era**. The exceptional growth was largely accounted for by substantial increases in Russian and Ukrainian spending, but many other European countries boosted their military budgets in 2022 (Tian et al. 2023). Some of our interviewees have argued that the war in Ukraine is changing *"the nature of the [European] Union"*, as Europe is traditionally associated with 'soft power' tools such as trade and development aid and is seen as a peace project focused on civilian power. While some expressed concerns about the further securitisation of international cooperation, a trend that has been ongoing since the advent of the Global War on Terror, others saw a much clearer relationship between foreign policy, defence, economic interests and international cooperation in the wake of the Ukraine war as a positive development for European policy coherence and international influence. Even the ability of the EU to offer 'hard security' collaboration through the European Peace Facility (EPF) was seen as filling an important gap in the EU's international cooperation toolbox, responding to a clear demand from partner governments. Some described the war in Ukraine as a *"trigger which put a lot of things in motion"* in terms of evolving geographic or thematic priorities or changes in spending patterns. The war in Ukraine has brought about not only a focus on hard security but also a shift to the East, as illustrated by the fact that the EU has so far earmarked €12 billion (in current prices) from the EPF in military aid for Ukraine (see Figure 3 for more details on changes in thematic and geographic priorities) (Bilquin 2023).

The war in Ukraine however, did not impact all member states in the same way: for some, it was seen as an existential threat such as for Sweden and Finland and an issue of immediate national self-interest requiring a paradigm-shifting response in international cooperation priorities, while for others such as Austria, it had not (yet) filtered down to international cooperation and the aid budget in such a significant way. Some member states such as Austria and Belgium initially ensured that funding allocated to Ukraine was 'extra money' or separate from the original ODA budget. Yet over the longer run, those we interviewed saw as unrealistic the ability to increase the overall pot of resources for international cooperation in the wake of not only Ukraine reconstruction (Euractiv 2023a)[4] but the costs of wider EU accession in a future EU budget.

Factor 4: More prominent economic, trade and commercial interests – often linked to the green transition

The fourth factor represented in Figure 2 relates to **economic, trade and commercial interests** which are becoming more prominent and being more clearly and openly pursued through international cooperation. This includes a strong focus on the green and digital transitions and the promotion of European interests and technologies in these areas. This is particularly evident in EU initiatives, such as the Global Gateway, yet bilaterally many countries are increasingly pitching closer links between their own private sector, trade and development cooperation as well as strategic economic interests. While this is not new (or easy to actually effectively operationalise), there is a renewed dynamism towards this as a policy objective, also driven by the green transition and a desire to see international cooperation facilitate access to specific minerals and raw materials. Many European governments want to be seen as being more *"business friendly"* to their own private sector in an increasingly competitive world. Economic diplomacy is not a new topic, as more openly 'tied aid' was common in the 1980s and 1990s – albeit not exactly the same, it has some common elements. While this is sometimes also characterised as *"securitisation"* of economic, trade and commercial links, for others there is a more compelling development case to be made for supporting the 'productive sector' and leveraging private sector resources for international cooperation in a way that is not available in a traditional development cooperation logic. Indeed, leveraging additional financial resources from the public and private sectors – including through blending and guarantees – is becoming a key part of the global international cooperation agenda and an essential condition to achieve the SDGs. Others interviewed pointed to the fact that partners themselves are increasingly demanding economic partnerships in the form of equitable access to global markets, as well as more trade and investment in their own countries. A limited cooperation focus on basic services and human development-focused partnerships is in itself no longer a sufficient and attractive

European offer nor an entirely sustainable one. So beyond any self-interested European securitisation logic, senior officials were very much concerned by the need to stay relevant and respond with economic cooperation to the demand of partner countries' political leadership and business community. Yet, it would be disingenuous not to note the clear European self-interest as well.

Factor 5: Partner countries becoming increasingly assertive and vocal

Another key driver is the fact that **partner countries are becoming more assertive about their needs and priorities and have more options** in terms of international partners to work with. In addition, partner countries, just like European countries, are increasingly sensitive and responsive to domestic constituencies and political pressure. The desire for new and diverse partners by Europe itself was also prevalent in our interviews: *"We need more friends out there, but not the usual suspects."* Those interviewed repeatedly mentioned the necessity to win a *"battle of narratives"* against Russia and China or at least have a better *"qualitative offer"* as the way the EU and its member states have so far responded to this growing competition with other global powers. Yet there was also a clear realisation that more active listening of partner countries' needs, interests and priorities and being more "demand-driven" and realistic in cooperation was needed. Beyond China, the perceived increased competition comes from the Gulf Countries, other BRICS members, Turkey and other regional powers. Yet, many interviewed European officials did not really feel that they had the necessary political or financial resources to present a new *"game-changing"* offer to partner countries. They were looking for synergies and better links between different levels of existing internationally-focused financial resources (both ODA and non-ODA) and relevant non-financial policies (for example, science and technology, trade, green, innovation, and digital) at the bilateral and EU level. Concerns that so-called competitors like China were faster, more flexible, and less encumbered with regulation were also evident in our interviews. Importantly, in spite of recent efforts and initiatives such as the Global Gateway aimed at presenting a coherent and easily identifiable European offer to the world, a number of interviewees noted that Europe was still not good enough at either acting collectively or promoting and communicating what it was 'good' at and that "*the EU is bulldozing with Global Gateway and shooting itself in the foot".*

Factor 6: The global goals and the values agenda decreasing in prominence

Our interviewees noted two other drivers of change in international cooperation, albeit with decreasing prominence. The first is **global commitments such as the SDGs**, which, behind closed doors, were said to no longer be the dominant rationale of European international and development cooperation. Second, and to some degree of despair for some, is the equally decreasing importance and ability to promote the so-called **values agenda**. On global goals, a point was made that *"the EU needs to be reminded of the geopolitical benefits of living up to global commitments",* yet it was clear that they had lost significant traction in policy and pursuit of priorities, often more retrofitted to initiatives or less prominent in new policy commitments rather than being their primary motivation. On values associated with governance, human rights, gender, and humanitarian principles, it was noted that these are increasingly being challenged externally, but also internally within Europe. The EU and member states' actions and inconsistent policies with regard to irregular migration for example severely undermine the EU's ability to be seen as credible on human rights standards (Bisong et al. 2023). More generally, Europe's mixed response to founded accusations of applying double standards (Tadesse Shiferaw and Di Ciommo 2023; Euractiv 2023b; Friends of Europe 2023; Fattibene et al. 2022; Kumar et al. 2022) when it comes to human rights clearly worried many of the senior officials we interviewed in terms of the EU's credibility and the negative projected image of Europe in the world. There were serious doubts about the extent to which the EU could compensate for this loss of credibility and recover its image simply by renewing its discourse and offer in the area of international and development cooperation. There was also a question of efficacy and whether forcefully promoting values was actually likely to be successful, win partners, compete with other players or achieve outcomes for citizens. Yet many felt that the values agenda – however difficult and tainted – was both a moral obligation and part of what differentiated Europe from other global players.

Where are citizens and other actors in the diagram?

One factor not represented in Figure 2 is citizens within partner countries. Despite a huge amount of rhetoric about placing "the poor", "beneficiaries", "citizens", or "partner countries" at the heart of decision-making for development cooperation, at the macro level this was not discernible from our "off the record" interviews about international cooperation. While this used to be a key part of development cooperation policy and international commitments at least at the level of narratives or aspirations, the global and national politics within Europe have clearly shifted away from giving this the same prominence it once had. While there is growing awareness about approaches such as localisation and decolonisation of aid, these also were largely absent from comments made by senior officials interviewed.[5] Also less prominent is the wider commitment to principles of ownership, participation and needs or rights-based approaches. The loss of a poverty focus in cooperation was also clearly a significant concern of those interviewed. The absence or lack of influence of citizens on Europe's international cooperation is a key issue, both within the EU's partners and also within Europe itself. But this did not directly feature in our interviews.

Factor 7: National/EU systems of governance filtering the drivers of change

While European governments and the EU institutions are subject to many of the same drivers, the diagram (Figure 2) then illustrates that there is a filtering of responses and choices through the individual "**national/EU system of governance**." The system of governance is directly linked to the constitution, primary and secondary law and established governance practice. This influences policy-framing, budgetary processes and the margins of manoeuvre at the political and senior bureaucratic level. Individual European countries and the EU's own unique governance systems define the context in which foreign and development policy decisions are reached and implemented and international cooperation is actioned and made real. This 'system of governance' is rather different from the other factors because of its role in 'filtering', framing and providing real boundaries to the political and bureaucratic choices that can be taken in support of international and development cooperation. It was very apparent from the senior-level interviews we had that, despite similar pressures, and at times worldviews, the governance systems of states and the EU have a huge impact on their response choices. A clear illustration of this filtering and framing is the call for 'integrated', 'comprehensive' or 'whole-of-government' 'nexus' approaches. **Systems of governance do not easily bend to a logic entailing more flexible, speedy, long-term, risk-taking and integrated action across government**, despite the polycrisis. Nor do these systems easily transform based on the declarations of political leaders in Europe and the demands of partners. This was readily acknowledged by interviewees. In many countries, the specifics of ministries or operational agencies' mandates or budgetary processes provide a unique character to the international cooperation agenda of that country. This has to be fully taken into account to understand how these changes at the political and rhetorical levels practically manifest themselves. Yet the place of international and development cooperation within the governance system is not static, indeed as was noted by one of our interviewees, *"development cooperation has moved from the fringes [of government] to a more central position – there is more debate around it."*

Another factor is simply the **amount of money available** for international cooperation in public budgetary processes or the ability to leverage additional resources. Despite a number of smaller funds being instituted, European international cooperation is overwhelmingly drawn from increasingly stretched development cooperation/ODA budgets. These in many countries seem to be squeezed by political choices to spend less internationally. Senior bureaucrats working in the EU and in member states (with a few exceptions such as Ireland and Austria) have been working with a reality of having to try and do 'more with less', to align resources with fast-emerging "new" strategic priorities, as well as to have visible resources for crisis response when demanded by political leaders. Despite many analysts noting that international cooperation must and should extend well beyond ODA, it is still one of the most tangible aspects of international cooperation. Also despite the globally small amount of ODA, finance – especially grant finance – is still much sought after by partners, particularly those who have limited other options. Yet some interviewees expressed frustrations regarding the willingness at the political level in Foreign Ministries to accept that tradeoffs (for example, between funding and political energy expended on Africa and Ukraine, or between climate finance and food security) are inevitable if internationally focussed resources are not increased. Overall there are few indications that overall European ODA budgets will grow significantly in the future from what they are now – not only because of Europe's current economic woes exacerbated by the war in Ukraine but also (and relatedly) because few European political leaders or parties seeking election are willing to justify increases in externally-focused budgets to domestic constituencies in Europe.

Q2. How is the framing of international cooperation

evolving?

Another question we asked our interviewees was meant to understand what shifts they were perceiving (if any) in the framing of international cooperation. The overwhelming answer given by our interviewees was that **international cooperation – and the political messages accompanying it – has become more interest-oriented, with increasing tensions with past stated values**, such as good governance, poverty alleviation, or concern about long-term approaches to civilian conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This trend was perceived by some as stronger at EU level than in member states, with an increased sense that development cooperation is more openly at the service of a wider agenda including foreign or even domestic policy objectives (especially when migration is concerned but also beyond, including commercial interests).

According to some of our interviewees, this evolution in international cooperation, means that **development policy is, as a result, less "pure", and certainly less poverty focussed, than it used to be.**

Yet this is also due to the fact that global challenges and policy responses are becoming more cross-sectoral. Trade and commercial interests for instance are increasingly being merged with development cooperation, leading to a greater emphasis on cooperation with the private sector including the European private sector.

The EU's Global Gateway for example – considered as the "EU's offer" to partner countries – was seen by most of the senior officials we talked to as an agenda primarily promoting the EU's desire and interest to strengthen interest-driven partnerships with countries, rather than the achievement of the SDGs. While the EU in its more recent communication has been at pains to point out that the Global Gateway is not a response or in competition with China's Belt and Road Initiative, interviewees were fairly clear that this was a key motivating factor along with a need to *"make more friends"*. While there was some critique of the Global Gateway, it was felt that this was a natural and bold innovation that did hold some promise.

There were, however, **clear differences between member states' officials' perceptions of this evolving framing of international cooperation**, with some (especially the smaller member states) still very much focused on *"reaching the furthest behind"*. Therefore their practice of international cooperation and spending has not been impacted in a very dramatic way and still has a primary development focus. This is not surprising as member states have different political and geostrategic interests, but also different political constellations. Indeed, international cooperation was seen as influenced by the political positioning of those in power and the political system at the country level. Yet it seems that there is a general trend of increasingly using development cooperation for a domestic and geo-political agenda, even under left-leaning governments who traditionally championed global solidarity and the social sectors.

Some member states' officials also highlighted that the distinction **between foreign policy/international cooperation and 'development' cooperation was never clear-cut**. In the Netherlands, the term 'international cooperation' has overtaken development cooperation for well over a decade with the Minister wearing both the Trade and Development Cooperation hat for a while. For Estonia, the distinction was never really made in the first place. In others, like Sweden, the linking of trade, private sector and development cooperation is something newer and linked more to changes in government policy under a new government in 2023, similarly in Finland. Many senior officials interviewed felt that these different foreign and development policy aspects coming together offered positive opportunities for a new type of international cooperation, one that is less patronising, more balanced and more honest.

However, others interviewed also expressed **doubts about whether it was actually the content of international – or specifically development – cooperation that was changing or simply the way it is being talked about and presented**. Some interviewed cautioned about putting too much focus on the policy pronouncements versus analysing the day-to-day practice.

The Global Gateway could indeed also be seen as a mere new narrative or rebranding of things that have been in the works for years or alternatively as a really different way of doing business (Teevan and Bilal 2023). Some talked about how the greater involvement of the private sector had been a priority for over a decade, while from another member state's point of view, this focus was really game-changing because it removed a taboo of promoting their own private sector players. On the one hand, it was argued that the way EU institutions implement and approach international cooperation issues has changed, it has become more interest-driven and with global competition in mind. Some others also saw this move actually being enabled through 'generational change', as a cadre of staff who saw their careers defined by traditional development cooperation and aid management duties increasingly retired from foreign ministries and a new generation with more of an international cooperation mindset coming through. On the other hand, interviewees also believed that changes take time to filter down and permeate the whole of their governmental systems. It does seem indeed that there are both 'declaratory' and 'policy' dimensions to these changes with a time lag between them, with a certain degree of inertia, path dependency and resistance coming from within European bureaucratic systems. Indeed the gap between the speed at which new initiatives, approaches and strategies (such as the EU's Global Gateway) are announced and marketed, and the time they take to actually filter through the system, land in partner countries and eventually produce results is understandable but an increasing concern.

Figure 3: How are these changes manifesting themselves …some tentative views

What?	• **More focus in approach** on European self interest & competing with others • **More focus thematically** on humanitarian/crisis response, health (COVID-19), private sector for development, food security, green, digital, energy, migration & 'hard' infrastructure (EU level) • **Less focus thematically** on governance, human rights, conflict prevention (yet concern about this reduced focus from officials)
Where?	• Some shift towards **Ukraine** and the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood more generally • **Strategic (L)MICs** more important in Africa but also beyond • (Concern about) potential **decreasing focus on Africa / LDCs** – but some confidence **Africa focus will remain** (for the moment)…
How?	• Increasing desire for **blending, guarantees** – but difficult to realise in practice • Less government to government grant aid (budget support out of fashion) • Increase share of spend through humanitarian /crisis response instruments (and for some on in-donor refugee costs)
With whom?	• **Private sector** (including European, but recognised as not easy) • Member states' operational agencies (where they have them) • Search for **"strategic partners" to work with politically/economically** beyond "development partners" • UN agencies less prominent overall, but important for crisis response • **Civil society** (CS) not as prominent for most, but question of "how" to work with CS in more volatile contexts

Source: *ECDPM*

Some nuances are worth adding to the summary table in Figure 3. First of all, on geography, some of the member states' officials we talked to pointed to the fact that the "priority partner countries" of their institution had been in place for a long period and that the war in Ukraine did not (yet) cause a fundamental shift, but rather a degree of expansion or upgrade Eastwards. As highlighted by one of our interviewees, *"we cannot afford to forget the rest of the world"* or *"we cannot be seen as the ones moving money from LDCs to MICs and from the Global South to Ukraine"*. Some member states noted on the contrary the fact that over recent years, Africa has become the centre of their development cooperation (apart from Ukraine) and that they do not have traditional "partner countries" in Latin America or Asia anymore which had moved to new types of economic cooperation or where contact was minimal. Finally, it was also noted by some that the consequences of the war in Ukraine for the EU's international cooperation priorities will really be felt in the mid-term review of the current EU budget and particularly in the next seven-year budget of the EU from 2028 onwards. Most felt that the longer and more expensive the war, and any reconstruction and accession of Ukraine and its neighbours would be, the less European international cooperation finance there would be for other regions.[6]

Three key messages clearly come out regarding the evolutions in the framing of international cooperation and in priorities:

1. The framing has been evolving towards a **more interest-driven development cooperation** for some time already, with other policy areas and priorities increasingly influencing cooperation with partner countries.
2. **International cooperation** is increasingly being driven by how **domestic political and economic concerns are being externalised (for example, migration management) or securitised**.
3. The degree of change varies considerably across EU member states and EU institutions and there is thus not one uniform story regarding the shifts international cooperation is currently undergoing in Europe. While this may seem obvious given that member states have very different histories, political cultures and systems of governance (see Figure 2), the fact that some of them are resisting broader shifts is noteworthy as member states drive the EU's external action. Yet it should be noted that some who previously were less subject to the broader shifts have since evolved due to changes of government (for example, Finland and Sweden).

Q3. Are institutions well-equipped to react to the changing world?

It is clear that the pace of change in European bureaucracies does not match the current pace of change in the world. Despite the fact that, for example, the EU institutions and EU instruments have gone through significant changes over the last 15 years to modernise their international cooperation (see the blue items in Figure 1), bureaucracies are still slow to align policies, capacities and programmes with the more underlying shifts and the wider cultural change takes much longer. Indeed, several ensuing challenges manifest themselves.

First of all, the senior bureaucrats we talked to expressed concerns with regard to the extent to which these changes are discussed within the outwardly focussed part of government (for example, MFAs, and EU DG INTPA/EEAS). It was mentioned that it is institutionally difficult to respond to the changing context due to the **lack of strategic overview, thinking and anticipation and the dispersion of contacts, knowledge and insufficiently calibrated tools and expertise** across ministries/EU institutions while the challenges European countries and the globe are faced with are increasingly interlinked. Even MFAs that are in theory 'integrated' (merging foreign affairs, development cooperation, and defence) face challenges in implementing integrated approaches, although the real challenge is frequently beyond the MFAs to other parts of government. However, it is also clear that the level of agility and coordination varies across countries and EU institutions. A related challenge concerns the availability of cross-sectoral expertise 'on the market' and the need to find civil servants able to make connections and add value between policy areas beyond their own specific portfolio who also ideally have regional knowledge and networks.

Secondly, there was a sense of a certain **'crisis fatigue'**. Bureaucracies have indeed moved from crisis to crisis over the past few years, from the COVID-19 response, through Afghanistan to the Israel-Hamas war although these are very different from each other. This poly and perma-crisis environment requires a high capacity for adaptation as well as flexibility that institutions often do not naturally have. It also pushes bureaucracies to be constantly in 'crisis mode' rather than think more long-term. While traditional foreign policy was always significantly impacted by and designed to respond to events, development cooperation comes from more of a long-term planning and partnership tradition. Indeed a plea was made by one of our interviewees that *"we can't always prioritise the 'urgent' over the 'important'"* in terms of international cooperation. Burnout and fatigue at the personal level were also mentioned as both a reality and a concern. Some changes in instruments (often quite significant) that happened in recent years – such as the creation in 2021 of the EU's €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe (NDICI-GE) – were seen as good but had not perhaps gone far enough and were not accompanied with sufficient institutional change management. Yet with no end in sight to the polycrisis, there is a need for these institutions to continually be more adaptive and flexible in their approach while maintaining some kind of strategic compass in a rapidly changing world – a balance that is not easy to achieve politically or bureaucratically.

All this leads to the fact that most senior bureaucrats, when asked, did not rate their own bureaucracies as particularly well equipped to face the changing world, but were full of praise for the resilience of their own colleagues.

Q4. Who are the main leaders and forums driving decisions?

With this question, we tried to get a sense of where political agenda-setting in international cooperation was coming from. While all were clear that international cooperation was no longer the domain of the junior Foreign Minister or State Secretary who had responsibility for development cooperation, the answers were different depending on the issue and the national system of governance.

One clear message was that the trend of geopolitics and issues like migration infiltrating development cooperation is leading to an increased interest from other domestic political players. It is indeed clear that development cooperation has moved from the fringes of ministerial policymaking to a more central position. There is, for instance, more influence from and exchanges with Ministries of Finance. The war in Ukraine and other recent crises have pushed international and development cooperation and aid spending choices much higher on the agenda of foreign ministers. According to some of our interviewees, agenda setting thus comes from the Minister of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with other ministries, although some regretted the fact that the involvement of other ministries is still undertaken more in an opportunistic rather than strategic or systemic manner. In most member states, there are clear attempts to reinforce a whole-of-government approach and the involvement of sectoral ministers in international and development cooperation, which could in the long run shift the substance of cooperation. Yet the system of governance (including procedures such as budgeting) referred to earlier still has a huge impact.

Response to the war in Ukraine is a high-profile issue being dealt with at the Prime Minister (PM) office level but it was not only Ukraine that was getting engagement. It was noted that fifteen years ago, *"there was no need for the PM to be involved in Africa"*, while nowadays, through the lens of migration but also trade, global competition, access to critical and raw materials, and the war in Ukraine, Africa is becoming increasingly relevant at the European Head of Government level. At the EU level, the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen has been much more engaged, vocal and visible, centralising the international agenda around her. This has not left much space for the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP) (apart from the defence agenda) or the International Partnerships Commissioner. Personalities and the political interests of ministers and the most senior EU officials were thus seen as playing an important role in agenda setting, particularly related to thematic priorities and major high-level initiatives regardless of the system of governance.

According to some of our interviewees, certain development cooperation directorates in MFAs are carefully trying to avoid being involved in the agenda concerning Ukraine as they *"don't want [ODA] funds being used for that"*. Others, on the contrary, highlighted the need to mobilise across the board to see what the country can provide in response to the war in Ukraine, including ODA.

Q5. How are these changes being perceived by partners?

We also asked those European officials interviewed how they thought this 'new' agenda was being perceived by their partners in Africa, the neighbourhood and beyond. This section thus reflects the thoughts of European officials and not those of partner countries. It is worth noting that interviews for this brief were conducted before October 2023 and the start of the war between Israel and Hamas, yet most of the sentiments outlined below still hold true or have perhaps even been exacerbated.

The answer most commonly given by our interviewees was that European responses to recent crises (COVID-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, and most likely now the Israel-Hamas war) have led to a **breakdown of trust** between Europe and traditional development partner countries in much of the world and that rebuilding the trust will be difficult. Several of our interviewees referred to the UNGA votes on the war in Ukraine, mentioning that some high-level political figures in Europe took the position of partner countries for granted. Some expressed doubts as to whether the discourse around moving away from a donor-recipient dynamic is just rhetoric, driven as much by partner behaviour as European behaviour. There was a concern that Europeans are still being seen as paternalistic and implementing double standards, for instance, on migration and the green transition (Tadesse Shiferaw and Di Ciommo 2023). The EU is seen as adding layers of conditions or new aspirations to development cooperation in its new international cooperation agenda – but not necessarily new layers of funding. The mistrust also reportedly comes from the fact that partners feel the shift in focus towards Ukraine and that funds are shifting as well, leading to a feeling of reduced engagement. One interviewee highlighted the importance of reaching out to adjust the impression that all resources are being repurposed which, in reality, is not evident in practice or data yet. There was also a recognition among member states officials that *"in practice, we have to start executing nice ambitions"* that are articulated in policy papers and announcements of initiatives in relation to this international cooperation agenda. Another interviewee pointed to a bit more of a mixed picture, highlighting the fact that partner country officials actually appreciate Europe's *"new honesty about its interests"* that had always been there but were now more front and centre.

Another issue mentioned regarded **misunderstandings** and the **lack of clarity in the messages that the EU and its member states are giving to partner countries**. This was particularly due to the frequent rebranding exercises. Global Gateway, Team Europe and the like are not clear at the partner country level – which is partly due to the fact that those are *'Brussels bubble concepts'* as the EU has not involved local voices in their design. Even EU delegations and embassies sometimes feel disconnected from these HQ initiatives. As said by one of our interviewees, *"partner countries consider that we* [the Europeans] *spend too much time on processes rather than substance"*.[7] The need for better communication was mentioned several times, yet there was no real clear articulation of what that would look like. The Global Gateway was seen by some as a *"good strategic initiative"* but its implementation causes confusion, although it was acknowledged that it was "early days". Yet this lack of clarity is an issue that partners often experience with the EU which could lead them to turn to other partnerships (Sabourin et al. 2023). There was also a recognition that at the partner country level, there is not 'one' perception of what the EU "stands for" as member states still have bilateral cooperation and independent foreign policies. The fact that the perception of the EU could be influenced by what one or two influential member states are doing, such as France in Africa, was seen as a weakness by some. This diversity also means that the way partner countries perceive changes also depends on the member state's cooperation, with some considered more reliable or credible partners for international cooperation than others, according to our interviewees.

Overall, most interviewees felt that it was too early to fully comprehend the impact of these shifts on partner countries' perceptions and the relationship with Europe. What is clear, however, is that the new geopolitical environment and new European agenda seem to induce some 'soul searching' in EU and member states' senior officials in terms of what is or would be a credible role for the EU in the world. Some were beginning to question long-held assumptions about how Europe is perceived and that was clearly creating some angst.

A few interviewees believed that the EU is not great at marketing itself and has been "too modest", and that it needs to adjust the narrative (that is, *"we are a reliable partner that is there for the long run"*) in a tactical way that suits the local context. This also requires European delegations and embassies to start more intensified political dialogues and to listen to what partners are saying more attentively than in the past. On the other hand, there was a feeling from an external partner of a certain arrogance and detachment from reality, with a trend in the EU institutions and many EU member states to portray *"everything as a success"* – without deeper self-reflection – and **to confuse visibility with appreciation and influence**. The EU however still tends to be perceived externally as a heavy and inflexible player that is talking to itself too much. In our interviews, it was particularly striking that the need to *"offer an alternative"* and to *"be better than the other ones"* (particularly China and Russia) kept being mentioned. Whether or not this will be sufficient to alleviate the feeling that the EU and its member states are not listening well to partners' demands and needs remains to be seen. But there certainly **was a clear reflection and unease amongst** those interviewed that they simply did not know enough about how these changes in Europe's international cooperation were really being received by partners.

Q6. What are the opportunities created by this new agenda?

While the challenges were clearly evident in our conversations, we also wanted to understand what senior European officials thought were the opportunities. There were essentially four points that were made when it came to opportunities.

First was that this **new agenda should lead to a more honest and open dialogue** with partners around European interests, and also to look at international partnerships in a more holistic way rather than simply dominated by developmental or, for that matter, commercial or security interests. This, some thought, held promise for a move away from a post-colonial relationship with Africa for example.

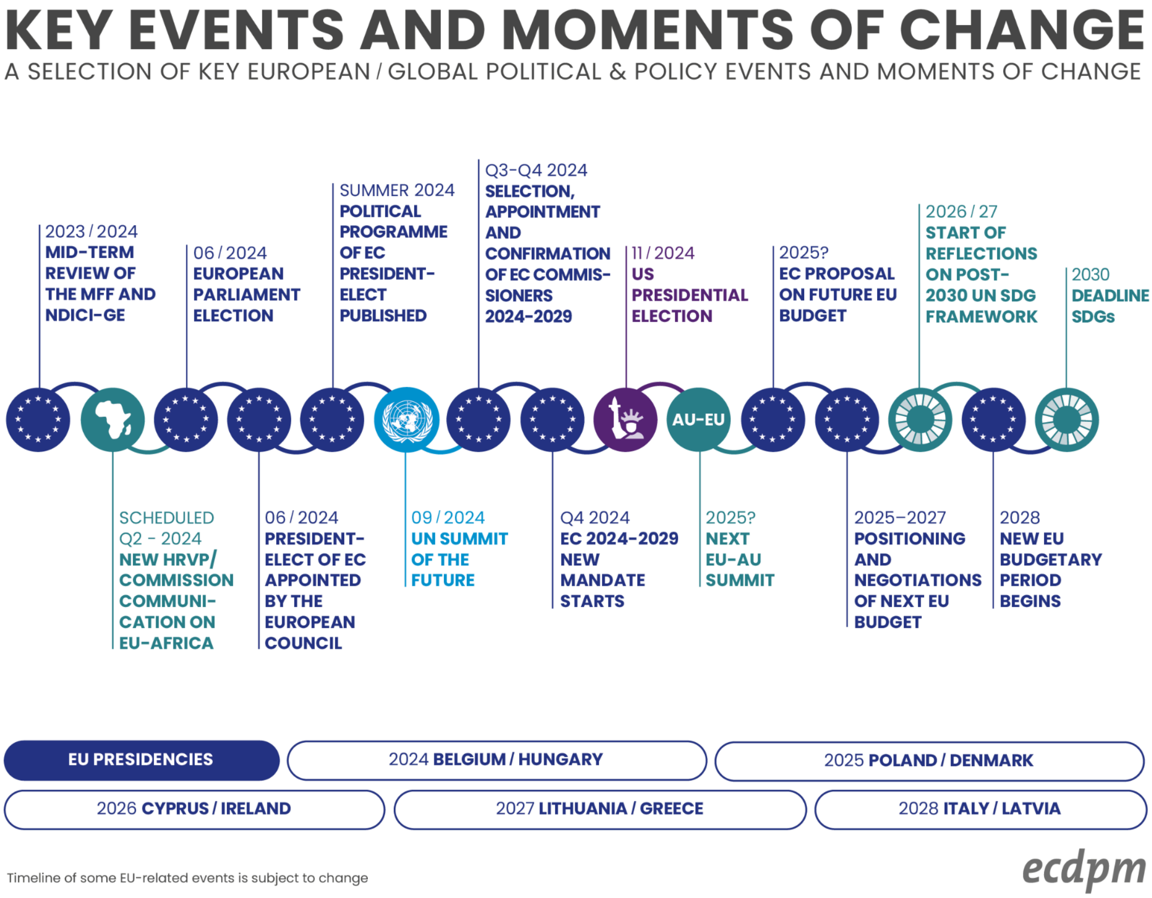
Second was the push for different parts of governments and the EU to work more closely together and for EU institutions and member states to also work closer together. This has been talked about for years. While there was clearly **no bureaucratic enthusiasm for the mechanics of Team Europe, it was understood that this was a geopolitical necessity for Europe**.

Third was that **multiple crises had pushed Europe to innovate** (for example, by focusing on new issues such as digitisation) and to have what some regarded as a long overdue reflection on previous ways of doing development cooperation.

Fourth, and finally, was **a European hope that combining efforts across different international cooperation domains would give Europe more respect, leverage and influence to be seen as a more serious partner**.

Despite these opportunities, one statement from the interviews summed up much of the sentiment: *"I don't think opportunities outweigh the risks of this new [international cooperation] agenda"*. There was also a lamentation that *"there are always opportunities in crises but why do we need a crisis to create opportunities?"*. Yet a number of those interviewed saw opportunities on the horizon with essentially the political and bureaucratic calendar of the EU creating moments of change.

Figure 4: Key events and moments of change



Source: ECDPM

Conclusion

For many in Europe, this evolution from a development cooperation agenda to an international cooperation agenda is a welcome and very necessary modernisation of relations between Europe and its partners in the majority of the rest of the world. One framed and undertaken beyond the limiting factor of aid, donor-recipient relations and all its associated postcolonial baggage. The idea is that this evolution will ultimately have a positive global impact and provide better outcomes for both parties at the country and global level. For others in Europe, this evolution represents a betrayal of development cooperation principles and values (for example, needs-based approach, ownership, and SDGs), past learning and commitments to global solidarity, likely to further exacerbate global tensions and further fuel historical grievances. Furthermore, this evolution will have a negative impact on the most vulnerable and the achievement of the SDGs as well as the way Europe is viewed in the world. Yet most senior officials we interviewed represented a complex mix of these sentiments rather than unequivocally coming down on one side. 2024 is a pivotal year for the leadership of the EU and its member states, with many opportunities for European and global change (see Figure 4). The stakes for global peace and prosperity as well as within Europe have never been higher. The second part of this series – building on the analysis of this brief – will look at ways forward for Europe's international cooperation.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the senior officials who made themselves available and shared such frank insight in the interviews, as well as those who attended the subsequent discussions in which we presented some of the analysis . Our gratitude also to our ECDPM colleagues, Carl Michiels, Lidet Tadesse, Alexei Jones and Virginia Mucchi for their insights and feedback. Our thanks to Robin van Hontem for his graphic design work and Annette Powell for the layout. The views are those of the authors and do not represent the position of ECDPM. All errors remain those of the authors. Comments and feedback can be sent to Pauline Veron (pv@ecdpm.org) and Andrew Sherriff (as@ecdpm.org).

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Endnotes

1. This brief looks at international cooperation beyond what the EU considers its own ""neighbourhood"" where a different suite of policies and instruments exist.
2. These officials were at the Deputy Secretary-General, Director General, Director and senior advisor level and were conducted throughout 2023 on the basis of no attribution to encourage full frankness (and to prevent reverting to policy lines, the "good news show" or political talking points). ECDPM also tested some of these ideas noted in this brief in closed-door presentations with a small group of European member states officials in April, June (HQ officials) and October 2023 (Brussels-based) 2023 to get further feedback, insight and validation.
3. Official sector expenditures for the sustenance of refugees in donor countries can be counted as ODA during the first twelve months of their stay. This includes payments for refugees' transport to the host country and temporary sustenance (food, shelter and training).
4. In March 2023, the World Bank estimated Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery needs at $411 billion.
5. We did not ask specific 'leading' questions on either of these aspects however.
6. It is important to note that this research was undertaken before the Israel-Hamas war which may well have implications for international cooperation spending in the future.
7. Although interestingly, someone mentioned that the EU receives more criticism at global level/in New York rather than at country level. According to that person, the gap and mistrust comes from the international level and a distinction should be made between the implementation/technical level and the political/global level.