

What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda? Part 2

February 2024

By Pauline Veron and Andrew Sherriff

Summary

Current trends in geopolitical and national political change seem to be gathering pace and show that more systemic change is on the way. In many European countries, foreign and development policy and commercial and economic policy priorities are being rethought and rewritten. A new era in which Europe's international cooperation policy and initiatives are clearly defined and 'road tested' is still some way off. This brings both challenges and opportunities.

The first brief of this two-part series explored what is driving change as articulated by senior European officials. In this second brief, we explore what could constitute a way to approach a new agenda for Europe's international cooperation in a rapidly changing world. While shifting geopolitics and domestic politics will dictate the pace of change, the European political and institutional calendar and multilateral events present some clear windows of opportunity in 2024 and 2025.

There is of course no 'one-size-fits-all' or perfect model for international cooperation. However, the pointers outlined in this brief are designed to help European policymakers work towards an international cooperation agenda that can be beneficial both for Europe and its partners.

Introduction

The [first brief](#) of this two-part series explored what is driving change as articulated by senior European officials,¹ while this second brief explores what could constitute a way to approach a new agenda for Europe's international cooperation in a rapidly changing world.² It lays out the authors' perspectives but also draws on ongoing work by ECDPM.³ In the first brief, we laid out seven factors influencing Europe's international cooperation, namely geopolitics, changes in domestic politics, core foreign and defence considerations, rising economic and commercial interests, the increasing assertiveness of partner countries, a decline in the adherence to the values agenda and global commitments and the national/European Union (EU) systems of governance. One of our key findings was that the shifting geopolitics and domestic politics cannot be wished away or ignored by those who want to return to a 'purer' more principled development policy or an international cooperation policy that puts partners first.

Current trends in geopolitical and national political change seem to be gathering pace and show that the next few years will continue to be bumpy, with further systemic change on the way. In many European countries, foreign and development policy and commercial and economic policy priorities are going through significant change. Initiatives like the EU's Global Gateway are very much a response to the changing geopolitical and national political environment and traditional foreign and development policy are evolving. Europe is in the process of change, yet a new era in which international cooperation policy and initiatives are clearly defined and 'road tested' is still some way off. This brings both challenges and opportunities.

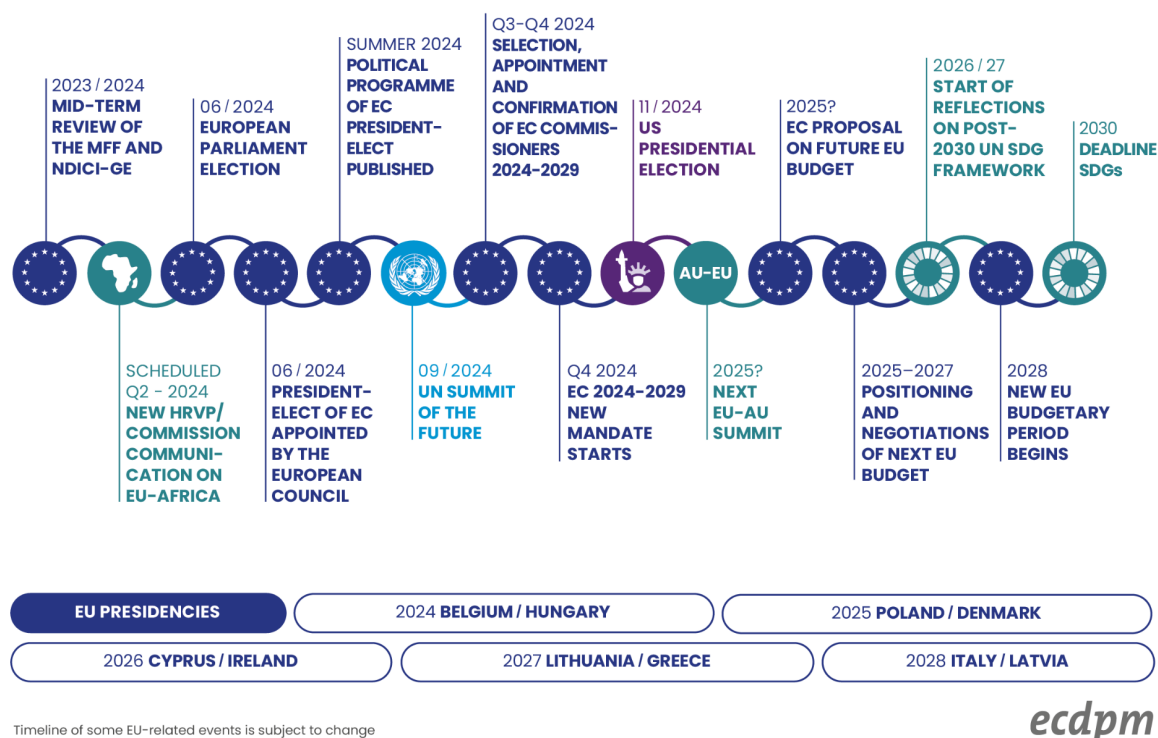
Key events and moments of change

While change in Europe's international cooperation is ongoing, the political and institutional calendar and multilateral events present some clear windows of opportunity in 2024 and 2025. These windows of opportunity, if taken, are likely to offer more latitude for change.

Figure 1: Key events and moments of change

KEY EVENTS AND MOMENTS OF CHANGE

A SELECTION OF KEY EUROPEAN / GLOBAL POLITICAL & POLICY EVENTS AND MOMENTS OF CHANGE



Source: ECDPM

As these moments of change bring both opportunities and risks, this brief aims at providing some pointers for future decisions on international cooperation, whether at EU or member state level. There is of course no 'one-size-fits-all' or perfect model for international cooperation. However, the pointers do raise some issues that senior leaders and advisers need to take into account when (re)designing their international cooperation agenda and priorities in a way that creates positive outcomes for Europe, for international partners and the multilateral order. Most of these factors overlap, and the degree to which those various elements are taken into account will, in our opinion, determine how successful current and new initiatives can be.

As we noted in our previous brief, what is already clear is that **a successful international cooperation policy cannot be built on the back of repurposing and rebranding official development assistance (ODA)**, nor simply wishful thinking about leveraging additional finance, which seems to be the dominant approach to date. It

can also not be driven entirely from the European ministries of foreign affairs or the European Commission's Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA); it requires **a much more comprehensive offer** and whole-of-government approach, but one that is also involving the private sector and civil society. **Indeed something much more fundamental, reflective and thought through is required.** Yet we must not forget that senior European public officials do not have a blank sheet, they have their own political leadership, bureaucratic constraints and path dependence. Similarly, while more money is needed, increasing public finances for international cooperation (whether ODA or beyond) are, for most countries, not on the cards. A new political and bureaucratic case for this type of spending will have to be made.

Key pointers for the future of Europe's international cooperation

Europe's international cooperation agenda globally covers vastly different regions and thematic topics. This section does not pretend to offer clear ideas relevant to every thematic issue, country and region. It rather focuses on cross-cutting issues.

Overall questions and approach

- **Address the big and tough questions – but with evidence, not wishful thinking.** These include questions around Europe's place in the world, what makes partnerships sustainable, what the future of development cooperation is, how to respond to European domestic constituencies' interests in international cooperation, or how to address the links between 'defensive' internal policy decisions (for example, around climate change and commercial competitiveness) and external impacts. Reaching better and more successful policies requires solid evidence. The EU and its member states for instance [need to decide if they are serious about changing the way they approach development cooperation](#) as part of a more strategic and integrated approach to foreign policy as a whole and what the trade-offs are. This requires discussions across governments and out-of-the-box thinking. New crises require new solutions. This is even more relevant in a context in which more far-right and populist parties will be elected and have a direct or indirect influence on government in member states – not to mention more presence in the European Parliament and potentially the next European Commission. They will at least have the ability to shape and

influence aspects of Europe's international cooperation agenda. Current leadership in the EU and member states must brace themselves for a potential future in which international cooperation – and development cooperation particularly – is being challenged not just externally, but also internally. What this means for the EU's place in the world will then have to be redefined, but the core elements of having a positive impact and relationship with partners beyond European borders must not be lost.

- **Find the right balance between crisis management and ensuring long-term (development) impact of the EU's international cooperation.** While a degree of flexibility is necessary for the EU to remain a relevant actor in an environment of poly- and permacrisis, it is just as key to go beyond short-term political announcements and cycles so as to avoid the 'urgent' overshadowing the 'important'. While this is easier said than done, it will become increasingly apparent that the short-term crisis management responses are themselves very inadequate with a high opportunity cost. Changing course will require new policies and clear principles and objectives that can guide action over the medium term.
- **Do not let the very real necessity of Europe's response to Ukraine – and enlargement in the Neighbourhood more generally – distract or pull political energy and financial resources away from other parts of the world** (notably Africa) where the EU has made commitments and needs solid cooperation. While support to Ukraine is an existential issue for the EU, an effective EU international cooperation policy has to be more encompassing.
- **Recognise potential synergies between different policy areas (foreign and development/commercial and development policies), but also trade-offs.** At the moment, much of the new rhetoric is that the EU can achieve positive outcomes for everyone (including its partners) with its foreign, development and commercial policies. In certain circumstances indeed some win-win scenarios are possible. But in an environment of strained resources and competing interests, it would be unrealistic to pretend that everything can be achieved for everyone, and it might be more beneficial to recognise upfront that this is not the case. Yet the EU should also make sure that it presents a coherent offer, [instead of giving with one hand and taking it away with the other](#). This will require more 'joined-up' and 'whole-of-government' thinking across parts of European governments, and

appreciating the potential negative impact of EU policy initiatives (trade, regulatory) on international partners 'upfront' rather than as an afterthought. There currently are very few European structures (despite decades of investment in policy coherence for development) to do this effectively or to 'test' the potential diplomatic fallout. This needs to be revisited by bringing together technical experts and those with good diplomatic knowledge of countries and regions that may be impacted. While an international cooperation agenda goes beyond a development policy agenda, potential trade-offs for Europe's collaboration with least developed countries (LDCs) and conflict countries, or the fight against global poverty, should also be considered up front, and not as an afterthought.

- **Recognise that further downplaying of the multilateral agenda does have geopolitical implications.** It is not realistic to expect that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development will frame all of Europe's international cooperation. Yet it carries the benefit of being a shared agenda or at least a shared point of reference, and it bolsters the EU's multilateral credentials at a time of global shifts. In the longer term, the EU will have to engage on the post-2030 agenda, so the question of how this evolving new EU international cooperation agenda is contributing to sustainable development targets will become more pressing.
- **Think seriously about better and new accountability mechanisms.** Significant resources and diplomatic energy are being expended on an enlarged international cooperation agenda spanning a significant range of policy domains. While much of the energy has been spent on launching new policies and initiatives, the existing accountability mechanisms in Europe need to be redesigned. Most of them are not related to multidimensional international cooperation, but rather to traditional budgetary and development cooperation approaches. Both have their place but are insufficient. There is relatively limited executive authority interest in this, but parliamentarians and civil society do need to push for this. [These should be developed at the overall level](#), and in specific domains, such as with European development finance institutions.

Partnerships

- **Spend much more time listening to partners, engaging in a genuine dialogue, gathering feedback and investing in more rigorous external evaluations of the impact of new initiatives.** Too often, Europe is open to the accusation that its initiatives designed to build partnerships are presented without consultation. Our research has shown that geopolitical and domestic factors are [key determinants of Europe's international cooperation agenda](#). It is only natural that European interests are at the fore in the current environment yet this thought has to be more long-term. Europeans have spent an inordinate amount of time speaking and deciding amongst themselves about priorities, policies, instruments and initiatives in recent years. A better balance now has to be sought between ownership priorities, the EU's values and the promotion of the EU's interests for partnerships to be truly 'win-win' or 'equal'. This is a challenging endeavour and can only be achieved if Europe's offer somewhat responds to the needs and differentiated interests of partners (finding a perfect match every time is unrealistic). Yet the approach, language and framing the EU uses also has an impact, and Europe picking up on and responding to the language used by partners can be helpful. Broader [ECDPM research](#) has also [shown](#) the need for the EU to communicate and [engage more with partner countries](#) to deal with the implications of the [EU's transition towards a more political approach](#) and new financial instruments – beyond simply marketing. The mid-term review of the €79.5 billion Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument-Global Europe (NDICI-GE) is, for instance, an opportunity to dedicate more time to undertake [proper consultations](#) with partner countries. More generally, better communication and more sophisticated and 'long-term' public diplomacy require both direction and investment from the next political leadership of the European institutions.
- **Continue to invest politically and financially in relationships beyond state actors,** as well as in state-society and state-business relationships. There is a danger that in a geopolitical world too much emphasis is placed on state actors and power politics. One of Europe's assets in its international cooperation is its multi-stakeholder approach and long history of engagement with civil society. While this certainly complicates relationships (particularly with authoritarian regimes), Europe should keep investing in creative ways of working rather than

abandoning or downplaying these stakeholders. This will require a significant refresh of the EU's own strategic approach and toolbox to engage with civil society as well as local authorities/cities, as its current approach belongs to another era of cooperation.

- **Not all international cooperation should come from a transactional mindset.** At times, Europe will need to be transnational in its international cooperation; this is no longer taboo. Yet European actors and the EU being responsible global citizens and putting financial resources and political energy towards [global public goods](#) also carries geopolitical benefits.
- **Be humble in your international cooperation, show respect and acknowledge how history also impacts your partnerships (on both sides).** While our first brief focused very much on current drivers of changes, the importance of history (and confronting difficult European history) and path dependency should not be downplayed. It is something that certain European countries and the EU will have to reckon with to improve their partnerships for the better. Yet there is also a diversity of EU member states that have a different (non-colonial) history, that could be drawn on and listened to more. Some – although small players – have developed niches very much valued by partners, such as Estonia when it comes to digital cooperation.

Adapting European bureaucracies and toolbox

- **Invest more in 'change management' within foreign ministries and EU institutions** to respond to this new world and agenda. Responding well will not happen by speeches, press releases, new policies, new initiatives or even new instruments alone – the hardware and software of institutions need to be rewired at the HQ and in-country levels. The fast-paced international and polycrisis environment will certainly require far greater change management and bureaucratic shifts in terms of mindset and ways of working, both in the EU institutions and member states. However, institutional path dependency and inertia are likely to be one of the greatest blockages to the EU's efforts to be a more relevant, reactive, integrated and strategic international cooperation actor. Bureaucratic incentives and disincentives for change need to be clearly and honestly analysed, however uncomfortable these are. Also recruitment, reward

and retention policies of the EU institutions and most foreign ministries need to be looked at to see if they are fit for purpose in this changing environment.

- **Recognise that the international cooperation agenda must extend well beyond ministries of foreign affairs and the EU's DG INTPA/European External Action Service (EEAS)**, and a long-term 'international cooperation' mindset must permeate other parts of government bureaucracies rather than simply short-term transactional thematic approaches. The knowledge and diplomatic and thematic insight of the EEAS and DG INTPA should however not be too far from the highest levels of priority setting for Europe's international cooperation either. Yet there does need to be a diplomatic 'strategy' and coordination between different policy areas. At the moment, despite a varied toolbox and major initiatives such as the EU Global Gateway and Team Europe, the EU's approach often still looks scattered at the global, regional and country levels.
- **Look critically at the EU's political, financial and policy instruments** in terms of whether they are really fit for purpose for this new international cooperation agenda, and particularly at what new non-ODA instruments are needed. The EU will naturally be doing this with the mid-term review of the EU budget and individual instruments such as the NDICI-GE and associated European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) in 2024, and as it begins looking at the future multiannual budget in 2025 (see Figure 1). These are crucial moments for change, as are the moments when European bilateral thematic (foreign/development) or geographic (for example, Africa/Latin America/Asia) policies are being rewritten. Beyond the 'classical' external financial EU instruments, there is a raft of internal instruments in relation to research (Horizon Europe) or education collaboration that can also be enhanced.

Accepting and recognising that results take time

- **Recognise that new initiatives like the EU Global Gateway will take time to roll out and show results**, but if abandoned too quickly or not invested with political and bureaucratic energy by the EU institutions and member states, it will be doomed to fail. While undoubtedly there will be pressure for (new) political leaders to come up with bold initiatives, non-delivery on existing initiatives will damage European standing. Also, do not confuse visibility with impact in launching new

initiatives. [The implementation of the Global Gateway](#) is crucial to the EU's geopolitical standing and credibility in the eyes of partners, yet it will require a genuine shift in business practices, including rethinking the EU and member states' collective [development cooperation objectives](#) and taking a whole-of-government approach. The EU is 'on notice' as partners have seen new initiatives launch and fade in the past (for example, the Africa–Europe Alliance for Sustainable Investment and Jobs of the Juncker Commission).

Reflecting and building on strengths

- **Reflect on what the EU and EU member states are 'good at' that is actually wanted as part of international cooperation from partners**, rather than just trying to launch initiatives similar to (seemingly successful) initiatives of others. A self-reflection and re-evaluation of the EU's added value in international cooperation (which inevitably varies from one partner and sector to another) will be necessary to 'hit the bull's eye' and be seen as relevant. [The EU's distinctiveness might indeed not lie where it thinks it does](#) and solely defining it in competition with other players will be detrimental in the long term, as it will inevitably drag the EU's international cooperation agenda to become reactive and 'in response to' other actors rather than proactive and building towards the EU's own objectives, values and added value. The [EU's political leadership should embrace a narrative based less on China-bashing and more on dialogue with partner countries](#).
- **Be smart, nuanced and tailored in pursuit of the values agenda**, and recognise and respond to Europe's diminished moral authority here. In some countries where the EU faces challenging dilemmas (for example, West African and Sahelian countries that underwent a [coup](#), such as Niger), the EU and its member states might need to become comfortable with embracing a strategic shift, even if it means deviating from the [EU's long-standing commitment to the liberal peace agenda](#). Being smart, nuanced and tailored will require investment in understanding political and cultural dynamics at the local, regional and national level, and listening to the EU's diplomatic network 'in country'. Europe has also come a long way with [mainstreaming of gender](#) in its international cooperation, as have many member states. This is something that can be built on, even if for political reasons the '[feminist foreign policy](#)' labelling may evolve in the face of change of parties in governments.

Strengthening the multilateral agenda

- **Seek to meaningfully engage on the global governance reform agenda** wanted by international cooperation partners. Europe should champion a reformed multilateral system that is fair, representative and reflective of the needs and responsibilities of all actors, which includes supporting Africa's proposals to reform multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Security Council, World Trade Organization (WTO), the G20 and the Bretton Wood Institutions. A stronger position of developing countries and African countries in these [fora](#) would not only help restore partner countries' trust and confidence in the international system, but also help diffuse [continued Western-Chinese tensions](#).

Conclusion

As the global order and domestic European politics shift, so do policy and practice, including internationally-focused policy. Yet the current picture is one of flux and change rather than something with clear and settled direction. There are few in Europe who remain universally upbeat about this shift. However, in moments like this, opportunities exist for changing course and implementing an international cooperation agenda that is more likely to be beneficial for Europe, its partners and the multilateral order. There is clearly room for improvement based on learning from existing practice.

Our analysis has shown that shifting geopolitics and domestic politics can no longer be ignored, so civil society organisations, thematic lobby groups or think tanks seeking to influence the European agenda should integrate those factors in their advocacy strategies, as attempts at influencing that are based on development or normative principles, values or global commitments alone – albeit laudable – are unlikely to shape action. Speaking to the non-converted sometimes requires adapting to their language, while staying true to your principles.⁴

The enormity of the stakes for Europe in terms of improving the outcomes of its international cooperation should not be underestimated. The EU is still a major global player in many domains and can be a force for global good, but the global window of

opportunity and the comparative size of its assets are shrinking. Now is the time for action.

References

Ashraf, N., Karaki, K. and Bilal, S. 2023. [Enhancing complaints mechanisms of European development finance institutions](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 352. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Byiers, B., Karkare, P., Bisong, A. and Ronceray, M. 2023. [Niger's coup: Who loses from ECOWAS sanctions?](#) ECDPM Commentary. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Di Ciommo, M. 2023. [Healing the AU-EU partnership in turbulent times: Views from Europe](#). ECDPM Commentary. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Di Ciommo, M., Salzinger, M., Desmidt, S. and Sergejeff, K. 2023. [Gender equality in EU external action: Leadership from the EU headquarters](#). ECDPM Briefing Note 157. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Karaki, K. 2023. [China's role in African sovereign debt: Implications for Europe](#). ECDPM Briefing Note 170. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Karkare, P. and Medinilla, A. 2023. [In search of shared benefits: Europe and Africa in a global green transition](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 345: Maastricht: ECDPM.

Laanani, K. 2023. [From Niger's coup to the Sahel's jihadist threat: A complex path ahead for the EU](#). ECDPM Commentary. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Musoni, M., Karkare, P., Teevan, C. and Domingo, E. 2023. [Global approaches to digital sovereignty: Competing definitions and contrasting policy](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 344. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sabourin, A. and Jones, A. 2023. [More than targets: How the EU promotes democracy, human rights and gender equality through Global Europe and beyond](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 337. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sabourin, A., Sergejeff, K. and Jones, A. 2023. [The new EU development policy shifts in practice: Views from Kenya and Cameroon](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 358. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sergejeff, K., Domingo, E. and Veron, P. 2023. [The EU, geopolitics and human development: Insights from Zambia, Kenya and Guinea](#). ECDPM Discussion Paper 340. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sergejeff, K. and Veron, P. 2024. [How to make 2024 the EU's year on global health](#). ECDPM Commentary. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Sherriff, A. and Veron, P. 2024. [What is driving change in Europe's international cooperation agenda? Part 1](#). ECDPM Briefing Note 175. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Tadesse Shiferaw, L. and Di Ciommo, M. 2023. [Trouble in paradise: The EU-Africa partnership in a geopolitical context](#). ECDPM Briefing Note 172. Maastricht: ECDPM.

Teevan, C. and Bilal, S. 2023. [The Global Gateway at two: Implementing EU strategic ambitions](#). ECDPM Briefing Note 173. Maastricht: ECDPM.

UN. 2023. [The Sustainable Development Goals Report – Special edition](#). United Nations.

Endnotes

1. These officials were at the Deputy Secretary-General, Director General, Director, and senior official level, and spoke to us on a confidential non-attribution basis.
2. This brief looks at international cooperation beyond what the EU considers its own 'neighbourhood' where a different suite of policies and instruments exist.
3. The authors would like to thank Alexei Jones, Lidet Tadesse Shiferaw, Carl Michiels, and Virginia Mucchi for their comments on an earlier version of this piece. All analysis and errors remain those of the authors themselves.
4. The authors' follow-up will be to hear directly from major partners on their aspirations and experiences with shifts in Europe's international cooperation agenda.

This publication benefits from the structural support by ECDPM's institutional partners: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, and Sweden.