

# PREFACE

*The 21st century has confronted the European Union with a complex array of challenges – geopolitical shifts, economic uncertainty, technological transformation, and evolving social dynamics. At the same time, new opportunities for leadership, cooperation, and innovation are emerging. It is within this dynamic and often unpredictable environment that the EU must continuously redefine its role, vision and strategies.*

*The European Union stands at a crossroads, both as a political entity and as a normative force on the international stage. In recent years, the world has witnessed tectonic shifts that have redefined the contours of global governance. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resurgence of geopolitical tensions, the rise of authoritarianism, the growing urgency of the climate crisis, and the profound impact of digital transformation are just some of the forces reshaping the global order. The EU, while navigating its internal challenges – ranging from strengthening EU legitimacy to economic disparity, from governing the artificial intelligence to countering disinformation, from fighting populism and Euroscepticism to protecting the EU values, from guarantying security to a viable enlargement process – has also to con-front its place and responsibilities in the time of war and uncertain international environment.*

*The twelfth international conference of the European Studies Department of Sofia University „Saint Kliment Ohridski“, held under the title „The European Union in a Dynamic Global Context,“ was conceived as a platform to critically assess these challenges and explore the EU’s potential pathways forward. It brought together an exceptional community of scholars from across Europe united by a shared interest in understanding the EU’s evolving role in the world. The contributions in this volume reflect the depth and diversity of those discussions.*

*One of the central themes that emerged from the conference is the tension between continuity and change. The EU was founded on principles of multilateralism, cooperation, and peace – values that are now being tested in an increasingly fragmented global landscape. By championing the rule of law, sustainable development, and human rights, the EU can continue to serve as a good example of stability and progress, provided it remains adaptive and active.*

*This publication does not offer a singular narrative or definitive vision for the EU’s future. Rather, it presents a mosaic of perspectives, grounded in empirical research, theoretical insight, and practical experience. The diversity of topics underscores the multidimensional nature of the EU’s external action. The contributors engage critically with current policy frameworks while also proposing*

*innovative strategies that reflect the complexities of today's global realities. This volume brings together a diverse array of voices who have contributed thoughtful, critical, and forward-looking analyses on the EU's engagement with the world. The discussions held during the conference reflected not only academic excellence but also a shared commitment to understanding and shaping the EU's evolving global footprint.*

*Equally important is the recognition that the EU's actions abroad are deeply intertwined with its internal cohesion. The credibility of its foreign policy depends not only on the strength of its institutions but also on the unity of its member states. As many of the contributions in this volume suggest, the EU must balance strategic interests with normative commitments – a challenge that requires both political will and institutional innovation.*

*Throughout the conference, a recurring question resonated: What kind of global actor does the European Union aspire to be? The responses were as varied as they were thought-provoking. Some emphasized the need for a more assertive EU, capable of defending its values and interests in an increasingly multipolar world. Others called for deeper partnerships, greater multilateral engagement, and a stronger voice for civil society in shaping foreign policy. What united all perspectives, however, was a collective understanding that the EU cannot afford to remain passive or reactive. The global context demands proactive and strategic engagement.*

*As Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of European integration, once said, „People only accept change when they are faced with necessity, and only recognize necessity when a crisis is upon them.“ Today, that necessity is more evident than ever. The challenges Europe faces cannot be met by any one nation alone; they demand unity, vision, and collective strength. Europe is not only about procedures and rules, but about a vision for society. That vision of openness, solidarity, and shared destiny remains as vital today as at any point in the EU's history.*

*This ideal is beautifully captured in Friedrich Schiller's Ode to Joy, famously set to music by Beethoven and adopted as the European anthem. The poem proclaims, „Alle Menschen werden Brüder“ – „All men become brothers“ in joy and in happy times. But the true test of fraternity is not when we rejoice together, but when we suffer, rebuild, and persevere together. Crises expose the fault lines of solidarity, but they also reveal its strength. If joy unites, then shared responsibility sustains. The European project must strive to uphold the common values in adversity when unity is most difficult and most necessary.*

*In closing, I would like to express our deep gratitude to all those who made this conference and publication possible: to the authors who contributed their*

*research and insights, to the keynote speakers, panel chairs and participants who enriched our discussions, and to the organising committee whose dedication ensured the event's success. Special thanks go to Hanns Seidel Foundation and Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies – the partners who supported this initiative and reaffirmed their commitment to academic exchange and international cooperation. I would like to end this preface quoting the words of Wilfried Martens „Strong Europe is a necessity in a globalized world“ and to remind the title of his book „Europe – I struggle, I overcome.“*

*Thank you for your commitment to this shared intellectual journey.*

***Prof. Ingrid Shikova, PhD  
President of the Organising Committee<sup>1</sup>***

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