



# MULTILATERALISM – PAST, PRESENT AND POSSIBLE FUTURES

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*Starting from the definition of multilateralism, based on its main characteristics – peaceful resolution of conflicts, sovereign states equality under international law, inclusion and active participation of all stakeholders, the present paper examines the current perception of the foundations of global cooperation stability. Thus, considering the high level of interconnectedness as well as the complexity of the crises our world is currently facing, some of the challenges to the multilateral system are presented, focusing on the UN, an inclusive multilateral institution, and the EU, a regional one. Romania's position in this context is also mentioned. In connection to the Western-based democratic values and liberal societies, three possible futures are exhibited. Under the given circumstances, it has been almost unanimously agreed that reforms are necessary. However, there are still few specific details related to the substance and means of the changes, and there are too many variables to be considered in the efforts to align goals, interests and expectations, as well as to accommodate the structural, functional and strategic elements of transformation.*

**Keywords:** *multilateralism; institutions; challenges; transformation; structural, functional, strategic goals.*

## Introduction

It has become increasingly obvious that the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by multiple crises. Therefore, today, the challenges are interconnected, as solutions should be found to a lot of problems that, by definition, exceed national boundaries, such as climate change, humanitarian crises, migration, cyber security (AI challenges included), space security. Taking into account the above-mentioned aspects, against the background of the well-known international relations triad –

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unilateralism, bilateralism, multilateralism –, the present article is intended to briefly define the terms, to explore the current state of affairs, and to present some future scenarios related to possible responses to the challenges, focusing on multilateral approaches, diplomacy and institutions.

In this context, considering that the core of multilateral approach is represented by providing mutually agreed solutions, based on shared values, to complex problems, besides the well-known multilateral organisations and institutions (e.g. United Nations – inclusive multilateralism, European Union – regional multilateralism, International Monetary Fund, World Bank – financial multilateralism, NATO – militarised multilateralism, Universal Postal Union – functional multilateralism), as the number of actors engaged in transforming the world is increasing, thus entailing much economic dynamism, other formats for cooperation have emerged (e.g. G7, then G20 – elite multilateralism). Therefore, one of the main challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to update existing multilateral institutions to meet the new reality generated by emerging state and even non-state actors as well as organisations (e.g. BRICS/BRICS+ – challenging multilateralism), which have divergent values. This is the reason why multilateralism-related themes have been so frequently and extensively debated lately.

The main research methods employed in developing the present article are as follows: *framework analysis* – to define the terms, codify concepts as well as themes and map them for interpretation; *content analysis* – to clarify the relationships between the identified concepts, themes and data; *comparative analysis* – to search for similarity and variance among the units of analysis; *scenario analysis* – to provide descriptions of possible, probable and/or preferable futures. Mention should be made that the analysis is focused on the United Nations (UN) as an example of global multilateral approach and the European Union (EU) as one of regional multilateral approach.

### 1. Terminology – Brief Explanation

*Multilateralism* is better explained in contrast to *individualism* and *bilateralism*. All three concepts are interrelated in international relations theories. In a *quantity-based* approach, it is obvious that unilateralism involves one actor, bilateralism – two, and multilateralism – three or more actors. In a *quality-based* approach, multilateralism is defined by the following characteristics: indivisibility, meaning that it is based on socially constructed public benefit; generalised organising principles, thus opposing discrimination; diffuse reciprocity, entailing that it is different from preferential bilateralism (Ruggie, 1993, p. 11).

Multilateralism can be also approached from the *theoretical* or *functional* viewpoints. From a *theoretical* perspective, multilateralism entails a common



political project as well as a shared system of norms and values. The decision-making process is based on consultation, solidarity and inclusion, thus guaranteeing that all actors have the same rights and obligations in all situations, not on a case-by-case basis. The overarching characteristic in this regard is an inclusive approach aimed at maintaining the stability of the international system in the long run. From a *functional* perspective, multilateralism is a diplomatic practice based on cooperation between several state and, more recently, even non-state actors, emphasising multilateral diplomacy characteristics. Mention should be made here that the concept of multilateral diplomacy is older than that of multilateralism, being implicit in the papers of great philosophers throughout history, such as Leibniz (1695), Rousseau (1782), Bentham (1789), and Kant (1795), who dedicated part of their studies to developing perpetual peace projects.

Besides the fact that it is a *method*, multilateralism can be also a *form of organisation*, as the actors get involved in both the formulation and implementation of multilateral policies. Thus, its main *roles* can be defined as an essential instrument for coordinating international actions and an essential means of addressing common challenges in order to provide a coordinated response, especially in the situations with which states cannot cope by themselves. Examples in this regard can be the principle of collective security in NATO, which is based on a multilateral approach, conflict prevention and resolution, in the case of a conflict that, directly or indirectly, goes beyond local borders, thus requiring the support of regional actors and/or major powers.

In strict connection to its main roles, multilateralism *institutionalisation* has to be mentioned. It is related to the processes and efforts meant to embed and implement the above-mentioned aspects in the international system, as well as to establish the proper institutions to support the endeavour.

The three mentioned terms (individualism, bilateralism and multilateralism) are more complex than they appear at first glance and they do not totally exclude each other in the theory and, especially, in the practice of international relations. Moreover, considering the current transformation the world is facing as well as the implicit challenges, multilateralism seems to be at heart of contemporary international life. However, it is still difficult to grasp and not thoroughly studied, although it is neither a novel notion, phenomenon, principle, nor a newly emerged institutional basis.

## 2. Multilateralism Institutionalisation. Historical Overview

The *Concert of Europe* or the Congress System or the Vienna System was established after the Congress of Vienna (1814-1815), which can be considered the foundation of what we now know as Modern Europe, following the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, which had troubled Europe since the 1790s.



In general terms, as there were some contained crises during the period the System was functional, namely between 1815-1914, when the First World War broke out, the Concert of Europe refers to the geopolitical order established on the continent in which the great powers intended to act in concert to resolve disputes and respond to new challenges so that wars and revolutions could be prevented and political and territorial status quo could be maintained. Therefore, as it provided an institutional consultation mechanism aimed at preserving the stability of the international system, the Concert of Europe can be considered the first modern multilateral institution, although it did not meet the inclusion and consultation conditions, as the small states were rarely consulted. It was based on the idea of balance of power, so that the ambitions of a great power could be contained by the others. Despite of it, the System could not prevent the outbreak of the war. However, some of its mechanisms and principles were preserved or updated when the League of Nations was established.

The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 can be considered the first multilateral treaties related to the conduct of warfare, enabling governments to cooperate in order to develop rules in the common interest. They were largely based on the Lieber Code, which, among others, defined the command responsibility for war crimes and crimes against humanity, the regulations for behaviour in times of martial law, for the protection of civilians, for the prisoner exchange process, as well as for the status of individuals engaged in civil wars. The 1907 conference focused on naval warfare. Some of the derived provisions and institutions still exist today, even if they have an updated form (e.g. the Permanent Court of Arbitration).

The League of Nations was established on 10 January 1920, following the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, where unanimous agreement was reached on the text of the Covenant of the League of Nations. It was an organisation for international cooperation, which could be considered the first fully-fledged multilateral institution, meant to provide the member states having the same status and sharing common values with the opportunity to meet periodically and discuss all major international issues in order to respond to challenges in a coordinated manner. The League was considered a unique moment when international affairs were “*institutionalised*”, in contrast to the pre-First World War methods of law and politics (Kennedy, 1997). However, as it has been mentioned, many of the League’s attributes were developed from existing institutions, conventions and diplomatic methods. A quite new concept included in the Covenant was that of collective security, alongside those of arbitration, economic and social cooperation, reduction of armaments and open diplomacy. Besides the previous multilateral achievements, the Covenant was largely based on the US President Wilson’s Fourteen Points’ declaration, which outlined the post-war peace settlement. Nevertheless, the League of Nations failed in preventing the outbreak of the Second World War, but it continued to exist legally and conducted limited operations. The Secretariat remained in Geneva, while some



staff worked in offices established in London, Washington, DC, and in the campus of US Princeton University.

The Allied powers decided, at the 1943 Tehran Conference, to create a new body to replace the League, namely the United Nations (UN), many of the League bodies becoming affiliated with the UN. When the UN Charter came into existence on 24 October 1945, the League of Nations was still active. For a few months, the two organisations coexisted. In April 1946, 35 of the 46 member states met in Geneva to formally approve the dissolution of the League. “It was not the League which failed. It was not its principles which were found wanting. It was the nations which neglected it. It was the Governments which abandoned it” (Paul-Boncour, 1946).

The United Nations was established after the Second World War. More exactly, on 25 April 1945, 50 nations met in San Francisco and started drafting the UN Charter, which was adopted on 25 June and took effect beginning on 24 October 1945, upon ratification by the five permanent members of the Security Council, namely the United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, the Soviet Union and China. The Charter defined the UN goals as maintaining international peace and security, protecting human rights, providing humanitarian aid, promoting sustainable development, upholding international law, developing friendly relations among countries, harmonising the actions of nations. The UN has six main operational organisations – the General Assembly, the Security Council, the Economic and Social Council, the International Court of Justice, the UN Secretariat, also including specialised agencies, funds and programmes, such as the World Bank Group, the World Health Organisation, the World Food Programme, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF). In addition, non-governmental organisations may be granted consultative status.

Considering the 21<sup>st</sup> century emerging challenges, in 2000, it was held the Millennium Summit, when all member states adopted the Millennium Development Goals. The 2015 World Summit reaffirmed the importance of promoting development, peacekeeping, human rights and global security, launching the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The 17 SDGs are as follows: no poverty; zero hunger; good health and well-being; quality education; gender equality; clean water and sanitation; affordable and clean energy; decent work and economic growth; industry, innovation and infrastructure; reduced inequalities; sustainable cities and communities; responsible consumption and production; climate action; life below water; life on land; peace, justice and strong institutions; partnerships for the goals (SDGs, 2015).

In line with the goals, on 13 June 2019, the UN signed a Strategic Partnership Framework with the World Economic Forum (WEF) to accelerate the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, the world’s plan for peace, prosperity and a healthy planet.



The partnership is structured along the following key focus areas: financing the 2030 Agenda, aligning financial systems and accelerating finance flows toward the 2030 SDGs; climate change, reaching carbon neutrality by 2050; health, realising universal health coverage; digital cooperation, meeting the needs of the Fourth Industrial Revolution; gender equality and the empowerment of women; education and skills, delivering inclusive green growth to achieve the SDGs (UN-WEF Strategic Partnership Framework, 2019).

The European Union can be considered, as it has been mentioned, a regional multilateral format, having among its goals, in the context of the present paper, to preserve peace in Europe, based on cooperation. Thus, between 1945 and 1959, the European Coal and Steel Community was established, the Treaties of Rome were signed and the European Parliament became an official institution.

On 1 July 1967, the three European Communities – the European Coal and Steel Community, the European Economic Community (EEC) and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) merged, having a single administrative arm – the Commission, and a single executive – the Council. In the 1970s, the European communities adopted laws to protect the environment, the notion of “polluter pays” being introduced. Thus, many environmental NGOs were established. On 10 December 1974, leaders of the EEC agreed to set up a major new fund under European regional policy. Its purpose was to transfer money from rich to poor regions – to improve infrastructure, attract investment and create jobs. The European Regional Development Fund was created the following year. In 1984, the *Esprit* programme was launched, the first of many research and innovation programmes at European level, so that the organisation could stay at the forefront of innovation, another sustainability-related goals. In February 1986, considering that the main obstacles in trade flowing freely across the borders between member countries were the differences in national regulations, the Single European Act was launched, meant to create a single market. When it entered into force, on 1 July 1987, the European Parliament was provided with more say and the European Commission with more powers in the field of environmental protection. On 7 February 1992, the Treaty on European Union was signed. It represented a major milestone, setting clear rules for the future single currency as well as for foreign and security policy and closer cooperation in justice and home affairs. The European Union was officially created by the treaty, which entered into force on 1 November 1993. A year later, the single market was established, focusing on the free movement of people, goods, services and money. In 1998, the Treaty of Amsterdam was signed, laying down plans to reform the EU institutions so that Europe could have a stronger voice in the world and devote more resources to employment and the rights of citizens. It entered into force on 1 May 1999. In February 2001, the Treaty of Nice was signed, aiming to reform the institutions so the EU can function efficiently after reaching 25 member



countries, while preparing for a group of new members. In April 2021, the EU launched the year-long Conference on the Future of Europe, which was considered an unprecedented exercise in participatory democracy. (Historical Archives of EU Institutions).

More specific arguments for the fact the EU is a key actor in the multilateral system can be found in its important documents. To illustrate, in the Report on the Implementation of the 2003 *European Security Strategy – A Secure Europe in a Better World*, it is stated that “at a global level, Europe must lead a renewal of the multilateral order. The UN stands at the apex of the international system. Everything the EU has done in the field of security has been linked to UN objectives. We have a unique moment to renew multilateralism, working with the United States and with our partners around the world” (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 9). The document has an entire section dedicated to “Partnerships for Effective Multilateralism” (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 25). ok

In the same vein, the EU published, in 2016, the strategic document *A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe*. The implementation reports (The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2019) describe the Strategy's visions turning into action. Thus, it is stated that “Our demand for reformed global governance was echoed by the ambitious reform agenda of the United Nations' system (...). Our investment in multilateralism and our commitment to the Paris Agreement on climate change and to the Sustainable Development Goals have cemented strong global alliances across the globe.” (Ib., p. 10). Moreover, in relation to the Integrated Approach to conflicts and crises, it is shown that it “entails a multi-dimensional approach through the use of all available policies and instruments; a multi-phased approach, acting at all stages of the conflict cycle; a multi-level approach acting at the local, national, regional and global levels of conflicts; and a multilateral approach engaging all key players present in a conflict and necessary for its resolution” (Ib., p. 17).

According to the current President of the European Commission, “Multilateralism is in Europe's DNA. It is our guiding principle in the world. My Commission will keep on championing this approach and ensure that we uphold and update the rules-based global order. We are on the right path and have achieved a lot over recent years, but major challenges remain.” (von der Leyen, 2019, p. 17).

### 3. Challenges

Considering the high level of interconnectedness, the multitude, the nature and the complexity of crises our world is currently facing, it has become obvious that a single state alone cannot provide viable and sustainable solutions to these crises, especially in the context of a multipolar system, the new type of world order that has



been increasingly advanced by experts in the field, in relation to present and future developments. This is the reason why multilateral organisations and institutions are in need for update and reform to meet the challenges. Under such circumstances, there have been a lot of expert debates, highlighting the main issues multilateral organisations should address. As it has already been mentioned, this paper is intended to present only the main ideas related to the UN and the EU.

With regard to the UN, in 2023, Carnegie Europe<sup>1</sup> launched a debate focused on the question “Is the UN still fit for the purpose?”. The expert answers to the question were presented in the organisation publication (Strategic Europe, 21 September 2023). In what follows, a selection of the main themes and arguments is provided.

“Without a doubt, the UN suffers from geopolitical tensions, and numerous member states with competing interests challenge the international order. (...) the UN can be a successful norm-setter – if member states allow it – with the UN system supporting follow-up and implementation. Take the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals, which now serve as a kind of glue for the international community. (...) The 2024 Summit of the Future will be a litmus test of whether member states can agree to make the UN a place that saves us from future threats and existential polycrisis. As Secretary-General António Guterres put it, <It’s reform or rupture>” (Beisheim<sup>2</sup>, Strategic Europe, 2023).

“When people ask whether the UN is relevant today, they usually have in mind the UN Security Council. It is definitely one of the most dysfunctional parts of the UN, largely due to the widening ideological gulf between the five veto-wielding permanent members (P5), usually pitting Russia and China on one side and the United States, UK, and France on the other. Time and again, the Security Council has failed to take any action on Ukraine, Israel, Sudan, and countless other crises because one or more P5 members blocks things.” (Charbonneau<sup>3</sup>, ib.)

“Almost everyone is unhappy with the state of the UN. (...) Europeans would say the organisation’s main failing is its inability to constrain Russia. (...) For the countries of the so-called Global South, rich countries’ failure to invest in fulfilling the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is the top worry. As the economic shocks associated with COVID-19 and Russia’s war on Ukraine have left poorer states floundering, there has been a growing sense that Western and non-Western UN members are drifting inexorably apart.” (Gowan<sup>4</sup>, ib.).

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<sup>1</sup> A think tank that delivers independent insights and interdisciplinary expertise that bring together national, regional, and global perspectives, a “*trusted source for European foreign and security policy analysis*”, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/>, retrieved on 11 February 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Beisheim is Senior Associate in the Global Issues Division of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP).

<sup>3</sup> Louis Charbonneau is the United Nations Director at Human Rights Watch.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Gowan is the UN Director at the International Crisis Group, New York.





“The UN is in desperate need of a major root and branch overhaul. The system is old and hopelessly out of date. It harks back to a long-gone era when a few countries, led by the United States and some European states, ran the show. It does not reflect the complex realities of today’s multipolar world.” (Islam<sup>5</sup>, ib.)

“That would depend on how one defines <purpose>. From a Chinese perspective, the UN is perfectly fit for the purpose of advancing its agenda to reshape the world order in a way that would suit its interests. (...) China seeks to legitimise its principal global leadership by commanding a majority of UN member states; if you wish, the diplomatic version of the Law of Large Numbers. Chinese diplomats use UN fora to advance Chinese messaging – be it the definition of democracy or <indivisible security>, which Russia used as a pretext to invade Ukraine. Chinese officials and diplomats hold senior positions in the UN and across its specialised agencies.” (Steiner<sup>6</sup>, ib.).

“The UN reflects the world order that has emerged after 1945. Despite several well-meaning attempts over the years, it has not sufficiently reformed itself to change with the times. And times have changed. Geopolitical shifts have empowered nations that were not even on the political map when the UN was created. Today it is really difficult to champion the legitimacy of a global system where the veto right remains in the hands of the five nations that happened to be on the winning side of a global conflict almost eighty years ago.” (Ulgen<sup>7</sup>, ib.)

As for the EU, on 8 November 2023, the European Commission adopted a new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. It is based on four pillars: enhancing economic integration with the EU’s single market, boosting economic integration within the Western Balkans through the Common Regional Market, accelerating fundamental reforms, increasing financial assistance through a Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans for the period 2024-2027, meaning also that Serbia and Kosovo need to engage in an EU-facilitated dialogue on normalisation of relations, as necessary pre-condition (European Commission, 2023).

Moreover, in December 2023, the European Council decided to open negotiations for EU accession with both Moldova and Ukraine, which applied for EU membership in February 2022 and were granted EU candidate status in June 2022. Georgia, in turn, applied for EU membership in March 2022 and was granted candidate status in December 2023. As it has become obvious, the EU has to meet the “absorption capacity”, which, according to many experts in the field, entails extensive reforms. Mention should be made that these efforts should be simultaneous with those meant to meet SDGs, and under the circumstances of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, whose territories are situated in the European continent – totally, in the case of Ukraine and partially, in the case of Russia.

<sup>5</sup> Shada Islam is Managing Director of the New Horizons Project.

<sup>6</sup> Tommy Steiner is Policy Director at the Sino-Israel Global Network and Academic Leadership (SIGNAL).

<sup>7</sup> Sinan Ülgen is Senior Fellow at Carnegie Europe.



Romania's position, in the context of the topic of this paper – multilateralism, was recently expressed by its President and Prime Minister.

In the speech delivered at the 78<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York (19 September 2023), Summit on Sustainable Development Goals – Leaders' Dialogue, with the theme "Unity and Solidarity: Strengthening the Multilateral System for Consolidated Support, Cooperation, Follow-up, and Review", President Klaus Iohannis stated that, according to the 2023 Voluntary National Review on SDGs, Romania had already achieved 62% of its 2030 national targets, highlighting the significant progress made by the country on the SDGs associated with environmental protection and limiting climate change. Moreover, the head of state showed that the seven years left until 2030 "must be used for decisive action which is not possible without unity, solidarity, and strong multilateral engagement. We need to further strengthen the UN Development System, better monitor the SDGs implementation, and base development policies on science and reliable data" (Ib.).

Furthermore, President Klaus Iohannis (7 February 2024) was invited to address the European Parliament as part of "This is Europe" series of debates. On that occasion, the head of state acknowledged that the European Union "faces unprecedented geostrategic challenges. Our future and the future of the next generations depend on each and every decision we are taking now." (Ib.). After mentioning the great number of crises our world is currently confronted with, President Iohannis showed that "On top of all these challenges, we witness a crisis of values. And, as far as I see it, a crisis of public trust in our institutions. We are indeed facing an erosion of values within the European Union, which fuels the perception of decline of Europe, or at least of Europe's leadership and global role. This is why we need to do more, to promote the feeling and the certainty that we are all part of the same community of values, which must be protected by every single one of us." (Ib.). Regarding the possible solutions, he advanced a transformative rethinking of our actions as a Union, strengthening national resilience as a fundamental condition for a stronger Union, developing sectoral policies such as technology, including artificial intelligence, fighting climate change, stimulating competitiveness, industrial production, and sustainable supply chains, encouraging creativity and large-scale development. Moreover, related to the question "How can we stay attractive as a Union? The answer is clear: enlarging our European family by accepting new members will only strengthen the Union." (Ib.). To the voices invoking a European solidarity fatigue, President Iohannis answered that "Defending democracy, territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as the rules-based international order, cannot be subject to any fatigue. Romania remains engaged in this common effort." (Ib.). As for the means to achieve our goals, the head of state considered that the Union has the legal and institutional instruments to achieve its goals, while it is equally obvious that



“we need to streamline our decision-making capacity. (...) Therefore, (...) it is our shared responsibility to do the best for all our citizens. (...) The future generations are looking towards us with hope and optimism in times of geopolitical volatility and socioeconomic distress. The future of Europe is about the capacity of the Union to give them honest answers and to deliver in education, health, prosperity, climate security and employment opportunities.” (Ib.)

In the same vein, during the USA meetings Prime Minister of Romania, Marcel Ciolacu (7 December 2023), had with António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and with Dennis Frances, the President of the General Assembly of this forum, he voiced Romania’s firm support for the reforming efforts of the UN: “We support your leadership and vision, as reflected in Our Common Agenda regarding the future of global cooperation through an inclusive and efficient multilateralism, which will mean a renewed solidarity between people and the next generations, a new social agreement rooted in human rights, a better management of the essential common goods and the global public goods to the benefit of us all, fairly and sustainably.” (Ib.)

Also in relation to Romania’s agenda in the field of promoting global partnerships in order for the governments to be more effective in the 2030 timeframe and beyond, three initiatives were advanced by our country’s representatives at the World Governments Summit (Abrudean, Borbely, 12 February 2024), namely the Government Accelerator program – the possibility of launching in Romania a government accelerator, as a platform for intersectoral government teams to address challenges and achieve ambitious goals within a 100-day period; the Centre of Excellence for Public Administration in the field of Sustainable Development (CExDD), provided for in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan – a future innovative Romanian public institution of research, education and dialogue for the alignment of public policies and decisions in order to support the objectives of sustainable development; the Integration of AI in the provision of public services – assessment of how Romania can benefit from the expertise of the United Arab Emirates in the digitization of government services and the use of AI to measure user satisfaction. (Abrudean<sup>8</sup>, ib.). It was also stated that “This Summit is an opportunity to show the whole world that Romania is an example worth following in the integrated approach it has developed in recent years at the Government’s centre in the field of sustainable development. We are awarded at the UN level for our functional and inclusive governance system and act as a regional hub for sustainable development in the European region.” (Borbely<sup>9</sup>, ib.)

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<sup>8</sup> Mircea Abrudean is the Secretary General of the Government of Romania.

<sup>9</sup> László Borbely, State Counsellor, Department of Sustainable Development, Government of Romania.



#### 4. Possible Futures

As it has become obvious from the above-presented aspects, the world is at a crossroads, almost everyone acknowledging that the post-Second World War, post-Cold War world order and the Bretton Woods arrangements need revision if not drastic changes. Moreover, as the recent Munich Security Report (February 2024) showed “amid growing geopolitical tensions and rising economic uncertainty, many governments are no longer focusing on the absolute benefits of global cooperation, but are increasingly concerned that they are gaining less than others. Prioritising relative payoffs may well spur lose-lose dynamics (...) There is thus a real risk that more and more countries end up in a lose - lose situation, which is no longer about who gains more, but only about who loses less” (Bunde, Eisentrant, Schutte, 2024, pp. 9, 11).

In connection to the Western-based democratic values and liberal societies, three possible scenarios could be as follows:

*A. Westlessness.* According to the Munich Security Report 2020, “today, <the West> is the subject of a new declinist literature, as a cottage industry of politicians, pundits, and public intellectuals has produced speeches, books, reports, and articles discussing the decay of the Western project” (Bunde et al., 2020, p. 6). In fact, the first such acknowledged discussion was provided by Oswald Spengler (1923), about a century ago. More recently, Robert Keohane (1984) advanced the idea that liberal institutions could have a life on their own and do not necessarily require a hegemon or a leader to provide the global public good. Mention should be made that the concept of public good, in a broader perspective, can have a nuance of moral philosophy, in the sense that in order for a society to be economically, politically, and culturally functional, the regulation of externalities (norms, decisions, and technical aspects) and the free-rider (benefit-related cost) problems arise. Without infrastructure and their protection, goods cannot be exchanged, votes cannot be cast, and it would be harder to enjoy the fruits of cultural production. Therefore, a certain level of education is required in this regard, including conflict prevention, management and resolution skills.

*B. Westishness.* It is “characterised by ambivalence about the role of American military hegemony, deep interdependence of Eastern and Western actors (e.g. European reliance on Russian oil and gas, American debt and trade dependence on China), and a proliferation of risks without a clear set of structures or rules to manage them” (Day<sup>10</sup>, 2022, p. 5), in the context in which geopolitics has come to be less defined in binary, zero-sum terms. In other words, Westishness refers to the fact that some of the aspects of the West’s values and power endure, while others get fragmented, following the Concert of Powers model. In the same vein, it has been

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<sup>10</sup> Adam Day is the Head of United Nations University Centre for Policy Research’s (UNU-CPR) Geneva Office.



advanced the idea that the market, the state and human social organisation should not be set in predetermined institutional arrangements. On the contrary, they need to be left open to experimentation and revision according to what works for the project of individual and collective empowerment (Unger<sup>11</sup>, 2022). In an interview from January 2023, based on the recently-released book, the mentioned philosopher advanced the idea of “soft globalism”. “By that, I mean that many people who write about this topic are often antagonistic to national sovereignty and prefer the attenuation of it. (...) Whereas the soft globalists seem to think there exist a huge range of possible alternatives for governing the world worth considering, experience suggests there’s only one option that works: voluntary cooperation among sovereign states to help solve problems that they cannot adequately solve alone” (Unger, 2023). However, he also showed that “pluralism comes with dangers, including the danger of environmental destruction. Some of these national experiments will take us backward. But the fact that the future is open means it is inherently open to danger. It cannot be open without being dangerous.” (Ib.)

*C. Westfulness.* Starting from the concept of Westlessness, coined as such by Ian Bremmer<sup>12</sup> (2020), during the 2021 Munich Security Conference what could be “Beyond Westlessness” (Bunde<sup>13</sup>, 2021) was discussed, which could be called Westfulness. Thus, many speakers at the conference saw the world’s liberal democracies at a crucial juncture. Therefore, “facing tremendous challenges at homeland abroad, Western countries will have to deliver on issues of concerns to their citizens and jointly address the challenge posed by authoritarian powers to prevent the rules-based order from unravelling” (Ib., p. 17). To them, the green transition and the digital transition have added. They might seem like two distinct issues, but they are really twin challenges, as neither can succeed without the other. The mentioned transitions are equally important for both Europe and the Western world. In this context, the European approach will be based on three main pillars to ensure that Europe seizes the opportunity and gives its citizens, businesses and governments control over the digital transformation, as follows: technology that works for the people; a fair and competitive digital economy; an open, democratic and sustainable society (European Commission, 2020). As for the green transition, EU policymakers have recently agreed on new rules to promote local production of equipment for solar and wind power, fuel cells and other clean technologies to compete with China and the USA. The bloc aims to set a 2030 target of producing 40% of the products it needs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Blenkinshop,

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<sup>11</sup> Roberto Mangabeira Unger is a Brazilian philosopher, Professor at Harvard Kennedy School.

<sup>12</sup> Ian Arthur Bremmer is an American political scientist, author, and entrepreneur focused on global political risk. He is the founder and president of Eurasia Group, a political risk research and consulting firm. He is also a founder of GZERO Media, a digital media firm.

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2024). If we agree that there is still heterogeneity, even in relation to the Westfulness scenario, possible ways to overcome fragmentation should be considered, which entails a transition period.

In the context of transition, the main characteristics of what has been coined as *G-Zero world and beyond* (Bremmer<sup>14</sup>, 2016) are briefly presented. Appreciating that the world is at the end of a geopolitical cycle as the global order that prevailed since the end of the Second World War has reached its limits, the mentioned author defines the G-Zero world as the result of a breakdown in longstanding domestic, regional, and international political equilibria, which is making policymakers both less able and less willing to collaborate internationally, a world characterised by a growing vacuum in global governance (Ib., p. 3). However, “this breakdown will not continue forever. Sooner or later, the G-Zero will give way to whatever new world order comes after it. The question is whether citizens across the world will remain passive throughout this process, or take on a proactive role in determining what future they want to live in” (Ib.). Moreover, it is shown that “the current fracturing of international governance, along with growing grievances over the values underpinning the Bretton Woods order, has already led emerging powers to begin creating new and alternative institutions of global governance, as their power and influence in global institutions is not keeping pace with their growing international importance and interests” (Ib.). In addition, “an expectations-capabilities gap is boiling in emerging markets” (...) “demand for decentralization is weighing on markets” (...) “failed states are no longer a mere nuisance” (Ib., pp. 6-8), “interdependence has become a perceived vulnerability” (Ib., p. 13), “a trade-off between domestic and international affairs” (Ib., p. 15) are also among the characteristics of such a world.

Having considered all the above-mentioned aspects, it is for us to see if competition or collaboration will be emphasised. Anyway, it seems that partnerships or partnering will get increasingly importance.

### Conclusions

Starting from the definition of multilateralism, based on its main characteristics – peaceful resolution of conflicts, sovereign states equality under international law, inclusion and active participation of all stakeholders, the present paper examines the current perception of the foundations of global cooperation stability, considering that the post-Second World War global order was built on multilateral cooperation. Throughout this period, the main stakeholders have been represented by nation-states that have committed to international laws, mediated through international organisations, some of the most important ones being presented in the paper.

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<sup>14</sup> IMF website, mentioning that the views expressed in the paper are those of the author(s) only, and the presence of them, or of links to them, on the IMF website does not imply that the IMF, its Executive Board, or its management endorses or shares the views expressed in the paper.



In financial terms, the rules of Bretton Woods (1973), set forth in the articles of agreement of the International Monetary Fund and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, provided for a system of fixed exchange rates. The post-Bretton Woods world has been thus based on a negotiated monetary order intended to govern monetary relations among independent and sovereign states and to encourage an open system by committing members to the convertibility of their respective currencies into other currencies and to free trade.

Over time, the international system has included other actors from different social, political, economic, academic, media and other fields. That is why the concept of multistakeholder governance emerged. It refers to the practice of governance that employs bringing multiple stakeholders together to participate in dialogue, decision-making and implementation of responses to jointly perceived problems or in public-private partnerships. Thus, there have to be accommodated the tensions between inclusion and exclusion as well as to balance the pressures generated by the interests of the emerging powers. In this context, mention should be made that there are experts who draw attention to the possible threat that is currently represented by multilateralism being captured by the corporate world. Therefore, the space for multilateral solutions has narrowed, and the traditional tools of multilateralism have become insufficient to manage the complex emerging issues, which seems to represent a crossroads.

The main challenges the traditional multilateral institutions have had to face, some of them acknowledged even by UN and EU officials, the two multilateral organisations being extensively discussed in the paper, can be summarised as follows: resources – financial, human and legal, legitimacy and the ways to strengthen it; bureaucracy, resulting in delays and deadlocks; competing interests; power imbalances, generating tensions among stakeholders that do not consider themselves properly represented, in accordance with their interests and perceived power.

Under such circumstances, it has been almost unanimously agreed that reforms are necessary. However, there are still few specific details related to the substance and means of the changes. Moreover, there are too many variables to be considered in the efforts to align goals, interests and expectations, as well as to accommodate the structural, functional and strategic elements of transformation.

In this context, three possible futures are presented, coined by experts as *Westlessness*, *Westishness* and *Westfulness*. In addition, the characteristics of the transition period are briefly mentioned. Having all the above aspects considered, the idealism of perpetual peace seems an increasingly distant possibility, if not a mere utopia.



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