



# European Norms Trap? EU Connectivity Policies and the Case of the Global Gateway

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## Abstract

Data cables, ports, and mobility are a rising theme in geopolitical competition, and the European Union (EU) also aims to develop a cutting-edge product for the fund-deficit connectivity market. Incapable of competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the quantity of investments, the EU's 1-year-old connectivity initiative Global Gateway aims to challenge it with quality, providing more democratic, secure, equal, green, transparent, and sustainable alternatives to lower-income partners. While the BRI has been accused of creating debt traps in the same context, this article analyzes whether there is a risk of the EU's norm-diffusing policy also having an undermining effect on partners' agency. Based on a systematic analysis of EU policy documents and strategic communications, the article identifies three categories for the EU's norms promotion: firstly, the support for regionalism, secondly, the prescribing of standards of connections, and thirdly, the defining of values to be applied in connectivity projects. The article argues that the EU communications reserve a limited role for the partners to participate in or to have control over the processes where values, norms, and standards of connectivity are created. The approach, unlikely to serve the EU's declared goal of equal partnerships, is rather found to respond to the competitive international context.

**Keywords** Connectivity · EU · Global Gateway · Regionalism · Normative power

## Introduction

Aggarwal and Fogarty have suggested that if globalization reflects an American view for organizing the world, interregionalism could be the European Union's (EU) version of it, "projecting the EU's success in creating a region and seeking to externalize the forms that have worked in Europe" abroad [1:16, 9:49]. Despite the success of the mission back home, the EU being read as the model example for regional

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integration in the world [55], the block's regionalism promotion has had more dubious effects abroad, for example, the postcolonial scholarship reporting on an undermining effect on partners in Africa [82]. This article focuses on a recent expression of the EU's interregionalism, the connectivity initiative "Global Gateway," from the point of view of whether it makes a case for coercive policy. The article argues that its norm diffusion, outlined in the policy documents in a unilateral and non-reflexive manner, entails a risk of compromising partners' control on how to connect, especially in contexts where investments are vitally needed but European values, standards, or norms are not fully shared.

The Global Gateway, a new European vision and a funding scheme to build "smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems" was launched in December 2021 [28]. At the time of launching, EU communications implied that not all investments in digitalization, infrastructure, transportation, or energy connections are of sufficient quality, with the EU duly committing itself to a development programme characterized by high standards, democratic values, good governance, transparency, equal partnerships, and sustainability among others [28, 30].<sup>1</sup> The framing consolidated the Gateway as a European countermove to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the 10-year-old, massive infrastructure development and loans programme undertaken by China.<sup>2</sup> The BRI in contrast has been communicated by Chinese leaders as an option that does not require partners to adopt liberal democratic norms of governance [61:5].

The EU initiative continued the efforts of multiple international actors to offer alternatives to China's infrastructure diplomacy, earlier attempts including the US-led investment program "Build Back Better World" (B3W), renamed as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) [91, 92] and similar agendas by Japan [72] and Australia [2, 6, 7] among others. Competing connectivity initiatives have been argued to serve as a means of geopolitics today [75]. Connectivity policies translate foreign policy and economic strategies of competing international actors into the practical construction of airports, fiber-optic cables, or railways, attaching political and security implications to infrastructure investments [55]. In the twenty-first century, using economic means for power politics has in general been argued to be a growing trend [78].

The EU itself has been described not only as a power in trade, but also a power "through trade," the phrasing by Meunier and Nicolaïdis referring to how the

<sup>1</sup> President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen argued that the few available options for infrastructure investment too often come with a lot of "small print" with big consequences (financially, politically, and socially), and hence, new trusted partners are needed, the EUGG being "this positive offer" [Source: European Commission 1.12.2021 B, esp. 04:00–05:00 [30]].

<sup>2</sup> Policy analysts have been unanimous in framing the EU Global Gateway as a European response to the BRI (see e. g. Tagliapietra 2021 [85]; Gavas & Pleeck 2021 [52]; Tanchum & Murphy 2021 [86]; or on the previous EU connectivity strategy, Biedermann 2019 [12]), but the EU official communication has, however, avoided such explicit characterizations. See the official response to the question "Is Global Gateway a response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and how does it relate to others?" (European Commission 1.12.2021 D [32]).

EU uses access to the internal market as a carrot to encourage adherence to EU norms [71:906]. The EU already has a long experience in establishing free trade agreements (FTAs) with a varying level of foreign and security policy attached [93:2–4], and it has also pursued a leading role as a provider of development aid [26], another field with a recognized foreign and security policy dimension [69]. The competitive market of connectivity initiatives forms the context in which EU norm diffusion is analyzed in this article. This study deviates from the literature that finds the EU's norm diffusion connected to a value-based international role in contrast to a power-political one [64, 65]. In our reading, in contrast, norm diffusion in EU connectivity policies is closely linked to international competition with potentially harmful effects.

Literature has already highlighted the coercive element in the EU's norms promotion [14, 57, 70, 82]. Not only a branch of literature on Normative Power Europe (NPE) but also on EU trade has raised the issue of coercion in EU's external action, conditionality in trade deals being found to potentially compromise the voluntary basis of absorbing norms [71]. Since the new Gateway programme highlights equal partnerships as its core value [28], this research revolves around the credibility of that pledge. While recognizing that norm diffusion in the EU's connectivity policies is closely linked to foreign politics and international competition, the study adopts a normative premise that the diffusion of norms for connectivity should (and could) be empowering, rather than coercive in nature.

To understand coercion in the context of connectivity, the article draws from the definition by Gaens and others of coercion as “forcing others to connect a certain way” [55:9–10]. The analysis devotes attention to both two elements in the definition: whether EU connectivity policy is about “forcing” and whether there is a “certain way” of connecting that the EU policy promotes. The research question *whether and to what extent the EU's connectivity policies and in particular the Global Gateway, as outlined in the official documents, are characterized by a coercive approach to how to connect* is examined in two parts:

Chapter 3 “**Connectivity as an EU policy**” reflects how the EU communications define norms for connectivity, and the fourth chapter “**Cooperation and coercion in EU connectivity policies**” delves into the question whether cooperation and/or coercion characterize the (envisioned) process in which norms are defined. The analysis finds EU connectivity projects to apply EU-defined norms and standards without reflecting the universality of the norms promoted or the impact of the norm diffusion on the agency of partners. Encouraging (inter-) regional integration, European standards and EU-defined values risks becoming a trap to the partners, who have limited opportunities to decline cooperation unfit to their perspective on how to connect.

The final chapter concludes that while the policy programme fails to demonstrate commitment to the declared goal of equal partnerships in the field of norms, values, and standards, it reflects and responds to the increasing geopolitical competition, concretized in the competing connectivity initiatives. To facilitate this analysis, the next chapter presents the key concepts—connectivity, regionalism, and normative power—and the data and method to be used in the analysis.

## Conceptualizing Connectivity, Regionalism, and Norm Diffusion

Despite being a relatively new notion, often ill-defined, connectivity constitutes a popular theoretical notion—according to some scholars, even a central “paradigm of global organisation” today [54:216, 215]. The theory article by Gaens, Sinkkonen and Vogt in this special issue provides one theoretical conceptualization for the notion [55]. Roots of the concept lie in the arena of international relations and foreign policy: most research still refers to the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) 2017 summit definition, approved by more than 50 governments in Asia and Europe. Drawing on that definition, connectivity signifies “bringing countries, people and societies closer together,” facilitates “access” and “ties,” and deals with both “hard and soft aspects,” such as transport, infrastructure, digital links, energy, education, cultural exchanges, and trade [5:1, 4].

This article draws from the conceptual framework established by Gaens and others that dismantles connectivity in six spheres (infrastructural, economic, institutional, knowledge linked, societal, and security) and logics—cooperation, copying, cushioning, contestation, containment, and coercion. In this model, cooperation as a logic of connectivity entails empowering rather than exercising power over others, coercion standing for the opposite. Containment means the exclusion of some actors from connections in the first place, whereas contestation captures a case of an actor opposing certain ways of connecting. Copying then refers to partners<sup>3</sup> absorbing structures or practices of others to improve connections, while cushioning finally depicts a tactic of a country balancing between major actors or power blocs in the competitive field of connectivity [55:12-16].

This study is particularly interested in whether connectivity outlined in the EU’s Global Gateway programme is coercive in nature. Instead of reading coercion as necessarily relying on “(the threat of) physical force” [21:1118], we also consider for example the “withdrawal of something valued” to influence other’s behavior to count as coercion [77:58]. This understanding by Reus-Smit is referenced also in Gaens’ and others’ work that summarizes coercion as a logic for connectivity “forcing others to connect a certain way” [55:16]. This article investigates both two elements in that definition: whether the EU connectivity policy seems to entail “forcing”<sup>4</sup> and whether there is a “certain way” of connecting that the EU policy promotes.<sup>5</sup> As an example of a coercive logic in connectivity, Gaens and others mention the instance of Western powers forcing the opening up of the Chinese market in the nineteenth century [55:16]. While their theoretical framework would facilitate the study of coercion as a logic of connectivity also at such more general level, in this article, the analysis is narrowed down to norms of connectivity. Furthermore, this study is limited to norms as outlined in the EU’s policy documents

<sup>3</sup> Partners in the context of connectivity initiatives can refer to also other actors than states—however, much of the literature and policy discourse associates them with nation states.

<sup>4</sup> See the chapter “Cooperation and coercion in EU connectivity policies.”

<sup>5</sup> See the chapter “Connectivity as an EU policy.”

and communications, while an empirical analysis of impact or implementation remains outside the scope of this research.

To support the analysis on the developing notion of connectivity, the article also refers to literature on more developed concepts, including regionalism and normative power. In literature, the notion of regionalism goes hand in hand with connectivity [55], and some consider connectivity to equate with regional integration [53:23]. While scholars disagree on how to define regionalism, this paper refers to it rather loosely as a political process and efforts linked to regional integration and cooperation, including economic means and institution creation.<sup>6</sup> The findings of this study also comment on the link between connectivity and regionalism by arguing that in EU connectivity policies, the idea of European regionalism is exported to other regions.

Interregionalism in particular seems central to understanding the EU's policies [9:49]: starting from the 1990s, the EU has increasingly emphasized region-to-region relations in its external policies [84:250]. For example, the relationship of the EU with the African Union (AU) has been argued to exemplify an exceptional form of regional institutions' partnership [50]. The region-to-region FTAs have also served as a means of promoting the European model of integration in other regions [93:4]: scholars widely argue the EU to aim to replicate its model of regionalism to other regions, serving the aim of self-justification to internal and external state actors, or for other reasons [57].

At the same time, however, regionalism should not be misunderstood as a European project in the first place: many scholars view regionalism or regionalization to be an international reordering trend with a variety of drivers [66, 81], not linked to EU attempts. Others criticize the narrative of the EU as the model for regional integration to be narcissism to start with [50]. Regional institutions have emerged for example in African contexts without European influence, for example, non-state actors, continental identity, and the principle for non-interference being argued to have played more central roles in that context than in the "European model" for integration [50]. Type of regionalism seems to matter: Tsheola's work on trade regionalization demonstrates how regionalism has the potential to serve either neo-colonization or decolonization in Africa [88]. This background increases the relevance of understanding the norms of connectivity promoted by the EU, to which end we next look into theoretical literature on how the EU spreads norms as part of its external action.

### Analyzing Norm Diffusion in EU Connectivity Policy

The core interest of this article is to find out, whether the EU's connectivity policies are characterized by "forcing others to connect a certain way" [55:10], representing a coercive logic of connectivity. To this end, this article applies useful insights from the Normative Power Europe literature, however, without an attempt of reviving the

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<sup>6</sup> See Behr and Jokela (2018) [9] or Mansfield and Solingen (2010) [66] for a review of different definitions.

more-than-a-decade-old and also criticized debate on the EU's global role.<sup>7</sup> This article approaches normative power from a functional perspective, as a *means of* rather than a *role in* the global connectivity race. We are interested in the EU's "ability to define what passes for 'normal' in the international arena" [64:253] and "the power to shape the values of others" [22:616], locating our analysis within just one of the many strings of the NPE literature, whose varying understandings of "power" and "normative" have been clarified among others by Forsberg [51], Merlingen, [70] and Sjørnsen [80].

The article follows the work of scholars that abandon the presumption of norm diffusion as "ethical" or as an opposite to self-interested [21, 22, 82, 83]. This study shares Diez's and De Zutter's vision that norm diffusion as a process is not necessarily soft in practice but can entail coercion [21, 22] and Forsberg's understanding of norms as not necessarily benign by nature [51:1187]. Furthermore, we are not interested in the ideal of norms spreading without material incentives [65] – instead, we delve into the "material world" of infrastructure investments where norm diffusion takes place only peripherally.

We also depart from the derivative of NPE literature which finds European regulation to spread abroad unintentionally, conceptualized as the "Brussels effect" by Bradford [15]. Also the model of European regionalism has been argued to travel in an indirect manner to other regions through emulation and socialization [63]. In contrast to this, this article identifies a purposeful and active practice of regionalism and other norm diffusion exercised by the EU as part of its connectivity policies.

In Ian Manners' original framework, normative substance is spread through six mechanisms: contagion, informational and procedural diffusion, transference, overt diffusion and the cultural filter [64:244–245]. Out of these logics, especially *informational diffusion*, namely the promotion of EU norms through strategic communication, and *transference*, equalling to norms spreading along trade or aid portray the intended lever arm of EU connectivity policies. In this article, we identify further categories for the EU's norms promotion. While Manners' mechanisms of norm diffusion concern *how* norms are spread, categories emerging from our analysis elaborate on the type of normative substance transferred.

Since our normative premise is that the diffusion of norms of connectivity should be empowering rather than coercive, some critical NPE literature deserves to be specifically acknowledged as fundamental to our analysis. Bicchi argues that in order to avoid becoming a negative "civilizing power" through norm diffusion, the EU would need perform inclusively and reflectively towards its partners when diffusing norms [11]. Should the EU just assume universality of diffused norms and fail to accommodate non-European perspectives, its role is more likely characterized by epistemic violence [70, 82]. While Manners referred to norms and ideas promoted by the EU

<sup>7</sup> The identified problems include among others that the debate falsely portrays the norm diffusion by the EU normatively superior to that of other great powers (Börzel and Risse 2007) [13] or overemphasizes "global interests" or "universal values" in EU foreign policy, understating domestic interests (Falkner 2007) [49], and that the analytical premise—the EU as the norms diffuser and partners as absorbers—is characterized by Eurocentrism to start with (Haastrup 2013) [57]. See also Sinkkonen (2015) [79], De Zutter (2010) [21], Merlingen (2007) [70], Sjørnsen (2006) [80], and Diez (2005) [22].

as universal [64:241], Haastrup finds their origin contested, the EU anyway aiming to embed them in its region-to-region relations [57:794].

Particularly relevant for an analysis of EU norm diffusion in previously colonized African and Asian countries, Staeger notes that European observers typically falsely project “past episodes of European integration” to the regionalization in Africa, prioritizing for example state agency over other forms of regional integration [82:990]. State-centrism has been similarly criticised in Asian contexts, the state-focused connectivity initiatives being found to have the potential to undermine more sustainable, intra-state models of connectivity [75]. As a starting point for us, this highlights the need for local control over EU-funded connections in non-European contexts. This study hence pays attention to *who* are envisioned to define “how to connect” (local or international actors) in EU connectivity projects, and who are left out from the processes of norms definition.

## Data and Method

The data of this research consists of key documents that establish the EU’s connectivity policies as well as the communications that explain the policies to domestic and external audiences. In this study, most of the public EU documents and communications on the Global Gateway and some earlier, relevant communications on EU connectivity policies were analysed, totalling up to approximately one hundred pages of material,<sup>8</sup> with which a saturation point was reached in the final analysis phase.<sup>9</sup>

While most of the data originate from approximately 1 year’s time starting from July 2021, the results should be read as representing only a short period of time in

<sup>8</sup> All data used does not indicate page numbers, whereby the number is an estimate. Specifically, the data consists of the Joint Communication on the Global Gateway by the European Commission (1.12.2021 C, 14 pp) [31]; the Conclusions on a “Globally Connected Europe” by the Council of the EU (12.7.2021, 7 pp) [18]; the webpage for the Global Gateway by the European Commission (2021) [28]; the strategy document “EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package” by the EU (10 February 2022, 6 pp) [33]; the press release by the European Commission (1.12.2021 A, 2 pp) [29]; a recording of the European Commission Press conference 1.12.2021; [30]; the webpage “Questions and Answers on Global Gateway” European Commission (1.12.2021 D, 5 pp) [32]; the press release from a connectivity conference in Samarkand (18.11.2022, 2 pp) [36]; the webpage “EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package” by the European Commission [25], sector specific information sheets linked to EU-Africa investment package, covering health [44] (4 pp), education and training [35] (3 pp), digital transition [41] (4 pp), green energy initiative [38] (3 pp), strategic corridors [47] (3 pp), “Great Green Wall” initiative [39] (2 pp), young business [44] (2 pp), sustainable food systems [48] (4 pp), climate resilience [40] (2 pp), infrastructure [43] (7 pp), regional value chains [45] (5 pp), and science, technology, and innovation [46] (1p). In addition to these, some earlier documents, in particular the 2018 strategy document “Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy” by the Commission (19.9.2018) [27, 13 pp] and partnership strategy documents such as the one with Japan [24, 3 pp] were studied in order to get an idea of the development of the EU policies. The data list excludes some short documents (i.e., factsheets, project specific press releases) that did not have any relevant information to add to the key documents analyzed. After submitting the first draft of the manuscript (30 September 2022), sectoral factsheets linked to the Africa investment package and one press release concerning investments in Central-Asia were analyzed, while other new material was excluded from the analysis.

<sup>9</sup> I.e., no new findings arising in the analysis of last material.

the EU's foreign policymaking. The key limitation of the analysis is that the Gateway being just 1-year-old, its implementation is just in the beginning. Hence, we do not analyze policy impact but look into *potential* pitfalls and effects of EU policies, assuming that the strategies and communications are likely to catalyze the implementation of the programme. The research does not reach how norms eventually are defined in the Gateway projects but sheds light on how the EU currently outlines plans for defining norms of connectivity. In order to illustrate findings rising from the analysis, some empirical examples of planned projects are provided.

Furthermore, the data cannot be used to analyze partners' points of view, since it only represents the EU's policy communications. The data combines different types of material from Council conclusions to Commission fact sheets and Q&As. While the conclusions represent EU member states' political commitments and positions, some of the Commission communications can be considered as more directed towards external audiences. The analysis also draws from theoretical and other literature which allows us among other things to reflect perspectives and potential conflicts of interests with partners. However, another shortage identified during the analysis is that there is relatively little peer-reviewed research available on EU connectivity policies and in particular on the Global Gateway, whereby some policy papers and think tank reports are referenced to compensate.

The documents were analyzed following the qualitative content analysis methodology [10, 90]. A loose analysis frame was developed to guide the examination of the data based on the research question and literature. To answer the research question *whether and to what extent the EU's connectivity policies and in particular the Global Gateway, as outlined in the official documents, are characterized by a coercive approach to how to connect*, all of the gathered data was systematically examined focusing on two selected aspects: (a) how the EU communications define norms for connectivity and (b) whether cooperation and/or coercion characterize the (envisioned) process in which norms are defined.

During the analysis process, the data was reorganized so that trends and characteristics could be identified and eventually conceptualized, referring back to the theoretical literature. The analysis combined elements from theory-led and data-led content analysis<sup>10</sup>; while the theorization by Gaens and others partly guided the analysis (part B of the research question), not all findings were forced to pre-defined categories, but new categories were formed in a data-led manner (part A of the research question). In the following two chapters, results of this analysis are presented, the next chapter focusing on how the EU communications define norms for connectivity, and the following chapter delving into whether cooperation and/or coercion characterize the process.

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<sup>10</sup> See e. g. Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2009 [90].

## Connectivity as an EU Policy

The EU approach to connectivity has developed as a patchwork, a series of strategy documents reflecting at times competition and contestation, at other times, cooperation and partnerships in the global connectivity market. Already when the first EU connectivity strategy “Connecting Europe and Asia – building blocks for an EU strategy” [27] was adopted in 2018, it was as regarded as offering an alternative to China’s BRI [53:22]. The 2018 strategy is considered as a pioneering communication that placed connectivity at the core of the EU’s Asia politics [54], even though the 2016 EU Global Strategy had already lumped China and connectivity together in EU’s foreign political thinking [23:37–38], further following policies from the 1990s when the “Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor” was established to connect Europe with China [54:219].

In the 2018 strategy, China was named as a potential partner for the EU to cooperate with [27], whereas the EU connectivity strategy documents 3 years later do not mention China—at the same time implicitly but clearly framing EU connectivity projects as a countermove to, or even as contestation of, China’s BRI [26, 28, 31]. In black and white, the communications apply modest expressions such as references to “other economies,”<sup>11</sup> while speeches by the EU leadership more clearly articulated the EU’s “positive offer” in contrast to alternatives that come with a lot of “small print.”<sup>12</sup> Communications on the US-led B3W programme instead explicitly mention the strategic competition with China as a background [72]. Despite the discretion, the gesture of a countermove is systematically constructed in the EU connectivity documents: for example, responding to the popularly discussed phenomenon of BRI causing debt traps in receiving countries,<sup>13</sup> debt-sustainability is highlighted by the EU starting from the 2018 strategy, continuing in the EU-Japan connectivity partnership document, and eventually in the 2021 initiative [24, 27, 29, 31].

What distinguishes the Global Gateway (2021, from now on EUGG) from the earlier connectivity initiatives by the EU is a relatively robust and concrete funding scheme, enabling the materialization of the strategic plan. The EUGG claims the objective of raising investments of 300 billion euros by 2027 building on the “Team Europe” approach.<sup>14</sup> The geographical scope also widened; while the 2018

<sup>11</sup> For example the Council Conclusions on a “Globally Connected Europe” refer to “other key economies” that have developed “their own approaches and tools for connectivity” (Council of the EU 12.7.2021) [18].

<sup>12</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>13</sup> One of the key critiques towards the BRI has revolved around the question of debt traps, unsustainable loans by China that turn out to be difficult to pay back, the outcome being Beijing’s increasing political grip on the recipient governments, or even seizure of strategically important infrastructure by China—yet scholars and commentators disagree on the prevalence and intentionality of the phenomenon. [Cf. Tskhay 2021 [89]; Mattlin 2021, p. 30 [68]; Calinoff & Gordon 2020 [16]; Crabtree 2021 [20]; Jie & Wallace 2021 [60]; Tagliapietra 2021 [85].]

<sup>14</sup> It is planned that up to 135 billion euros of investments will be mobilized from the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSI+, an arm of NDICI Global Europe). A total of 18 billion euros was announced as “grant funding” from the EU External Assistance Programmes, while it is estimated that the remaining 145 billion euros will be contributed by other European financial and development finance institutions. [European Commission 1.12.2021 C, pp. 8–9 [31].]

EU connectivity strategy named Asia and the Indo-Pacific region as the focus areas of the EU policy, the EUGG is—as is in the name—more global.

With the financial package, the EUGG appears as a textbook case for what Manners once suggested as the *transference* mechanism of normative power [64:245]. The diffusion of EU-defined norms—democracy, good governance, transparency, equal partnerships, greenness, cleanliness, security, and so on—takes place along the exchange of goods or aid, with the possibility of including elements of “carrot and stickism” and conditionality. At the same time, some commentators referring to the policy programme as a “branding exercise” [52], the EU has invested in strategic communications and marketing of the (partly ongoing) investments. The selling point is European standards and values, presented as superior to the alternative programmes.

The 2018 strategy already established the normative, *European way* to connectivity, with sustainability, comprehensiveness, and a rule-based approach as key principles [12, 27]. However, despite being promoted as European, the Europeanness of the approach can be questioned, as both the definition for connectivity but also some of the normative principles established stem back to the preceding ASEM meeting.<sup>15</sup> The connectivity partnership with Japan in 2019 further elaborated the EU’s connectivity vision, placing in particular “quality infrastructure” at the centre of the EU’s policies. Constituting a major theme in the EU’s current connectivity policy programme, in Japan’s connectivity policies, the theme of “quality infrastructure investment” predates the partnership with the EU.<sup>16</sup>

The pursuit for democratic values similarly seems to hold a particular role in the EU’s connectivity policies. The EUGG joint communication starts with an appeal to democracies to “demonstrate their ability to deliver on today’s global challenges” [31:1], linking the EU strategy to a similar declaration in the US-led B3W programme for “world’s democracies to deliver [...] and demonstrate our shared values” [91]. The statements seem to propose a common identity and a mission for the democratic camp in the global connectivity race, also constructing the perceived “otherness” of non-democratic partners and competitors on the same field. The alignment of the EUGG with the B3W/PGII is of course not surprising—the initiatives also share two members: France and Germany.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to democratic values and high standards, the EUGG’s principles include good governance and transparency, equal partnerships, greenness and cleanliness, security—and following the language in the communications, the principle of “catalysing private sector investment” [28].

<sup>15</sup> The ASEM 2017 visioned for example a “level-playing field, free and open trade, market principles, multi-dimensionality, inclusiveness, fairness, openness, transparency, financial viability, cost-effectiveness and mutual benefits”, and further referred to earlier international agreements such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development targets. [ASEM 2017 B, p. 1 [4, 5]].

<sup>16</sup> See e. g. the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015 [72]. A comparison of the 2018 strategy [European Commission 19.9.2018 [27]], the EU-Japan partnership agreement [EEAS 2019 [24]] and the Global Gateway communications [1.12.2021 A-D [29, 30, 31, 32]] show the increasing relevance of the theme.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, however, democratic norms are not mentioned in the PGII communications, while many other principles are highlighted [The White House 26.6.2022 [91]; The White House 12.6.2021 [92]].

The analysis of EU policy documents reveals that the promotion of allegedly European values, standards, and norms is a coherent theme in EU connectivity policies, representing a conventional role for the EU as a global actor and at least to some extent separating the European infrastructure investment programme from China's more unregulated BRI.<sup>18</sup> EU connectivity policies are directly aimed at inserting European norms, values, and standards into infrastructure projects outside the European region—a logic differing from the idea of EU norms spreading abroad without material incentives [65] or unintentionally such as in the “Brussels effect” [15]. In the next chapter, we divide the normative content of the policy documents in three categories.

### Regional Integration and European Standards and Values

Three separate, yet partly overlapping categories of norm diffusion can be identified in the policy documents. Firstly, the communications anticipate the encouragement for regional integration; secondly, they constitute an attempt to define standards for infrastructure; and thirdly, they foresee the promotion of EU (branded) values in connectivity projects (not necessarily directly linked to the infrastructure built). Before moving on to analyzing the level of coercion involved, we look into these three categories in more detail.

**Regional Integration and Interregionalism** The EUGG communications provide empirical support for the notion that the connectivity agenda itself should be understood as promoting regional integration as well as region-to-region connections, i.e., interregionalism. While regional integration is not specifically declared as an objective in the EUGG communications,<sup>19</sup> in practical terms the programme is all about promoting it. To illustrate, communications establish plans for building capacities for regional energy integration and projects on regional and interregional data cables and transport networks.<sup>20</sup> Regional institutions such as the AU are also validated by plans for institutionalized inter-regional cooperation [33]. Furthermore, the

<sup>18</sup> See Kendall-Taylor and others 2022, pp.1, 5 [61]; BRI communicated as an alternative that does not insist adoption of liberal democratic norms.

<sup>19</sup> However, it is mentioned that the EUGG will support “regional energy integration” [European Commission 1.12.2021 C, p. 4[31]] as well as prioritize “underserved regions, countries and populations” when building digital networks, “strengthening secure and trusted digital connections within them” (p. 4).

<sup>20</sup> Example projects mentioned in the EUGG communication, some ongoing, some yet to be launched, include: an extension of the BELLA programme that is building “a submarine cable between the EU and Latin America and a terrestrial backbone between South American countries” [European Commission 1.12.2021 B, p. 5][30], the Africa-EU Green Energy Initiative that will “contribute to the development and integration of regional energy markets and the implementation of a strong continental Africa Single Electricity Market” (p.6) and the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) programme, already extended to the Western Balkans, Turkey, and the Eastern Partnership region. The latter will be followed by (support for) the adoption of the Trans-Mediterranean Transport Network (TMN-T) in the Southern Neighbourhood, as well as by a “strengthening of connections with adjacent strategic corridors in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia”, along with advancing “the regulatory environment” and promoting “EU and international standards” as a part of it. (P.6).

communications indicate that the EUGG will not promote just any type of regionalism, but the European model in particular, featuring among others open and competitive markets (the core of EU integration), EU regulatory models, and “regulatory convergence” as part of interregional partnerships [31:4–5].

**Standards and Norms of Connections** One of the criticisms of China’s infrastructure investments has been their alleged poor quality or incompetence [20:82]. Both the US-led B3W/PGII and the EUGG have declared to do better, while Japan’s connectivity strategy has also relied on offering “quality infrastructure” [54, 72]. In the EU’s connectivity policy, the focus on standards not only implies the *high* quality of the infrastructure, but also specific EU-defined standards. Based on the EUGG communications, the standards could concern, among other things, network interoperability [31:4], intellectual property [31:3], the production of medicine [31:7], or emissions [31:5]. Convergence with European standards is specifically mentioned [31:4, 6], including European regulation such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) [31:4]. While regulation and other “standards” convey normative substance at different levels of institutionalization and legal imperativeness, in the EUGG communication, the two seem to form a bundle, whose eventual nature remains unclear.

**Values and Norms of Connectivity Projects** EUGG principles also include many that do not directly link to the infrastructure delivered, but rather reflect the EU approach to designing and governing projects as well as their societal and environmental impact. These EU values and norms embedded in the EUGG include, for example, democratic values and good governance, rule of law, workers’ rights, human rights, as well as sustainability in both social and ecological terms [28, 31]. While some of the mentioned standards for connectivity also fall into this category, this category demonstrates that not only connections but also the processes of constructing them are covered when the EU defines norms for connectivity.

To give some more concrete examples of how norm diffusion in these categories will take place, regional integration will be supported for example by the construction of “regional fibre-optic backbones” to connect coastal and landlocked African countries [41:2] and by technical assistance aiming to set up the Africa Single Electricity Market [38]. Inter-regional integration will be promoted by integrating the European and African transport networks [47] and through enhancing EU-Africa inter-continental data flows through building a data cable along the Atlantic Ocean coast [41].

European standards will be promoted for example in Tanzania, where the Arabica coffee value chain will be supported so that the packaging and marketing match European standards [48]. The press release from a connectivity conference in Samarkand in November 2022 instead reveals that alongside establishing earth stations to increase internet access in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, the EUGG projects will promote digital governance reforms, concerning personal data protection and human rights among others, “bringing the EU’s high standards and best practices to the region” [36:1]. In addition to demonstrating the promotion of EU standards, this exemplifies the promotion of certain values in the connectivity projects. Another case for both defining standards and values is planned in Africa, where investments in infrastructure for

mobility and trade will be accompanied by harmonizing regulatory frameworks, with a focus on security and safety [43:1].

## Cooperation and Coercion in EU Connectivity Policies

This chapter delves into the question whether and to what extent coercion and/or cooperation characterize the process in which norms of EU connectivity projects are defined. In Gaens' and others' conceptualization, cooperation as a logic of connectivity entails enabling and empowering—power *with* rather than power *over*—partners [55:12]. Applying this logic to the norms of connectivity, we find that in order for cooperation to predominate, an understanding on how to connect (which norms, standards and values to apply) should be at least to some extent shared between the EU and its connectivity partners concerning their joint endeavor. If this is not the case initially, it should be reflected and addressed in a cooperative exchange that does not entail forcing or coercion. This interpretation is aligned with what Gaens and others write about social learning as an outcome of transactions, reflecting the work by Adler and Barnett (1998).

Based on the analysis of the EUGG communications, it is evident that an abundance of norms of connectivity is pre-set by the EU to be applied in connectivity projects with partners. The EU attempts to define “how to connect”—the above-mentioned three categories—draw from both the cooperation and competition in the global connectivity race. Starting from the definition of connectivity originating from the ASEM format, the EUGG also echoes the declaration by the US-led B3W for democracies to demonstrate shared values, and aligns with the quality-infrastructure approach of Japan. China's role as the one being contested is also central: the EUGG reflects and challenges the BRI by offering connectivity with allegedly higher quality, European norms, standards, and values to the receiving partners.

In contrast, it emerges from the documents that the receiving partners are not envisioned to have much of a role in defining norms of connectivity. In the communications, the receiving partners' agency is most often described as “choosing” the EU's normative approach [31:3], or as “adhering to,” or “complying with” the EU set norms, standards, and regulation—in contrast to, for example (hypothetically) “democratically deciding on” or “defining and controlling” them.<sup>21</sup> It is mentioned once in the Council Conclusions that priorities for new projects will be identified and agreed *with* partners—however, whether this refers to norms or rather to prioritized connections

<sup>21</sup> The communications mention adhering to “the rule of law, upholding high standards of human, social, and workers' rights and respecting norms from international rules and standards to intellectual property” [European Commission 1.12.2021 C, p. 3 [31]] and to “international standards for infrastructure spending” (p. 11). They also mention the “capacity to enforce compliance” with legal obligations (aligned with the promoted international standards)(p.11). Referring to those “most affected”, the communication also mentions that local partners need to have “their full say through proper public consultations and civil society involvement” (p. 3). Whether it refers to legal decision-making bodies or other societal actors remains unclear, but in the case of the former, this would signify denying the decision-making power of the partners and minimizing it into a bare consultation role.

remains unclear [18:5].<sup>22</sup> The concept of “like-minded” features often in the communications, reflecting a shared normative mission, however, not referring to the receiving partners of the connectivity projects but to other international donors.

If norms of connectivity are defined by the EU without the receiving partners, it seems that in order for cooperation as a logic to be predominant, the partners should either already share or be ready to absorb the EU-defined connectivity norms. While many of the partners can be expected to share at least some of the promoted norms, previous research has already pointed to potential incompatibility problems [12, 75, 82]. Literature indicates that standards in general might not be a priority for low-income partner states if accompanied by a higher price or a delay<sup>23</sup>; a different cost–benefit calculation for sufficient quality might make the EU’s focus on high standards unfit. For example, it seems potentially a problem that the EU funds by certain instruments include filtering out “abnormally low tenders” and finance partners that do not adhere to EU procurement standards [31:10]—an exercise whose eventual outlook however remains unclear.

The likely divergence in perceptions on how to connect could of course be overcome through reconciliation and the search for common ground, starting from an analysis of which norms and standards are mutually shared. This is not, however, encouraged in the communications by the EU: almost none of the official communications include reflection on whether and to what extent partners are expected to agree on EUGG principles and values, or how the EU will address situations where visions differ.<sup>24</sup>

It must be noted, however, that the “Europeanness” of many of the EUGG norms and values can be questioned, with green transition, for example, being a necessity (and hence, presumably an objective) in the partner states with or without a European push or conditionality [8]. “Transparency” as an objective constitutes another case as a seemingly universal concept that is however utilized to compete with the BRI investments.<sup>25</sup> From the perspective of the logic of cooperation, it is not even so much the potential incompatibility problem as it is the lack of reflection of universality and the lack of plans for local control over norms that minimizes the role of receiving partners to either refusing or accepting the connectivity cooperation.

To provide a concrete example of this lack of reflexivity, the EU plans to finance technical assistance to Central Asian countries to “manage and share their limited water and energy resources sustainably and fairly,” accompanied with investments. [36] The communication does not provide any justification on whether the EU has the knowledge of or shared understanding with the local stakeholders on what is fair and sustainable in the specific context.

<sup>22</sup> At the project level, cooperation linked to Africa’s Great Green Wall Initiative [39] could be expected to reflect more local ownership, since the initiative was originally made by the African Union. However, control over norms and values of related cooperation cannot be reliably analysed from the short factsheet that contains little and ambiguous normative content.

<sup>23</sup> See Crabtree 2021 for a similar discussion on B3W [20].

<sup>24</sup> In the Joint Communication, there is an implicit acknowledgement linked to scientific cooperation that not all countries might share “fundamental values and a strong science, technology and innovation profile” [European Commission 1.12.2021 c, p. 8 [31]], however, without reflection of how to address different fundamental values.

<sup>25</sup> See again the debate on debt traps: Tskhay 2021 [89]; Mattlin 2021, p. 30 [68]; Calinoff & Gordon 2020 [16]; Crabtree 2021 [20]; Jie & Wallace 2021 [60]; Tagliapietra 2021 [85].

Finally, in the context where connectivity projects typically operate, middle- or low-income countries suffering from the scarcity of resources and an inferior position in the distribution of global wealth to start with, the power of refusing cooperation is limited. While competitive, the market of infrastructure projects is also highly fund-deficit—the estimations varying, the EU refers to a G20 estimation of a deficit of €13 trillion by 2040 [32, 56]. This increases the incentive for target countries to accept well-financed projects that are conditionalized with EU-defined values and norms. Low-income partner states might have little real alternatives than to accept the EU (or other international donor) funded and defined projects, questioning the voluntary nature of the collaboration.

### Like-Minded Partners and Partners to Align Their Minds

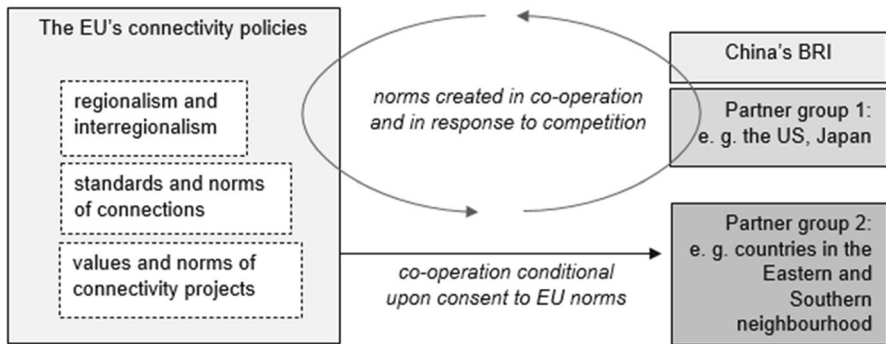
Graph 1 demonstrates the process of creating norms for connectivity as emerges from this analysis of EU communications and official documents establishing its connectivity policies. The partner group 1 has a fundamental role in the creation of norms for connectivity projects, including the joint mission of “democracies” to promote joint values, or the shared goal of Japan and the EU to invest in the high quality of connectivity. These are referred to as the “like-minded partners” and seem to include among others the G7 and for example the Republic of Korea [31:12]. In previous literature, for example, Tocci has highlighted the role of cooperation with like-minded allies in order to assert liberal norms in the global sphere [87]. Despite not being a partner but rather a competitor in the global connectivity market, China has a role to play in the process of norms creation for the EU’s connectivity policies, since many of the communicated principles and values directly comment on the perceived weaknesses of China’s BRI, such as the lack of transparency.<sup>26</sup>

Partner group 2 does not have a role in the creation of norms as envisioned in the EU communications: their agency is limited to accepting (or rejecting) and adhering to the norms of the EU connectivity policies. Rejection as a policy choice for this group might, however, be unrealistic due to the fund deficit connectivity market. In places where China’s BRI and the EU’s connectivity policies compete, their policy options and hence local control over norms of connectivity might increase.<sup>27</sup>

The arrows in a cycle demonstrate agencies in the process of norms creation as proposed by the EU communications, featuring both cooperation (with like-minded

<sup>26</sup> At the same time, however, while the role of China is here portrayed as one characterized by competition and contestation, it should be noted that the relationship between the EU and China in the global connectivity market has also entailed cooperation. See for example: The EU-China Connectivity Platform.

<sup>27</sup> One concrete example of the two different partner groups and their perceived agency (however not linked to only norms in this case) can be found on page 2 of the Joint Communication [European Commission 1.12.2021 c [31]] where the Gateway is identified to be based on a few earlier documents. Some of these documents are cooperation agreements, such as the partnership agreement with Japan, signed by its Prime Minister. Others are EU strategies for other regions (e.g., the Agenda for the Mediterranean, the Eastern Partnership policy beyond 2020, the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans) to which only EU bodies are parties to.



**Graph 1** The process of defining norms for connectivity as emerges from the analysis of the documents establishing the EU's connectivity policies

partners) as well as competition and contestation (with/of China, most centrally). The straight, one-way arrow depicts the EU's normative power—in this case, the ability to define norms of connectivity for the partner group 2. It marks coercion if the partner group 2 does not happen to share the norms promoted and if they do not have a realistic option of declining the cooperation.

What is absent in the picture is, firstly, a “reflective” EU with regard to the receiving partners: to be there, the EU strategies should foresee the accommodation of non-European perspectives on how to connect and anticipate and prevent the potentially negative effects of the EU norms-promotion to the partners.<sup>28</sup> The graph also does not include an arrow that would signify the contestation of EU-defined norms by the partner group 2 since such a policy option is not acknowledged in the EU communications. If declining cooperation with the EU, partners could define how to connect without the EU but not the norms of EU connectivity policies depicted in the graph.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The fact that the Global Gateway initiative finally attaches a funding scheme to European connectivity policies makes it a relevant case for analysis: the strategy can be expected to have a policy impact in its target regions around the globe. The EU has not always succeeded in connecting economics to foreign policy. Before the launch of the EUGG, some scholars such as Pascha estimated that the formulation of such a policy programme in the EU framework could be difficult [74:699]. From the point of view of the normative agenda, the question was whether the EU even has coherent norms or values to promote, or if the Commission, Parliament, Council and actors within have different principles to advance [22:614]. At the time of adoption, the EUGG combines a relatively coherent and large policy agenda with a financial framework and the political leverage of both the Commission and the EEAS. In

<sup>28</sup> See Bicchi 2006 [11].

addition to institutional bridge-building, the EUGG represents a somewhat successful effort to overcome political blocks between the EU member states.<sup>29</sup>

This article has analyzed whether and to what extent the EU's connectivity policies and in particular the Global Gateway are characterized by a *coercive* approach to connectivity. In particular, it has looked into the process of creating *norms* for connectivity, drawing from the official communications and strategy documents by the EU. We found that the connectivity agenda by the EU encourages regional integration as well as region-to-region connections, characterized by European standards for connections as well as EU-defined values for the processes where connections are built.

While the norms and standards promoted might hold universal value, coercion potentially features in the way they are promoted. Based on the analysis of EU documents, neither control over norms, nor the decision to accept or decline them fully lies within the receiving partners. Instead, EU connectivity projects are planned to apply EU-defined norms and standards without reflecting their universal value or impact on the normative agency of partners. The values and norms controlled by the EU can become a trap if project offers take place in a context of scarce resources where low-income partners have limited opportunities to decline cooperation unfit for their perspective on how to connect.

While the lack of commitment to strengthen (or even, to not undermine) the normative agency of partners is in contradiction with the declared objective to support equal partnerships, it might not be in contradiction with the broader foreign policy objective to respond to geopolitical competition and challenge China's BRI. Both the cooperative approach towards like-minded (donor) partners and the systematic commentary on the BRI's perceived weaknesses responds to the competitiveness of the connectivity market. The non-reflexivity and the Eurocentric vision on norms could even be argued to support the role of the EU as the normative power: if roles in international relations are read as constructed in relation to "others," the EU as a normative power fundamentally draws its existence from the "others" adhering and absorbing the EU-defined norms and values. The role of "others" is simultaneously recreated, in this case undermining the normative agency of the receiving partners.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, the same factors could also undermine the EU's power to define norms of connectivity. Presentation of potentially universal norms as European should not be expected to increase their buy-in in the global infrastructure market. The lack of reflection might actually compromise the goal of a comprehensive outreach of the policy programme [12:587] especially if partners have more "norms-free" or better-suited alternatives to choose from.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the

<sup>29</sup> To highlight the political challenge—and with the adoption of the joint programme, a political achievement—11 of the EU member states are part of the 16+1 cooperation framework between China and Central and Eastern European states, with Lithuania having dropped out last year and 18 of the 27 EU member states having already endorsed the BRI. [E. g. Lau/Politico 21.5.2021 [62].]

<sup>30</sup> For more about constructing the self and the other in NPE literature: see Diez 2005. For more about constructing roles in international relations, see for example Harnisch, Frank and Maull 2011 [58].

<sup>31</sup> See e. g. Kendall-Taylor and others 2022, pp.1, 5 [61]; BRI communicated as an alternative that does not insist the adoption of liberal democratic norms.

credibility of the EU's "value-based" policy and the equal partnerships narrative is at risk if partners' agency and control are compromised.

This analysis does not suggest that the EU could or should pursue connectivity policies free from European norms, standards, and values, but that it should do so in an empowering rather than coercive manner. The asymmetric setting where the donor has more power to define the terms of cooperation and the recipient cannot always afford to decline cooperation makes equal partnerships an ambitious goal. Literature provides useful tips to start with, including reflexivity and inclusivity when norms are defined [11] and ensuring local ownership in any development projects.<sup>32</sup> Even with a comprehensive plan, pursuing equal partnerships is likely to be difficult: practical involvement of third parties in non-democratic and anarchic international environment can be expected to be complicated.<sup>33</sup> The EUGG, building on a Team Europe approach, will require that channels of consultancy and reflection are built not only between Brussels and the host countries but also for European companies and the member states to connect with the partners.

Furthermore, it might be useful to differentiate between the values and standards of connectivity. There is no value-based need to push EU standards where they do not fit; in contrast, literature provides an abundance of lessons from earlier unsuccessful attempts to copy European models of governance to other contexts.<sup>34</sup> Instead, a value-based EU should consistently stick to principles such as human rights. Studies argue that the EU's inconsistency in promoting norms such as human rights has decreased their attractiveness, the EU actually having been more successful with spreading technical norms for example with regard to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) [3]. While the universality of the promoted values is a topic for a separate debate, it also seems relevant to reflect that even when the EU values would be shared by the partners, they might be seen from a different point of view. When for example security and safety are prioritized in investments to African transport infrastructure [43], whose safety is the safety in question, and are the security threats and solutions defined by European or African counterparts?

Finally, about regionalism in specific, the findings of this study also encourage cautiousness. In contrast to the European model of regionalism spreading abroad passively based on its attractiveness, we have identified an active attempt by the EU to export the European model of regionalism abroad. It is not a process where local actors would initiate and manage the copying of European models of integration based on local demand; instead, the Global Gateway documents outline a supply-based regionalism-diffusion project combined with a lack of reflection on compatibility. With such a unilateral approach, it seems unlikely that the risk of exporting unsuited models could be avoided. Based on the literature, the risks could include for example overemphasizing state-centrism [75] or reconstructing colonial structures at the cost of intra-regional trade [88]. Furthermore, it should be reflected, what are the risks of supporting the creation of internal markets or improving mobility in contexts

<sup>32</sup> For the discussion, see e. g. Helleiner 2002 [59]

<sup>33</sup> See Bicchi 2006 [11].

<sup>34</sup> See e. g. Chandler 2006 [17].

of recent or ongoing armed conflicts, and how do the investments affect local and regional power structures.

To mention some limitations of this analysis and to suggest topics for further research, the level of cooperation between countries in the partner group I (e.g., the US, Japan) would need more elaboration: to which extent are the jointly promoted norms shared by the “like-minded” allies and how is the internal norms-negotiation process constructed?<sup>35</sup> What also remains open in this study is how different characteristics of the receiving countries affect the EU’s behavior. Based on the literature, it is relevant to ask, is the EU more willing to negotiate values and standards in less asymmetric settings, such as in cases where connections are built in larger host countries?<sup>36</sup> This analysis also did not comment on the practical implementation of the EUGG programme, much of which has yet to unfold. Hence, also the assessment of policy impact is left as a task for further research.

Furthermore, the analysis does not claim to understand or reach the actual ownership and agency that the partners of the EU exercise in practice. The partners of the group 2 (recipient countries) can in fact be expected to excel in the navigation between donor programmes and to be able to maximize local control of projects where the normative power of the donors ends. For example, a selective absorption of norms and principles can turn out as a policy option; as pointed out by Haastруп, the AU has copied the best-fit norms rather than absorbed everything from the EU regional integration process [57]. Cushioning as a logic of connectivity might emerge especially in contexts where international actors compete [55]: earlier literature mentions examples from Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Kazakhstan having demonstrated an ability to benefit from such situations [75].

The identified lack of reflexivity and inclusivity also evoke the question whether they point to a larger phenomenon of how European responses to the increasingly competitive international environment will turn out. While the EU’s approach to connectivity appears as a reaction to competition, a more reflexive and inclusive approach might turn out more sought-after and eventually, competitive. How could the EU’s connectivity initiative beat the alternatives, if it is not committed to systematically advancing equal partnerships? In order for the EUGG to succeed as the “positive offer” [30], the key problem to be solved seems to be, how to build connections based on European values without undermining the control of partners to define “how to connect.”

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<sup>35</sup> The role of Russia is ambiguous in the EU’s connectivity strategies; whether it is considered to belong to the camp of “others” to be challenged or if it is not considered as a relevant player in the connectivity market despite its interest (see Silvan’s and Kaczmarek’s article “Russia’s Approach to Connectivity in Asia: From Cooperation to Coercion” in this special issue) remains to be answered.

<sup>36</sup> See Mattlin 2012 [67].

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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