



Could the European Union become a Guardian of the Galaxy? Assessing the international actorness of the EU in cyberspace

Constant PÂRIS (FR) – Prof. SMITH H.

Abstract

In an increasingly digitalised and interconnected world, cyberspace has emerged as a complex and multidimensional arena. Alongside additional security challenges, new-fangled cyber-threats and malicious cyber-players have emanated from this universe. They pose unprecedented risks to the existing political, economic, and societal structures of the European Union. In 2016, in line with the EU's ambition to become a powerful diplomatic power on the international stage, the EU Global Strategy proclaimed: "The European Union will be a forward-looking cyber-player". Four years later, where does the EU stand?

This thesis aims at demystifying the international actorness of the EU in cyberspace, by assessing to what extent does the EU possess the sufficient capabilities to become over time a global effective cyber-power on the international stage. For such purpose, the study relies on a holistic and kinetic approach based on the evaluation of four intertwined criteria: resilience, coherence, attractiveness, and responsiveness. It first assesses the domestic features of the EU's cyber-actorness (resilience and coherence) to be able to further determine the characteristic of the EU's international cyber-actorness (attractiveness and responsiveness).

This thesis assumes that the EU has evolved from an inward-looking cyber-actor to a more globally-oriented one. Internally, it has proved to be a strong resilient actor, leading to the emergence of a 'collective cybersecuritisation' at the pace of cyber-attacks. Moreover, the EU has spontaneously leant towards a decentralised 'asymmetric governance', which enables the EU to avoid internal pitfalls. The presence of both domestic capabilities (resilience and coherence) constitutes a fertile ground allowing to further assessing the EU's actorness externally (attractiveness and responsiveness).

On the international stage, torn by continuous whipsaws between a proactive and a reactive approach, the role of the EU as a cyber-actor is still blurred. Through a dense network of multilateral and bilateral partnerships, and an effective magnetism aimed at building resilience in third countries, the EU is shaping a collective immunity in cyberspace by projecting its vision, norms, and values abroad. However, the EU got entangled in a number of dilemmas inherent to its own nature. Consequently, the EU's international actorness is imbued with a paradoxical sleep: the brain acts, but the body is asleep.

The EU is a budding global cyber-power. However, this thesis positions that the EU, hampered by its own paradoxes and a number of internal stalemates, is a paralysed international cyber-player. Devoid of means to fulfill its global ambitions, the EU's 'cyber-powerness' remains limited to the regional scope. The EU is not yet a Guardian of the Galaxy, but it does have the potential and the capabilities to become a global influent and effective leading cyber-power, if it manages to overcome its sui generis schizophrenic nature