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INTRODUCTION

In a year in which hedge funds have faced numerous performance headwinds – rotations from growth to value, the rise of retail investors, turbulence in Chinese equities – one area of apparent tailwinds is Europe.

In recent years, focus and interest in the region have remained muted relative to other regions, but steady. However, over the past ten months we’ve observed a swift migration of attention towards Europe, as European managers outperformed their peers elsewhere, and hedge funds globally have been increasing their exposure.

As a macro trend more broadly, Europe is in the spotlight. Recent Goldman Sachs Research reports, *Top of Mind: Europe at a Crossroads* and *Europe Equity Strategy - 2022 Outlook: If not now, when?*, highlighted a number of reasons as to why investors are looking to grow their European exposure. These include Europe’s unprecedented program of fiscal risk-sharing in response to the pandemic and other developments towards

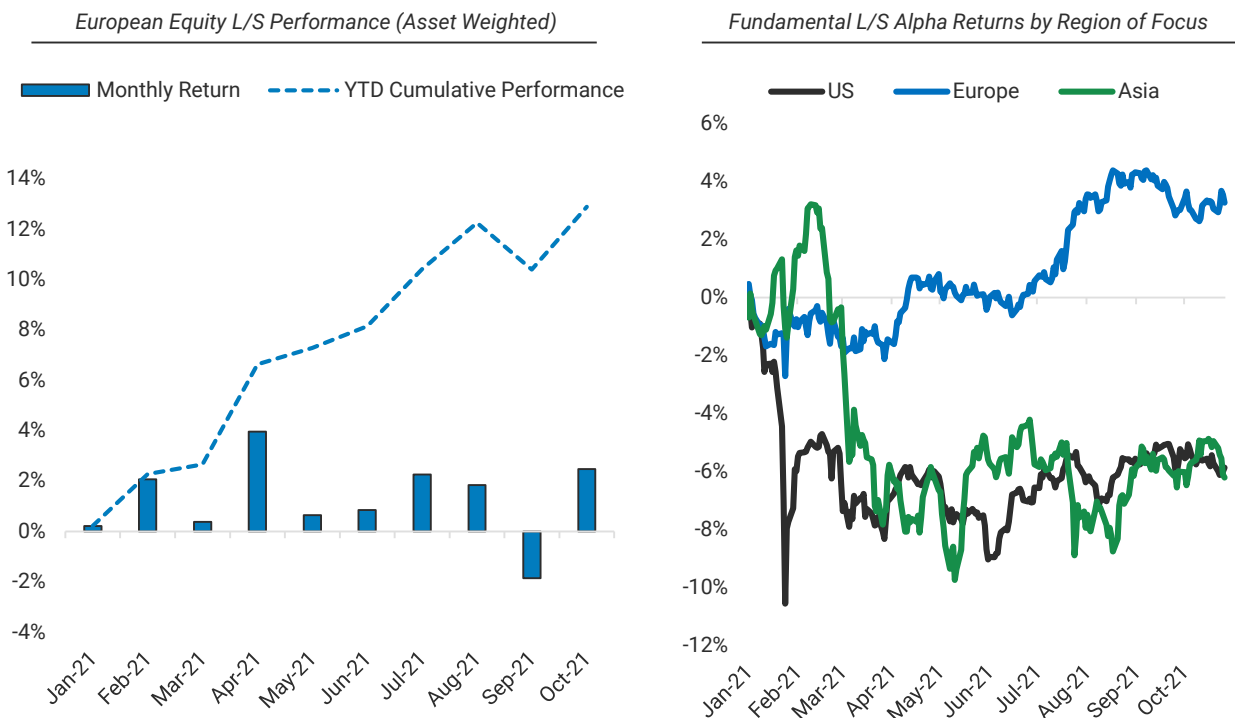
increased European integration, combined with higher growth and relatively cheap valuations, all of which may create an environment for better investor returns.

In this latest issue of *Insights in Brief*, we explore the recent outperformance of European hedge funds, the rotation into the region, key trends in hedge fund positioning in Europe, the European hedge fund manager landscape, and the appetite of allocators for deploying capital in Europe-focused strategies.

RECENT EUROPEAN EQUITY HEDGE FUND PERFORMANCE

Based on our estimates (on an asset-weighted basis), European equity long/short managers are currently on track to deliver a third consecutive year of double-digit returns. Through October, we estimate that European L/S managers are up +12.9% YTD, after being up +11.4% and +14.1% in 2019 and 2020, respectively. As **Figure 1** shows, European managers have posted positive returns in 11 of the past 12 months (except September 2021).

Figure 1: YTD European Equity L/S performance and alpha estimates



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Despite the losses in September, European managers still managed to significantly outperform the market benchmark (-1.9% vs. -4.6% MSCI EU).

The strength of this performance distinguishes them from their US- and Asia-focused peers: through October, the average US-focused equity L/S fund was +6.5%, and the average Asia-focused L/S fund was +3.2%. In large part, this relative outperformance has been driven by European managers' lack of exposure to the major performance headwinds of 2021: the rapid appreciation of widely-held shorts in January in the US, and then the China sell-off that occurred from May onwards. We would caveat, however, that as in all regions, the dispersion in performance among European managers is high this year. Moreover, the asset-weighted performance average is higher than the equally-weighted average, indicating relatively stronger performance by larger European managers.

However, it is not just in absolute performance terms that European L/S funds are outperforming. In contrast to US-focused funds, which have delivered negative YTD alpha of around -6%, we estimate that European funds have delivered positive alpha of between +3.3% and +6.6% (depending on the alpha model used) through the end of October, positioning them for the third year in a row of positive alpha. European funds have also acquitted themselves well in alpha terms on a longer-term basis.

During the last 5 years, European L/S funds generated an aggregate alpha of +32.4%, while US funds delivered just +4.0% (though both regions lagged Asia at +46.1%). However, this alpha has been masked by an easier benchmark to beat: the MSCI Europe has annualized 7.1% over the last 5 years, while the S&P 500 has annualized 16.5%. In addition, our sense is that the 'globalization' of the portfolios of some of the largest European long/short managers (discussed in more

detail on page 4-5) has also contributed to recent alpha.

Away from equity L/S, we estimate that European credit funds are also outperforming their global peers, albeit by a smaller margin: the average European credit fund was +13.8% through November, vs. 11.3% for the global average. In event-driven, European funds are slightly lagging the average (+8.4% vs. +10.2%), though that differential is largely explained by the larger presence of activist strategies in the US within our dataset, which have performed very strongly this year.

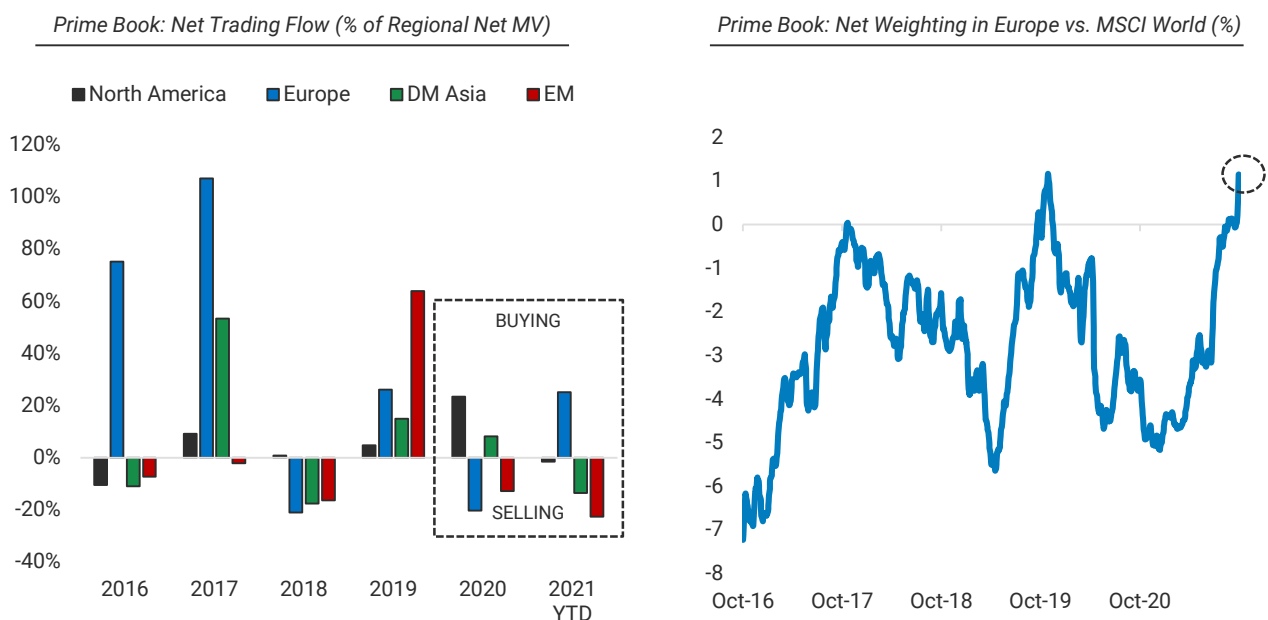
HEDGE FUND FLOWS INTO EUROPE

Since the start of the year, hedge funds globally have aggressively rotated into European equities at the expense of other regions, buying European stocks in seven out of the ten past months. To further this point, Europe is the only net bought region on the Goldman Sachs Prime Brokerage book year to date, on the back of risk-on flows with long buying outpacing short selling 3.5 to 1 in dollar terms, as shown in **Figure 2**.

As a result, hedge fund positioning in European equities has risen considerably this year on several measures:

- **Long/Short Ratio (market value):** The aggregate L/S ratio in European stocks is up +27% YTD – from 1.9 to 2.4, the highest level in nearly six years (since June 2015). On the other hand, the aggregate L/S ratios in all other regions have declined so far this year.
- **Net weighting vs. the market benchmark:** Hedge funds' net weighting in Europe vs. the MSCI World has risen +6.0 pts YTD to +1.2%. This is the first time they have been overweight since December 2019 and the highest level on our record, as shown in **Figure 2**. For the first time since November 2017, Europe is now the most overweight region in the GS Prime Brokerage book.

Figure 2: Hedge fund net trading flow by region and over/under-weight in European equities



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- **Europe as percentage of global gross and net exposures:**
As a percentage of the overall Prime Brokerage book, gross/net exposures in Europe have risen +1.3/+5.9 pts YTD to 16.5%/19.0%, which are in the 47th/78th percentiles vs. the past ten years.

This is a sharp contrast versus what we observed in 2020 when Europe was by far the most net sold region on the Prime Brokerage book, almost entirely driven by short sales (also displayed in **Figure 2**); indicating much more positive sentiment towards the region throughout the course of this year.

Moreover, we would note that this year’s buying activity has been more broad-based as compared to 2017 when European stocks saw large net buying on the back of double-digit earnings growth. While macro products (indices and ETFs) accounted for nearly 40% of the dollar net buying in 2017, the net buying so far this year has been driven entirely by single stocks, as 10 of 11 European sectors have been net bought (healthcare being the sole exception).

Although European stocks have seen significant net buying this year, the leverage profile across European equity L/S managers does not seem stretched, based on our estimates. While gross leverage has moved up in the past few months, it is still down -4.9 pts YTD at 171%, which is in the 33rd percentile vs. the past year and in the 52nd percentile vs. the past five years; suggesting there remains ample dry powder on the sidelines. Net leverage is also down -2.2 pts on a YTD basis at 55%, which is in the 32nd percentile vs. the past year and in the 79th percentile vs. the past five years.

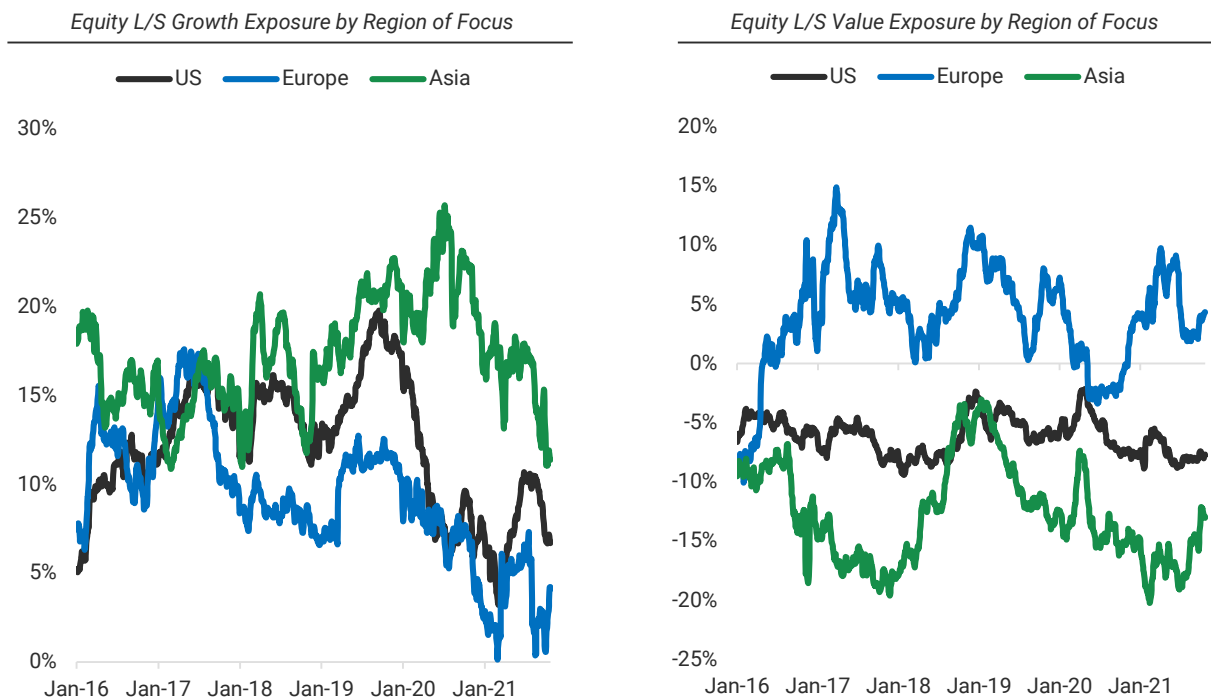
FACTOR AND THEMATIC POSITIONING IN EUROPE

One of the most notable facets of positioning in Europe is on the topic of growth vs. value. Our global client base has tended to be long growth and short value, which has created a performance headwind in the last 12 months. However, as shown in **Figure 3**, Europe-focused long/short managers tend to have a higher tilt towards value relative to their Asia and US peers. Our factor models estimate that European L/S managers are currently net long the value factor by +3.8%. In contrast, Asia and US L/S managers are net short value by -13.3% and -7.4%, respectively. Similarly, European L/S is currently net long the growth factor by just +3.6%, well below their Asian and US peers at +12.0% and +6.5%, respectively. This has helped to support the positive performance dynamics in favor of European managers this year.

Through our GS Custom Baskets, we also discern a number of other key themes in terms of current European hedge fund positioning:

- **Reopening (GSCBGOUT; above average positioning vs history):** Prior to recent news of the Omicron variant, managers were positioned for outperformance of the European reopening trade: exposure to the EU Go Outside basket (**GSCBGOUT**) was in the 100th percentile versus the past five years. On a YTD basis, the basket was lagging the STOXX 600 by nearly 10 pts before the sell-off; since then, that gap has widened to almost 18 pts. Managers have also reduced their exposure to this theme, with the aggregate L/S ratio of the basket constituents on the GS Prime book falling from a high of 3.60 on November 17th

Figure 3: Equity L/S growth and value exposure by region of focus



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to 3.13 on November 30th, suggesting a more cautious stance. With that said, positioning still remains relatively elevated, with the L/S ratio currently in the 92nd percentile on a five-year basis.

- **Renewables (GSXERNEW and GSXEENAB; mixed):** The recent COP26 conference saw a reaffirmation of government commitments to net zero targets, with prospects of additional green fiscal stimulus supporting the broader ESG ecosystem. However, amid persistent supply chain challenges, hedge fund positioning appears to have shifted from pure green energy producers into tech and green transition enablers this year. For perspective, the aggregate L/S ratio of the EU Renewable Energy basket (GSXERNEW) is down -47% YTD to 1.94 (34th percentile vs. the past five years), while the L/S ratio of the EU New Cycle Enablers basket (GSXEENAB) is up +6% YTD to 3.06 (80th percentile vs. the past five years); though the trends appear to have partially reversed in the past few weeks.
- **China Exposure (GSXECHNA; above average positioning vs history but well below recent highs):** The aggregate L/S ratio of the EU China Exposure basket (GSXECHNA) currently stands at 3.34, which is up +10% YTD and in the 89th percentile vs. the past five years; however, it has declined by -18% since rising to a multi-year high of 4.05 in early July, suggesting that hedge funds recently reduced net length in EU stocks with significant China exposure even though the price of the basket has risen +2.8% during the same period.

THE EUROPEAN HEDGE FUND MANAGER LANDSCAPE

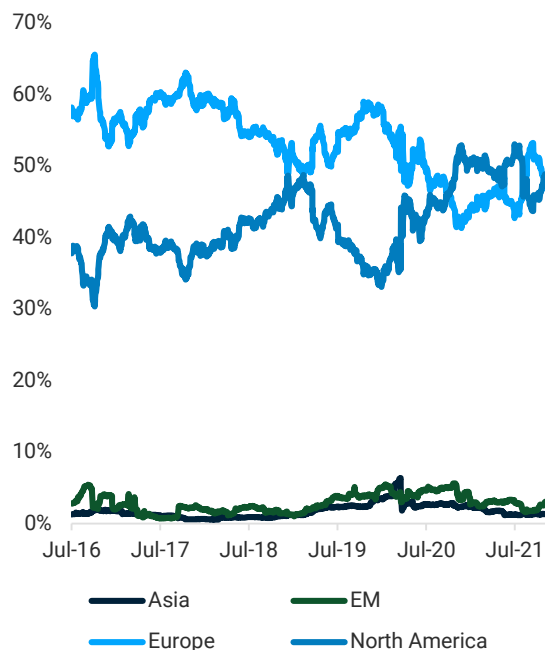
On a regional basis, European managers have consistently accounted for 15-25% of industry assets during the last decade. In the post-crisis period (2010-15), European managers lost share, falling from 19% to 15% of global assets, before beginning to grow again steadily. This growth reached a peak of almost 24% of assets in 2019, before falling sharply amid the COVID crisis back to 18%.¹

However, the European hedge fund industry has tended to be skewed towards certain strategies in particular, with macro and systematic strategies representing an outsized share of assets relative to other regions. These strategies tend mostly to be global in their investment focus, meaning that funds with a regional focus on Europe represent a smaller segment of overall industry AUM. According to HFR, funds with a regional focus on Europe account for around 5.9% of total hedge fund industry AUM as of Q3 2021. While this proportion has declined over the past ten years (7.6% in 2011), all regions have experienced this losing trend as the number of funds with a global focus has continued to grow (40.1% in 2011, 50.9% in Q3 2021)²

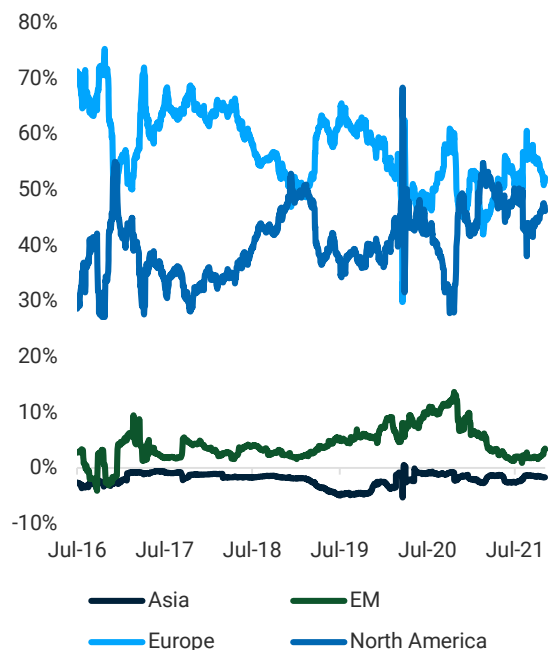
Moreover, we found it interesting to note that many of the largest 'brand name' European managers have broadened their portfolios beyond their home region. As **Figure 4** illustrates, the top ten European long/short managers in our Prime book have substantially decreased their exposure to

Figure 4: Top 10 European equity L/S funds: regional gross and net exposure

Prime Book: Top 10 European ELS Regional Gross Exposure



Prime Book: Top 10 European ELS Regional Net Exposure



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1. HFM – note that this analysis only includes managers with >\$1bn in AUM, so assumes that these trends hold for smaller managers.

2. HFR

Europe (by almost 20%) over the past five years, while North American exposure has steadily risen by an offsetting amount. The globalization of these strategies in recent years may have been due to many reasons including the perceived opportunity set within Europe, the migration towards growth, and more. The effect, however, has been to limit the range of dedicated European-focused products available to investors, and in some cases to discourage allocation to European funds given the potential for overlap with existing global exposures.

However, in the last two years, we have seen an increasingly vibrant new launch market in Europe, which may point towards a resurgence. Interestingly, a notable percentage of these offerings have been credit-focused, accounting for around 27% and 30% of new launches in Europe during 2019 and 2020 respectively, considerably higher than in the past. This changing strategy mix points towards both the evolving opportunity set and the changing nature of European managers.

ALLOCATOR APPETITE FOR EUROPEAN HEDGE FUNDS

Until recently, allocator interest in Europe had been relatively muted for a number of years. **Figure 5** shows regional demand for hedge fund strategies based on investor surveys that the Goldman Sachs Capital Introduction team has conducted. After a spike in demand in 2018 (off the back of strong European performance in 2017), appetite for European exposure has stayed at a consistently low level. At the outset of 2021, the majority of regional interest expressed was in Asia-focused strategies, with around 45% of allocators planning to increase their exposure. At the same time, just 11% of allocators planning to increase their exposure to European strategies throughout 2021.

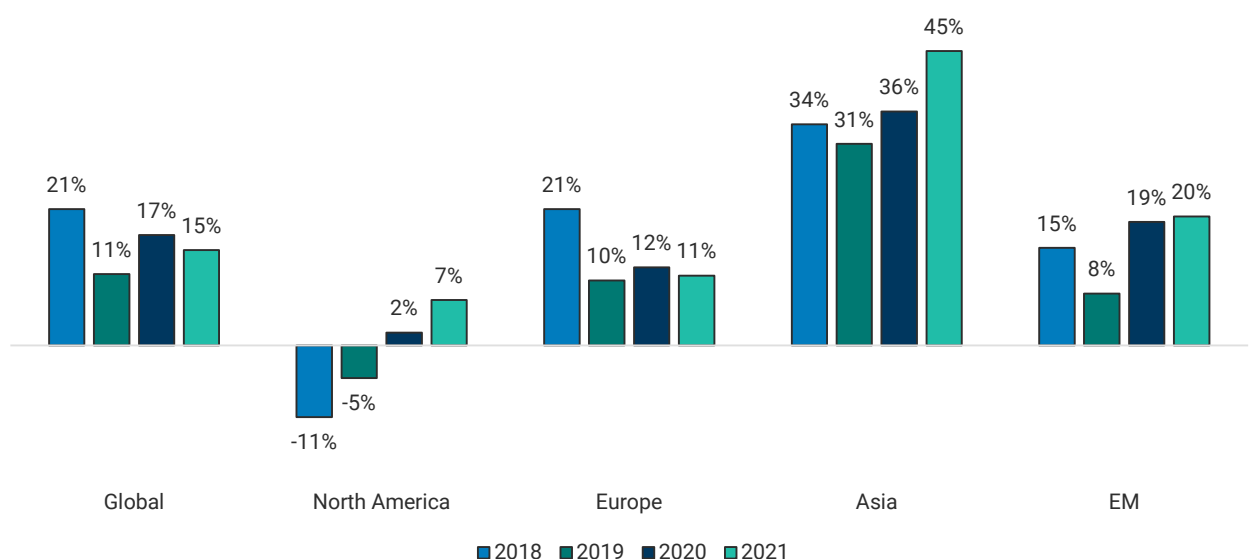
However, despite this muted interest at the beginning of the year, we have begun to observe (on an anecdotal basis) more allocators looking to re-evaluate the opportunity set for various reasons, including:

- **Concerns around diversification:** A number of investors have expressed concerns around their portfolios being overweight in US equities or growth and are looking to diversify internationally or towards value through European managers. While the larger European managers have decreased Europe exposure in recent years, this exposure still accounts for the majority of the book, which offers investors the opportunity to achieve that regional diversification within their portfolios. Moreover, European managers indeed have a value tilt according to our book.
- **Tackling the ‘travel backlog’:** As international travel between the US and Europe has recently reopened, and comfort levels with international travel are slowly increasing, many allocators have expressed that they are looking to make up for lost time and commence searches for European managers.
- **Opportunity set:** More and more allocators have indicated that many of the macro headwinds in Europe have dissipated (Brexit, broader EU/Eurozone concerns etc.) making Europe as a macro play more attractive than it has been in many years, and giving comfort that European markets are less likely to be impacted by political challenges than they have been in the last decade.

It remains to be seen whether this recent interest will prove durable, but combined with the increased trading flows to the region, it suggests that 2021 may mark the beginning of a European comeback for the hedge fund industry.

Figure 5: Allocator appetite by regional focus of hedge fund strategy

Regional Appetite for 2018-2021 (net % of allocators planning to increase allocation)



Source: Goldman Sachs Prime Insights & Analytics: 'A Rising Tide: The Outlook for the Hedge Fund Industry in 2021', February 2021

HEDGE FUND INSIGHTS & ANALYTICS

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