

The EU and the Ukraine War: Making Sense of the Rise of a “Geopolitical” Union

by Riccardo Alcaro

By ordering Russian armed forces into Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin has arguably made the greatest blunder of his twenty-two-year long rule. The Russian president seems to have underestimated not just Ukraine’s capacity to resist the invasion, but also the resolve of the United States and its partners to oppose it.¹ If that is indeed the case, the greatest surprise must have come from the European Union.

The rediscovered unity

The assumption that the EU would not respond forcefully to an escalation in Ukraine was not entirely far-fetched. The Union has supported Kiev’s European aspirations and maintained sanctions on Russia for its 2014 annexation of Crimea and destabilisation of the Donbas. Yet support was lukewarm and the

restrictions limited.

In truth, several EU member states, especially in western Europe, bet that they could freeze the unsolved conflict in the Donbas in order to preserve a degree of stability in Europe and keep cooperating with an increasingly intractable Russia on other fronts. Putin may well have determined that these countries would have stuck to this policy line.²

Undoubtedly, the Russian president and his advisers must have anticipated that the EU would have reacted to an escalation with harsher measures than those adopted in 2014. Yet, Putin must have also thought that, faced with a Russian *fait accompli*, EU cohesion would eventually melt away.

Putin’s calculus was based on the assumption that sanctions would have

¹ White House, *Remarks of President Joe Biden – State of the Union Address as Prepared for Delivery*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/01/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-delivered>.

² Katya Adler, “EU Leaders Attempt to Dodge Putin’s Divide and Rule Tactics”, in *BBC News*, 8 February 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60297736>.

inflicted a significant cost on European states too, who have an interest in stabilising markets as well as energy and commodity prices jolted by the Russian intervention.³ Massive refugee flows from Ukraine would have further augmented pressure on the EU, which in recent years has clashed more on migration than anything else. And if all this would not have worked, Putin was ready to resort to intimidation and even threats of nuclear escalation.⁴

The (tragic) irony is that, if Putin had limited himself to recognising the self-styled separatist republics of Donetsk and Lugansk, the EU would have struggled to find an agreement on far-reaching sanctions and other restrictive measures. But a large-scale war whose ostensible goal is the destruction of Ukraine as an independent nation has swept aside any lingering hesitations that EU countries may have had.⁵ Just like that, the EU has found out that it can be a geopolitical actor.⁶

³ Rick Noack and Kate Brady, “European Sanctions on Russia Will Cost Europe, Too, Early Signs Show”, in *The Washington Post*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/02/europe-russia-sanctions-backlash>.

⁴ “Vladimir Putin Puts Russia’s Nuclear Forces on Alert, as Ukraine Agrees to Talks with Russia”, in *ABC News*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/100866518>.

⁵ Riccardo Alcaro, “Europe’s Post-Cold War Order Is No More”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|08 (February 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/14671>.

⁶ Josep Borrell, “Putin’s War Has Given Birth to Geopolitical Europe”, in *Project Syndicate*, 3 March 2022, <https://prosyn.org/2F8IAMd>.

The onslaught on Russia

The Union has not just condemned Russia’s aggression of Ukraine as a mammoth violation of international law. It has also construed the clash with Moscow in normative terms, as a collision between values – rule of law and freedoms on the one side, might and authoritarianism on the other.⁷ Many in the EU have framed their support for Ukraine’s accession as a way to secure the latter’s democratic future.⁸

Whatever aspiration still lingered to forge a shared European security space with Putin’s Russia has dissipated. Proximity to Russia, either as a result of ideological affinity (as in the case of Hungary’s illiberal president Viktor Orban), financial opportunism (Cyprus) or the pragmatism underlying German and Italian *Ostpolitik*, is no longer sustainable. In the EU, Russia has no friends or partners left.

The EU has demonstrated that it can inflict massive harm on Russia. It has frozen or seized assets and properties of basically all oligarchs close to Putin, the most prominent cabinet members and the president himself. It has disconnected most Russian banks from the interbank messaging system

⁷ European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Russian Aggression against Ukraine*, 1 March 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_1483.

⁸ Alberto Nardelli and John Follain, “EU Agrees to Move to Next Step in Ukraine’s Membership Bid”, in *Bloomberg*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-01/eu-agrees-to-move-to-the-next-step-in-ukraine-s-membership-bid>.

run by Swift, although it has carved out exceptions to make payments for energy imports (which continue, for now). It has severely restricted access by Russian companies and banks to EU financial markets, and even established a ceiling of 100,000 euro to deposits held in EU banks by Russian nationals. Most dramatically, the EU has limited Russia's ability to absorb the costs of sanctions by blocking the Russian Central Bank's access to its euro-denominated foreign reserves, which account for around a third (approximately two hundred billion) of the total.⁹

The Union did not stop there. It has drastically curtailed, and at times blocked entirely, trade with key Russian companies in such sectors as defence, hydrocarbon extraction and export, aerospace, shipbuilding, maritime and land transport, as well as insurance and reinsurance. Severe limits have been imposed on the supply to Russia of dual use technologies and semiconductors, the key material to make electronic devices like smartphones and computers work.¹⁰ Finally, the EU has closed its airspace to Russian airlines and banned its own carriers from flying over Russian airspace.¹¹

The sanctions wave – EU measures have complemented similar restrictions by

⁹ Eir Nolsoe and Valentina Pop, “Russia Sanctions List: What the West Imposed Over the Ukraine Invasion”, in *Financial Times*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6f3ce193-ab7d-4449-ac1b-751d49b1aaf8>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sean Goulding Carroll, “EU Closes Airspace to Russian Aircraft”, in *Euractiv*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1719357>.

the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia and others – has kept mounting. Cultural and sport organisations have banned Russia's participation.¹² Most importantly, sanctions have spawned a spontaneous business disengagement of colossal proportions, with companies from Europe and elsewhere abandoning Russia in droves.¹³ In short, the EU has contributed to excluding Russia from the benefits of globalisation: open financial markets, investment, trade, travels, entertainment and technology-enabled payment and information services.

Meanwhile, the Union has opened the doors to hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, who have been granted freedom to move, reside and work across the EU.¹⁴ The Commission has reaffirmed its pledge to allocate 1.2 billion euro macroeconomic assistance to Kyiv, not counting contributions by individual member states.¹⁵

Last but certainly not least, the EU has for the first time in history agreed to facilitate the transfer of military

¹² Yasmine Serhan, “Why the Cultural Boycott of Russia Matters”, in *The Atlantic*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2022/03/article/623873>.

¹³ Arthur Sullivan, “From Russia with Haste: Mass Exodus of Companies over Ukraine Invasion”, in *Deutsche Welle*, 2 March 2022, <https://p.dw.com/p/47rFp>.

¹⁴ Jacopo Barigazzi, “EU Hails ‘Historic’ Deal to Protect Ukrainian Refugees”, in *Politico*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2012789>.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Commission Tables Proposal for €1.2 Billion Emergency Macro-Financial Assistance Package for Ukraine, as Announced by President von der Leyen*, 1 February 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_674.

equipment to Ukraine’s armed forces.¹⁶ This decision is in line with the orientation of most member states, including those traditionally reticent to do so like Sweden¹⁷ and Germany.¹⁸

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s decision to significantly augment defence spending¹⁹ – which is nothing less than a full German rearmament – is a watershed in itself, but it is also likely to spur other countries to follow suit. This may lead to a stronger EU foreign and defence policy, if not in terms of policy federalisation at least in terms of greater integration of the EU’s defence industrial base and potentially of its power projection capacity. The vision of European strategic autonomy or sovereignty, for years championed by French President Emmanuel Macron, may soon take on clearer contours.²⁰

¹⁶ Maïa de La Baume and Jacopo Barigazzi, “EU Agrees to Give €500M in Arms, Aid to Ukrainian Military in ‘Watershed’ Move”, in *Politico*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2005428>.

¹⁷ “Sweden to Send Military Aid to Ukraine - PM Andersson”, in *Reuters*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/sweden-send-military-aid-ukraine-pm-andersson-2022-02-27>.

¹⁸ David M. Herszenhorn, Lili Bayer and Hans von der Burchard, “Germany to Send Ukraine Weapons in Historic Shift on Military Aid”, in *Politico*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2004438>.

¹⁹ Federal Government of Germany, *Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag*, Berlin, 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

²⁰ Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It*, Rome, IAI, 2021, <https://www.iai.it/>

The limits of geopolitical Europe

The EU’s response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has been swift and hard. The Union has contributed to making the Russian economy toxic: whoever touches it does so at his or her own risk. It has (for the time being) neutralised migration flows as a potential trouble spot by offering refuge to Ukrainians. And it has supported Ukraine’s resistance against the invading armies. However, there are limits to its supposed transformation into a “geopolitical” power.²¹

The first is the war itself. There are rumours that the occupation army may be on the verge of collapse, yet even this would not automatically translate into an end to violence.²² For the time being, Putin has given no sign that he is ready to renege on his original objective of breaking Ukraine.²³ If, or when, the war becomes more brutal, the EU (like the United States) will be caught between two equally strong but conflicting logics: ratchet up the pressure (and military aid to Ukraine) and avoid an escalation between Russia and NATO.

Much as anyone else, the EU does not really have a strategy that goes beyond

[en/node/12819](https://www.iai.it/en/node/12819).

²¹ Luigi Scazzieri, “The EU’s Geopolitical Awakening?”, in *The UK in a Changing Europe*, 3 March 2022, <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/?p=48426>.

²² See comments by Russian military expert Michael Kofman, “I try not to make too many predictions”, *Twitter post*, 5 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael/status/1499967950975115269>.

²³ “Russia’s Putin Says Ukraine Advance ‘Going to Plan’”, in *Al Jazeera*, 3 March 2022, <https://aje.io/dhtvsp>.

the combination of pressure on Moscow and assistance to Kyiv. How to deal with a Russian government that has turned the authoritarian screw on its people manifold will become harder now that the EU has wrapped itself in the ideological mantle of defender of democracy.²⁴ Reaching out to Moscow may become a controversial proposition within the Union, as some would be keener on ending the violence while others would rather cut any link to the Kremlin. Managing Ukraine’s expectation for greater help and a speedier entry into the EU will be no less easy.

The second limit concerns the sustainability of the sanctions regime, especially if the EU were to opt for reducing its oil and gas imports from Russia. Should the war drag on until the autumn, the Union may struggle to secure alternative energy supplies.²⁵

The third limit is the EU’s reliance on the United States. European cohesion, albeit it has acquired a life on its own, has originated from continuous information exchanges and coordination with a staunchly Atlanticist US administration.²⁶

²⁴ Elliott Davis Jr, “Putin’s War at Home”, in *U.S. News*, 4 March 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/the-report/articles/2022-03-04/war-weary-russians-threaten-trouble-for-vladimir-putin-amid-ukraine-attack>.

²⁵ International Energy Agency, *How Europe Can Cut Natural Gas Imports from Russia Significantly within a Year*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.iea.org/news/how-europe-can-cut-natural-gas-imports-from-russia-significantly-within-a-year>.

²⁶ Riccardo Alcaro, “The Return of US Leadership in Europe: Biden and the Russia Crisis”, in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 22|04 (February 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/14592>.

However, Joe Biden’s popularity has been sagging for months.²⁷ If the Republicans – many coming from the Trumpian camp – were to win control of Congress following the mid-term elections in November, the transatlantic pillar of EU cohesion would weaken. And that pillar may crumble altogether if Donald Trump, who defined Putin a “genius” just two days before the invasion and never hid his profound disdain for the EU, or someone like him were to win the White House in 2024.²⁸

A fourth and most significant limit concerns the absolute exceptionality of Russia’s war against Ukraine. The stakes are so high that EU member states have had greater incentives to close ranks and aim high than doing otherwise. But this has hardly been the case in the past – most painful is the strident contrast between the generous welcome of Ukrainian refugees and the barbed wire that migrants from other regions have been met with across the EU. It is anything but certain that the unity of purpose shown on Ukraine may be transferred to other issues.

In conclusion, the EU has shown considerable “geopolitical” power. Such power rests on unity, but it is not a given that unity may endure a drawn-out war in Ukraine or the loosening of

²⁷ RealClearPolitics, “President Biden Job Approval”, in *RealClearPolitics Poll*, retrieved on 6 March 2022, <https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president-biden-job-approval-7320.html>.

²⁸ Joseph Gedeon, “Trump Calls Putin ‘Genius’ and ‘Savvy’ for Ukraine Invasion”, in *Politico*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/23/trump-putin-ukraine-invasion-00010923>.

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the transatlantic front. The true test for the Union may lie ahead. But the precedent of this past week can hardly be ignored.

6 March 2022

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Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

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