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Tackling the Constraints on EU Foreign Policy towards Ukraine: From Strategic Denial to Geopolitical Awakening

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Abstract

This report explores the evolution of EU policy towards Ukraine, with major turning points occurring in 2004, 2014 and February 2022 when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine started. The dominant constraining factor in the case of Ukraine was multipolar (or rather bipolar) competition between the EU and Russia over the European political, economic and security order, which gradually tightened since 2004. Up to 2022, the EU's main mitigation tactics in response to such competition was actually a denial of it, but in 2022 this approach became untenable and the EU entered the competition as an emerging geopolitical actor, actively trying to shape the future of European order that was challenged by the war in Ukraine. EU–Ukraine relations were also complicated by regional fragmentation in the post-Soviet space and within Ukraine, but this factor was overshadowed by geopolitical competition. Intra-EU contestation was an important constraining factor in 2004–2014, but after 2014 and especially after 2022 the EU reached an unprecedented level of unity in the face of the most serious geopolitical conflict in post-WWII Europe.

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Introduction

Ukraine's name is thought to come from the Slavic word for borderland. The largest European state that re-emerged as a result of dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine occupies a central geopolitical position in the historically contested zone coined by Timothy Snyder as "bloodlands".[1] The sheer size and geopolitical significance of the country would have, in and of itself, required a clear and coherent policy from the European Union in the aftermath of the Cold War. However, the EU's focus was initially on the countries that joined the EU in 2004, and on Russia. It was the big bang enlargement of 2004 that increased the need for a reformulated and sophisticated approach to Ukraine and other new Eastern neighbours. The new approach took the shape of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004 and soon complemented by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) that emerged as the strategic sub-set of the ENP in 2009.[2]

Within this framework, bilateral relations were primarily defined in terms of securing the EU's interests for enhanced political association and deeper and more comprehensive trade relations, without at the same time undermining official relations with Russia by offering Ukraine a membership perspective. The EU was naively thinking that its approach would keep the Kremlin at bay. The strategic myopia on which the EU's Ukraine policy rested was painfully exposed when the Union was caught off-guard after Russia seized Crimea in March 2014. Although this was unintended by the EU, the imminent conclusion of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement (AA) was an important factor in the string of events that culminated with Russia's invasion of the peninsula and subsequent instigation of war in eastern Ukraine. From Russia's perspective, the AA was a significant step in Ukraine's drift towards the West that undermined President Vladimir Putin's agenda to re-establish a privileged sphere of interest in the post-Soviet space. Russia's desire to block Ukraine's European aspirations was determined by a confluence of wider strategic and neo-imperialist drivers, including an effort

[1] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York, Basic Books, 2010.

[2] European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy. Strategy Paper* (COM/2004/373), 12 May 2004, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52004DC0373; Council of the European Union, *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, Prague, 7 May 2009, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/31797/2009_eap_declaration.pdf.

to avenge the downfall of the Kremlin's puppet regime in Ukraine, stunt Kyiv's supposed drift towards NATO, protect Moscow's interest in maintaining access to its only true major warm water port of Sevastopol, and redeem the peninsula by correcting what president Putin portrayed as a historical wrong.

Coming on the heels of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, the annexation of Crimea and subsequent destabilisation of Donbas should have been enough reason for the EU to fundamentally review its Ukraine policy. Instead, the EU continued to bet on the possibility of establishing a working relationship with Russia, even though it simultaneously adopted a non-recognition policy vis-à-vis Crimea and a raft of targeted sanctions against Russia and its Ukrainian collaborators. France and Germany joined the so-called Normandy Group, also including Russia and Ukraine, where they pushed the latter to accept the controversial Minsk agreements. The EU, by way of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Commission Vice-President (HRVP) Federica Mogherini, cut itself out of the negotiation process with the suggestion that if it was seen by Russia as part of the problem, it should not be mediating the talks between Ukraine and Russia. However, upon the initiative of Mogherini the EU prioritised the implementation of the Minsk agreements as the first of five principles guiding its recalibrated policy towards Russia.

In the years that followed, Ukraine started implementing the reforms needed to meet the commitments entered into under the AA with the EU. In certain areas, notably the fight against corruption and in the justice sector, these reforms moved at the pace of two steps ahead and one back. All the while, Ukraine faced the occupation of Crimea and the simmering war in Donbas. The latter came to the boil on 24 February 2022, when President Putin finally dropped his mask and ordered a full-scale invasion.

The second and most devastating stage of Russia's war against Ukraine has ended the post-Cold War European security order, creating new realities in Ukraine and other countries neighbouring the EU. The war has shattered old illusions in Berlin, Paris and other western European capitals about Russia's true intentions in the so-called "shared neighbourhood" and has underlined how much of a security threat the Kremlin's imperialist ambitions pose for security and democracy in wider Europe. Russia's unprovoked and illegal aggression has united EU member states,

in close coordination with partners in the G7 and other like-minded countries around the world, to adopt strong and unprecedented measures to support Ukraine.

This paper traces the dramatic developments in EU–Ukraine relations during the past three decades, in order to explore the main constraints on EU action and assess the EU's responses to these constraints. The first section outlines the conceptual framework for the study of the constraining factors on EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP), focusing on multipolar competition, regional fragmentation and intra-EU contestation. Section 2 charts the evolutionary course of the design and implementation of the EU's Ukraine policy over the past thirty years. This will be followed by an analysis of how the three major constraints played out on EU Ukraine policy (Section 3) and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the EU's tactics to mitigate and counter the constraints (Section 4). On the basis of a comprehensive review of official documents, relevant literature and 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with ten Ukrainian and five European stakeholders (officials, members of parliament, CSO representatives) in the last quarter of 2022,[3] the paper finds that the EU policy has gone through major adaptations in the course of growing multipolar competition over the European security order and Ukraine's place in it. The EU's mitigation tactics had some success in supporting Ukraine during 2004–2022, but evidently failed to stop the escalation of Russian aggression. The paper highlights that, in response to the full-scale war, the EU emerged as a geopolitical actor that entered the fight over the future of European order, mobilising its policy instruments to support Ukraine in unprecedented ways. In the conclusions, the paper offers recommendations on how to further develop the EU's policy on Ukraine in the context of continued multipolar competition.

1. The constraints on EU foreign and security policy

This paper applies the concepts of multipolar competition, regional fragmentation and intra-EU contestation to articulate the framework in which EU policy towards

[3] The semi-structured guide for the interviews contained questions on the EU's policy toward Ukraine since 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022. Apart from two, all interviews with Ukrainian stakeholders had to be conducted online via Zoom due to issues of security and accessibility.

Ukraine has unfolded. The three concepts refer to major constraining factors on EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP) that have played out and interacted in different ways in the context of different external crises and conflicts. This paper looks at how the three factors affect the coherence and impact of EUFSP in the case of Ukraine; how the three constraints interact; and how the EU can mitigate and counteract the effects of the three factors and develop a more comprehensive and effective policy in future. A brief semantic clarification is in order of how these concepts are construed as constraints on EUFSP.[4]

Multipolar competition entails a multiplicity of power centres espousing diverging understandings of how order – at the global but also regional level – should look like. Global and regional powers consequently construe international crises as arenas of strategic confrontation rather than transnational problems to address through multilateral institutions.[5] Crisis management thus becomes much harder. Multipolar competition compels EU member states to factor in their relationship with external powers when they handle a crisis or conflict, which may give such powers an opening to influence EU decision-making.[6] On the other hand, acknowledgement of multipolar competition may be necessary for the EU to recognise and develop ways to protect itself against malign external influence – relationship with Russia being a case in point.

Regional fragmentation refers to the erosion of state capacity to set and enforce laws as well as to the dysfunctionality of regional governance arrangements.

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[4] For a lengthier discussion of the three concepts of multipolar competition, regional fragmentation and internal contestation and the ways in which they affect EU foreign and security policy, see Riccardo Alcaro et al., "A Joined-Up Union, a Stronger Europe. A Conceptual Framework to Investigate EU Foreign and Security Policy in a Complex and Contested World", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 8 (August 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=969.

[5] Graeme P. Herd (ed.), *Great Powers and Strategic Stability in the 21st Century. Competing Visions of World Order*, London/New York, Routledge, 2010; Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself. Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*, London, Portfolio/Penguin, 2012; Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World. The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (May/June 2014), p. 69-79; Riccardo Alcaro, John Peterson and Ettore Greco (eds), *The West and the Global Power Shift. Transatlantic Relations and Global Governance*, Basingstoke/New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016; Riccardo Alcaro (ed.), *The Liberal Order and its Contestations. Great Powers and Regions Transiting in a Multipolar Era*, London/New York, Routledge, 2018; Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018.

[6] Assem Dandashly et al., "Multipolarity and EU Foreign and Security Policy: Divergent Approaches to Conflict and Crisis Response", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 6 (December 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=697.

When multilateral governance mechanisms are absent or struggle to function, regional powers are drawn into conflicts, as are global players, with the frequent result of blurring the distinction between civil conflict and proxy war.[7] EU member states struggle to meet the requirements for effectively addressing regional fragmentation, such as joint conflict analysis, integration of different policy tools, as well as coordination between EU institutions and member states and the EU and third actors.[8]

Internal contestation involves the process by which EU governments question established EU policies for reasons of domestic political expedience.[9] Internal contestation may be motivated by short-term domestic political goals, but it may also (and sometimes simultaneously) be rooted in long-term differences between member states' strategic outlook and culture. In both cases, internal contestation reduces the domestic incentives for individual governments to spend political capital on EUFSP.[10]

Depending on the case at hand, mitigation of the effects of these constraints involves variable forms of coordination between EU institutions and member states, different blends of security and non-security policy tools, and multiple formats of external engagements (bilateral and multilateral, formal and informal).[11]

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7 Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Lee J.M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars", in *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (June 2012), p. 265-283, DOI 10.1017/S1537592712000667; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Understanding Fragmentation in Conflict and its Impact on Prospects for Peace", in *Oslo Forum Papers*, No. 6 (December 2016), https://hdcentre.org/?p=18486; Ana E. Juncos and Steven Blockmans, "The EU's Role in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding: Four Key Challenges", in *Global Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 2-3 (2018), p. 131-140, https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2018.1502619; Tanja A. Börzel and Thomas Risse, *Effective Governance Under Anarchy. Institutions, Legitimacy, and Social Trust in Areas of Limited Statehood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

8 Agnès Levallois et al., "Regional Fragmentation and EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 3 (November 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=639.

9 Mitchell A. Orenstein and R. Daniel Kelemen, "Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 2017), p. 87-102, DOI 10.1111/jcms.12441; Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, "Populism and Foreign Policy", in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser et al. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 384-405; Rosa Balfour et al., "Divide and Obstruct: Populist Parties and EU Foreign Policy", in *GMF Policy Papers*, No. 13 (May 2019), https://www.gmfus.org/node/19074.

10 Marianna Lovato et al., "The Internal Contestation of EU Foreign and Security Policy", in *JOINT Research Papers*, No. 1 (September 2021), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=516.

11 Riccardo Alcaro et al., "A Joined-Up Union, a Stronger Europe", cit.

2. EU policy towards Ukraine: Strategy and execution

The relations between the European Union and Ukraine have been naturally determined by a variety of domestic and international political and economic factors. The EU's approach to Ukraine has developed in four marked stages, which mirror turning points in Ukraine's domestic developments as well as the external environment.

2.1 Stage 1 (1991–2004): Barely on the EU's radar

After its proclamation of independence from the Soviet Union on 24 August 1991, Ukraine has functioned as a constitutional democracy, led by a President and ruled by a unicameral assembly of 450 deputies (Verkhovna Rada). The 1990s were characterised by economic hardship, half-way institutional and market reforms and the emergence of an oligarchic regime fraught with serious corruption scandals.[12]

During much of this period, EU–Ukraine relations were nominally governed by a standard Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which was signed on 16 June 1994. Yet, the fact that it took two years for the PCA's trade section to be provisionally applied, and another two years for the PCA as a whole to be fully ratified, reflected the low priority placed on President Viktor Kuchma's Ukraine by the EU and its member states. The unwillingness of the Ukrainian authorities to go beyond the mere technical implementation of the PCA, their lack of respect for certain contractual obligations due to misapplication, protectionism or outright bureaucratic disdain, was met by the EU's refusal to engage more deeply and widely. Consecutive declarations by Ukraine regarding its intention to seek EU membership[13] were politely ignored. The EU took a restrained approach and merely confirmed that "it welcomes Ukraine's European aspirations",[14] while Ukraine was pursuing a "multi-vector" foreign policy oscillating between a pro-Western and

[12] For a historical overview, see Taras Kuzio, *Ukraine. Democratization, Corruption, and the New Russian Imperialism*, Santa Barbara, Praeger Security International, 2015.

[13] See, e.g., the declarations by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, as reported by ITAR-TASS on 27 April 1998 and by Holos Ukrayiny on 26 March 1999.

[14] See, e.g., EU and Ukraine, *European Union-Ukraine Summit Joint Statement* (10607/02), Copenhagen, 4 July 2002, p. 3, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10607-2002-INIT/en/pdf.

pro-Russian course.[15]

2.2 Stage 2 (2004–2014): Upgrading relations with new Eastern neighbours

2004 marked a turning point both for the EU that welcomed ten new member states from Central and Eastern Europe and for Ukraine where domestic dissatisfaction with corrupt and ineffective leadership and electoral fraud led to the so-called "Orange Revolution", marked by demands for democracy and European integration. Both of these landmark events were conducive to enhancing EU–Ukraine relations.

With the prospect of eastern enlargement, Western Europe gradually awoke to the idea of Ukraine becoming one of the biggest and strategically most important neighbours of the EU. Indeed, the European Security Strategy of 2003 acknowledged that "[e]ven in an era of globalisation, geography is still important".[16] In the interest of having countries on its borders that are peaceful, well-governed and prosperous, the EU assigned itself the task of promoting a "ring of friends".[17] The creation of the ENP was the European Commission's response to the wish of member states to develop a new strategy ahead of the enlargement of May 2004, to mitigate the exclusion effects for countries like Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, as indeed the three countries from the Southern Caucasus, and prevent them from being disadvantaged by the change of EU borders.[18]

The "big bang" enlargement was soon followed by the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. In November 2004, hundreds of thousands of protesters came to the

[15] Taras Kuzio, "EU and Ukraine: A Turning Point in 2004?", in *EUISS Occasional Papers*, No. 47 (November 2003), p. 7-12, https://www.iss.europa.eu/node/72.

[16] Council of the European Union, *European Security Strategy. A Secure Europe in a Better World*, 12 December 2003, p. 35, https://doi.org/10.2860/1402.

[17] European Commission, *Wider Europe - Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours* (COM/2003/104), 11 March 2003, p. 4, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52003DC0104.

[18] The ENP was first outlined on 11 March 2003 in the European Commission Communication *Wider Europe - Neighbourhood*, cit. A more developed strategy paper was published on 12 May 2004 as European Commission, *European Neighbourhood Policy. Strategy Paper*, cit.

streets of Kyiv to protest rigged presidential elections.[19] The protests led to a re-run of elections and elevation of the pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko to the presidency. The new leadership confirmed their determination to accelerate reforms to bring Ukraine closer to EU standards. They also highlighted the goal of full EU membership and asked for a membership perspective. However, the EU clung to the legally untenable position that undeniably "European" countries like Ukraine could be denied a membership perspective. It was evident that the newly launched ENP, conceived as a substitute for the enlargement policy, failed to respond to the expectations of Ukraine.

Ukraine was offered an advanced AA, which included a substantial economic integration component through the establishment of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) but was denied political integration in the form of formal institutional inclusion in the EU structures. The new agreement was negotiated between 2007–2012. However, Viktor Yanukovych, elected as President in 2010, bowed to Russian pressure and made a U-turn, suspending preparations to sign the AA/DCFTA in November 2013, shortly after his meeting with Putin in Sochi. This geopolitical shift triggered mass protests known as "Euromaidan" or "revolution of dignity" throughout the country. In February 2014, the Maidan culminated in mass shooting of protesters, followed by Yanukovych and his entourage fleeing the country and pro-European, pro-Maidan forces in the parliament taking the lead.

2.3 Stage 3 (2014–2022): In denial of tightening geopolitical competition

Maidan's victory signified Ukraine's clear break away from Russia's sphere of influence in favour of a pro-European path. In an effort to block this path, Russia occupied Crimea and instigated war in Donbas in March 2014. Nonetheless the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement was signed in June 2014 by the newly elected President Petro Poroshenko and entered fully into force in September

[19] OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Ukraine Presidential Election, 31 October, 21 November and 26 December 2004. OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (ODIHR.GAL/33/05), 11 May 2005, https://www.osce.org/node/14673.

2017.[20] Poroshenko's pro-European agenda had brought him a clear victory in the elections, with majority support in all the regions of Ukraine. The AA triggered a process of reforms in different sectors including decentralisation of power and anti-corruption. The EU provided essential political, financial and organisational support for the reforms, although still not responding to Ukraine's quest for a membership prospect. The implementation of the DCFTA brought the Ukrainian economy closer to the EU's single market by diffusing the EU rules and regulations to various sectors and creating an institutional framework for regulatory convergence with the EU.[21] One of the carrots the EU offered to motivate reforms was visa liberalisation, which entered into force in June 2017. In September 2018, to further consolidate the country's Euro-Atlantic course, the parliament approved amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine that set EU and NATO membership as Ukraine's goals.

Moscow sought new leverage over Ukraine through the occupation of Crimea and, together with its proxies, of certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine in 2014.[22] Immediately following the events on Maidan in February, Russia moved its unmarked military troops to Crimea where a fake referendum on "joining Russia" was held in March 2014. This was followed by Russian efforts to destabilise the situation in Eastern and Southern Ukraine and, manipulating pre-existing discontent with Kyiv, establish "separatist" movements in every region there which were to follow the Crimea scenario. Active opposition of the Ukrainian population and authorities prevented it everywhere except in parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions where in April 2014 open warfare started between the Ukrainian army and Russian proxy forces and collaborators.[23]

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20 Austria et al., *Association Agreement between the European Union and its Member States, of the One Part, and Ukraine, of the Other Part*, 27 June 2014, http://data.europa.eu/eli/agree_internation/2014/295/oj. See also the Ukrainian Government Portal: *Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine*, https://www.kmu.gov.ua/en/yevropejska-integraciya/ugoda-pro-asociacyu.

21 Michael Emerson and Veronika Movchan (eds), *Deepening EU-Ukraine Relations. Updating and Upgrading in the Shadow of Covid-19*, 3rd ed., London, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, https://www.ceps.eu/?p=33787.

22 Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, "The Logic of Competitive Influence-seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the Conflict in Donbas", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2018), p. 191-212, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1425083; Kristian Åtland, "Destined for Deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the Unfulfilled Minsk Agreements", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2020), p. 122-139, DOI 10.1080/1060586X.2020.1720443.

23 Andrew Wilson, "The Donbas in 2014: Explaining Civil Conflict Perhaps, but not Civil War", in *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2016), p. 631-652 at p. 646-649, DOI 10.1080/09668136.2016.1176994;

As the Ukraine-Russia conflict became hot in 2014, the EU was reluctant and unable to get directly involved but increased support to Ukraine's reform efforts.[24] The EU refused to recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and introduced sanctions against Russia but apart from that did not take an active role in the conflict resolution process. It is also noteworthy that there was a growing recognition in the EU that its energy dependence on Russia was problematic,[25] but little was done to reduce it – on the contrary, Germany went ahead with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline linking it with Russia and bypassing Ukraine, which would increase German reliance on Russian supplies and make Ukraine more vulnerable to pressure from Moscow.

2.4 Stage 4 (2022–present): The awakening of a geopolitical Union

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia was met by a strong and creative EU response that mobilised the whole EU foreign and security policy toolbox, as described in more detail below. Immediately following the full-scale invasion, on 28 February 2022, Ukraine formally applied for EU membership. In the face of Ukraine's resolve to stand up for its pro-European choice and affirmation of its normative commitment to European values, EU member states changed course and responded positively to Ukraine's application by granting it a candidate country status in June 2022.[26] While one can expect a long and winding road to full accession, the shift of policy is consequential and profoundly changes the narrative on which the EU has built its relations with the countries on its eastern periphery in the last two decades. In short, Russia's war in Ukraine brought about a substantial change in the EU member states' conception of the European political order and Ukraine's place in it.

Andreas Umland, "In Defense of Conspirology: A Rejoinder to Serhiy Kudelia's Anti-Political Analysis of the Hybrid War in Eastern Ukraine", in *PONARS Eurasia Commentaries*, 30 September 2014, https://www.ponarseurasia.org/in-defense-of-conspirology-a-rejoinder-to-serhiy-kudelia-s-anti-political-analysis-of-the-hybrid-war-in-eastern-ukraine.

24 Kataryna Wolczuk, "Ukraine and Europe: Reshuffling the Boundaries of Order", in *Thesis Eleven*, Vol. 136, No. 1 (October 2016), p. 54-73, https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513616667666.

25 European Commission, *European Energy Security Strategy* (COM/2014/330), 28 May 2014, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52014DC0330.

26 European Council, *Conclusions*, 23-24 June 2022, https://europa.eu/!TCKrrj.

The unprovoked war of aggression also led to a profound revision of EU foreign policy towards Russia. For three decades, fostering economic and energy interdependence had been a cornerstone of those relations.[27] Now Russia became the biggest threat to peace and stability in Europe, and hence all areas of relations became securitised.[28] Through ten comprehensive sanctions packages adopted by the EU during the first year of the war alone, all member states have drastically cut their economic ties to Russia, above all energy dependency. This has helped to reduce the resources of Russia's war machinery and make the EU less vulnerable to Russian malign influence.

To sum up, since 2004 the EU has been gradually increasing its support to political and economic reforms in Ukraine. The transformational agenda remains a key element of EU Ukraine policy. Until 2022, it was a major limitation of the EU's influence that its response to Ukraine's European aspirations was limited to an offer of "political association and economic integration".[29] This changed as Ukraine was granted candidate country status in 2022. Another major limitation until 2022 was that security was a marginal issue in the relationship and the EU did not seem to have political will or tools to address the growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia. From 2014, the EU paid increased attention to security issues, but still sought to stay out of geopolitical competition. 24 February 2022 was a historical turning point that forced the EU to become a security actor in the biggest geopolitical conflict in Europe since World War II (WWII).

3. The constraints on EU Ukraine policy

3.1 Tightening multipolar competition

Ever since the 1990s, Russia has been finding it hard to come to terms with Ukraine's independence and has been trying to keep the second-largest Slavic nation in

27 Kristi Raik and András Rácz (eds), *Post-Crimea Shift in EU-Russia Relations: From Fostering Interdependence to Managing Vulnerabilities*, Tallinn, International Centre for Defence and Security, 2019, https://icds.ee/en/?p=45116.

28 Stefan Meister, "A Paradigm Shift: EU-Russia Relations After the War in Ukraine", in *Carnegie Articles*, 29 November 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/88476.

29 Austria et al., *Association Agreement*..., cit., preamble.

its sphere of influence. Viewing the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, Russia's political elites have regarded all the post-Soviet space as a sphere of Russia's strategic interests.[30] From 2004, multipolar competition between Russia on the one side and Western powers, above all the EU and US, on the other, started to grow, with Ukraine as the focal point of disagreements over the European security order. The competition, which slowly but steadily morphed into a sort of bipolar (rather than multipolar) confrontation, had three major dimensions: security arrangements, political system and projects of economic integration.[31] Hence, the three-dimensional EU–Russia competition tightened as part of the broader Western-Russian competition, whereas the role of other actors was far less significant, as described in more detail below.

As the EU became more engaged in Ukraine through the European Neighbourhood Policy launched in 2004, and particularly its Eastern Partnership component added in 2009, the new "common neighbourhood" became a "contested" one.[32] At the same time, the Orange Revolution of 2004 marked a clear Western turn in Ukraine's orientation, which provoked a strong negative response by Russia.[33] From the Kremlin's perspective, Ukraine was a territory that should have naturally and historically belonged to Russia's sphere of influence but had become an object of Western hegemonic aspirations and hence terrain of geopolitical competition. Meeting with then US President George W. Bush (2001–2009) ahead of the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Putin reportedly stated that "Ukraine is not even a state"[34] – a view that he later frequently repeated, most notably in a televised address to the nation on 21 February 2022, three days prior to the full-scale invasion,

30 Andrej Krickovic, "Imperial Nostalgia or Prudent Geopolitics? Russia's Efforts to Reintegrate the Post-Soviet Space in Geopolitical Perspective", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 6 (2014), p. 503-528, DOI 10.1080/1060586X.2014.900975; Babak Rezvani, "Russian Foreign Policy and Geopolitics in the Post-Soviet Space and the Middle East: Tajikistan, Georgia, Ukraine and Syria", in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 56, No. 6 (2020), p. 878-899, https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2020.1775590.

31 Kristi Raik, "The Ukraine Crisis as a Conflict over Europe's Political, Economic and Security Order", in *Geopolitics*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (2019), p. 51-70, DOI 10.1080/14650045.2017.1414046.

32 Esther Ademmer, Laure Delcour and Kataryna Wolczuk, "Beyond Geopolitics: Exploring the Impact of the EU and Russia in the 'Contested Neighborhood'", in *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (2016), p. 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1183221.

33 Vladimir Pastukhov, "The Ukrainian Revolution and the Russian Counterrevolution", in *Russian Politics & Law*, Vol. 49, No. 5 (2011), p. 68-80, DOI 10.2753/RUP1061-1940490505.

34 Olga Allyonova, Yelena Geda and Vladimir Novikov, "Блок НАТО разошелся на блокпакеты" [NATO went for bloc package], in *Kommersant*, 7 April 2008, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/877224.

in which he explicitly withdrew Russia's recognition of Ukraine as an independent nation.[35]

The economic dimension of the geopolitical competition escalated in 2013, when the EU and Ukraine were preparing to sign the AA/DCFTA. Russia used sticks and carrots to push Ukraine to abandon the EU agreement and draw it into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) instead. While the DCFTA was a free trade agreement and thus compatible with free trade agreements of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the loose political organisation that had succeeded the Soviet Union, the EEU was a Customs Union and therefore incompatible with the DCFTA.[36] After then President Yanukovich reneged on the AA/DCFTA, it took the massive Euromaidan protests and change of power in Kyiv in February 2014 to reassert Ukraine's choice for economic integration with the EU.

Competition over visions of domestic political governance intensified too, with Ukraine making bigger steps in aligning with the EU-inspired democratic model and Russia becoming increasingly authoritarian under Putin's rule. Although Russia has not intentionally aspired to project a political model of its own, it has consciously promoted conservative ideas and non-democratic practices throughout the eastern neighbourhood, including Ukraine.[37] In the context of the Ukrainian popular protests in both 2004 and 2014, it was important for the Russian leadership to portray these in negative terms as unconstitutional and instigated by Western-backed violent extremists, inter alia criticising the West for its illegitimate interference in Ukraine's domestic politics.[38] The bottom-up nature of Ukrainian protests and demands – indeed, Ukrainian agency as well as popular will – was consistently denied by Russia.

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35 Russian Presidency, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, 21 February 2022, http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828.

36 Kristi Raik, "The Ukraine Crisis as a Conflict over Europe's Political, Economic and Security Order", cit.

37 Tom Casier, "Russia and the Diffusion of Political Norms: The Perfect Rival?", in *Democratization*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (2022), p. 433-450, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.1928078.

38 Gergana Noutcheva, "Whose Legitimacy? The EU and Russia in Contest for the Eastern Neighbourhood", in *Democratization*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2018), p. 312-330, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1363186.

The full-scale invasion changed the balance in the Russian-Western competition due to the strong and united response that it provoked from the EU, US and other Western actors. Radical change happened also at the level of Ukrainian attitudes, with public opinion polls suggesting that Russia's approach to Ukraine in 2014–2022 was deeply counterproductive.[39] Although the active part of Ukrainian society expressed strong support to the European orientation at Maidan in 2004 and again in 2014, most Ukrainians at the time did not see their European choice as anti-Russian. In February 2014, 78 per cent of Ukrainians had a positive attitude towards Russia and 68 per cent shared the idea that Ukraine and Russia should be independent, but friendly states with open borders, without visas and customs.[40] The EU orientation was supported by 45 per cent of the population and the Russia-initiated Customs Union by 36 per cent.[41] By December 2021, following more than seven years of Russia's hybrid war and at the same time continued EU efforts to promote reforms in Ukraine, support for EU membership had increased to 67 per cent.[42]

The Russian full-scale invasion drastically increased the level of negative attitude towards Russia, which reached 92 per cent in May 2022,[43] and further increased support for EU membership to 87 per cent by the beginning of 2023.[44] According to the Kremlin, one of the main reasons for the invasion was the approach of NATO

39 For an overview of Ukrainian public opinion on the EU and NATO over the years, see Olexiy Haran and Petro Burkovskyi, "The EU and Ukraine's Public Opinion: Changing Dynamic", in *JOINT Briefs*, No. 25 (December 2022), https://www.jointproject.eu/?p=1450.

40 Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), "How Relations between Ukraine and Russia Should Look Like? Public Opinion Polls' Results", in *KIIS Press Releases and Reports*, 4 March 2014, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=236&lang=eng.

41 KIIS, "Intentions of Ukraine - Results of Conjoint Nationwide Sociological Survey KIIS and SOCIS", in *KIIS Press Releases and Reports*, 7 February 2014, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=227&lang=eng.

42 KIIS, "Attitudes towards Ukraine's Accession to the EU and NATO, Attitudes towards Direct Talks with Vladimir Putin and the Perception of the Military Threat from Russia: The Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on December 13-16, 2021", in *KIIS Press Releases and Reports*, 24 December 2021, https://kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1083&lang=eng.

43 KIIS, "Dynamics of the Population's Attitude to Russia and the Emotional Background Due to the War: The Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted on May 13-18, 2022", in *KIIS Press Releases and Reports*, 26 May 2022, https://www.kiis.com.ua/?cat=reports&id=1112&lang=eng.

44 Rating Group, *Twentieth National Poll. Foreign Policy Moods (January 14-16, 2023)*, 23 January 2023, https://ratinggroup.ua/research/ukraine/dvadcyate_zagalnonac_onalne_opituvannya_zovn_shnopol_tichn_nastro_naselennya_14-16_s_chnya_2023.html.

to the Russian borders.[45] The full-scale invasion was preceded by proposals from the Russian ministry of foreign affairs regarding changes to the European security order, presented in December 2021. In two documents, Russia laid out more clearly than ever before its revisionist demands aimed at restoring its sphere of influence and driving NATO's presence in Europe back to pre-1997 levels.[46] The new order was to be agreed on among the major powers (by way of two separate treaties between NATO and Russia and the US and Russia) over the heads of smaller ones.[47] The proposals came twelve years after then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev presented his solutions for a new European security architecture,[48] which were rather ambiguous but could be read as an expression of Russia's desire for fundamental amendments, in particular veto power on NATO decisions.[49] While the Western response to the 2009 proposals was also ambiguous, in January 2022 the US and NATO made clear that it was inconceivable to even enter negotiations on the basis of Russia's core demands, although the US was open to talks on such issues as arms control, nuclear treaties and transparency measures.[50]

Although Russia has actively worked against Ukraine's European orientation, according to the Russian rhetoric its main adversary in Ukraine has been the US, as Russia does not see the EU as an independent (security) actor. Putin's bitterness over what he saw as expanding US hegemony, for the first time clearly on display in his speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007,[51] increased over the years. In his February 2022 speech introducing the "special military operation on Ukraine", Putin mentioned the US twelve times.[52] During the UN General Assembly

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45 Russian Presidency, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, cit.

46 Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Agreement on Measures to Ensure the Security of the Russian Federation and Member States of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, 17 December 2021, https://mid.ru/1790803/?lang=en.

47 Ibid.

48 Russian Presidency, *The Draft of the European Security Treaty*, 29 November 2009, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/6152.

49 Roy Allison, "Security Policy, Geopolitics and International Order in EU-Russia Relations during the Ukraine Crisis", in Cristian Nitoiu (ed.), "Avoiding a New 'Cold War'. The Future of EU-Russia Relations in the Context of the Ukraine Crisis", in *LSE Ideas Special Reports*, March 2016, p. 26-32, https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/publications/reports/new-cold-war.

50 David M. Herszenhorn, "US, NATO Deliver Written Replies to Russia on Security Demands", in *Politico*, 26 January 2022, https://www.politico.eu/?p=1965901.

51 Russian Presidency, *Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy*, 10 February 2007, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034.

52 Russian Presidency, *Address by the President of the Russian Federation*, cit.

session in September 2022, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that Washington was trying to turn the entire globe into its "backyard".[53] Yet the role of the US in Ukraine was rather cautious and limited until 2022. During the presidency of Barack Obama (2009–2017), the US pushed the Europeans to take the lead, and during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021), there was much controversy around his sympathies towards Russia. The US was compelled to take the leading role in military support to Ukraine only after Russia started mobilising its troops along Ukraine's borders in April 2021. The decisive role of the US was highlighted by the Ukrainian experts interviewed for this paper. Up until mid-January 2023, the US was by far the largest donor to Ukraine with 25,11 billion euro as financial aid, 3,72 billion euro in humanitarian aid and 44,34 billion euro in military aid.[54]

The US has also established the international Ramstein platform to mobilise and coordinate military aid from different countries. Additionally, Washington supports Ukraine not only through direct channels but also by initiating respective programmes within NATO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Almost all the interviewed Ukrainian experts agreed that the US influence on the EU policy, namely pushing the EU to play a more active role regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war, had been significant. It was also stressed that the US and the EU have coordinated their aid (sanctions, military and/or financial aid) efficiently.

The Russian leadership framed the invasion as part of the creation of a "multipolar world", while claiming that Western "attempts to create a unipolar world have acquired in recent times an absolutely ugly configuration".[55] However, the role of other actors apart from Russia, the EU, US and UK in the Ukraine conflict was limited. China's economic relationship with Ukraine grew during the 2010s,[56] while the Sino-Russian partnership deepened. Even after 24 February 2022, China tried

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53 UN News, *Russia Had 'No Choice' but to Launch 'Special Military Operation' in Ukraine, Lavrov Tells UN*, 24 September 2022, https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1127881.

54 Statista: *Total Bilateral Aid Commitments to Ukraine between January 24, 2022 and January 15, 2023, by Type and Country or Organization*, last update on February 2023, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1303432.

55 Russian Presidency, *Meeting with Heads of CIS Security and Intelligence Agencies*, 26 October 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69681; Russian Presidency, *Meeting with PRC President Xi Jinping*, 15 September 2022, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69356.

56 Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "What's at Stake for China's Economic Relationship with Ukraine?" in *CFR In Briefs*, 2 March 2022, https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whats-stake-chinas-economic-relationship-ukraine.

to portray a neutral position regarding the Russia-Ukraine war. Many of China's positions were, however, supportive of its strategic partner Russia, which was reflected in its rather unsubstantial proposal for a settlement put forward on 24 February 2023: China did not condemn the invasion, spoke about the importance of territorial integrity but did not demand Russia to actually respect it in Ukraine, and expressed criticism of Western hegemony and "unilateral sanctions".[57] In addition to rhetorical and political support, China has been helpful to Russia by way of increased trade relations that have a negative impact on the effectiveness of the Western sanctions on Russia.[58] Furthermore, there has been concern in the West about China providing non-lethal support and high-tech products that can be used for military purposes, and the possibility that China might also provide lethal support.[59]

Another significant actor in the Black Sea region is Turkey, which tried to take the role of a mediator during the full-scale invasion. Since the start of the war, Turkey "has opted for a delicate balancing act, which has appeared to be a risky but overall successful strategy. With interests that lie [on] both sides, Ankara has consistently supported Ukraine politically and militarily without alienating Russia economically".[60] Turkey is still a safe haven for Russian companies, with many Russian investors having flooded Turkey, buying property and opening businesses in 2022.[61] This has given a breath to the weakened Russian economy and prolonged its ability to sustain the war effort and circumvent EU sanctions, at least until early March 2023.[62]

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57 Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *China's Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine Crisis*, 24 February 2023, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/202302/t20230224_11030713.html.

58 Laura He, "How China Is Helping to Prop Up the Russian Economy through the War in Ukraine", in *CNN News*, 26 February 2023, https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/22/economy/china-russia-economic-ties-ukraine-intl-hnk; see also Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "The Putin-Xi Summit – Their Joint Statement and Analysis", in *China Briefing*, 22 March 2023, https://wp.me/p1n7HB-ir3.

59 Doina Chiacu and Sarah N. Lynch, "China Lethal Aid to Russia Would Come at Real Cost, U.S. Says", in *Reuters*, 26 February 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/any-china-lethal-aid-russia-would-come-real-costs-us-says-2023-02-26.

60 Yevgeniya Gaber, "One Year into the War, It's Time for Turkey to Reconsider Its Ukraine-Russia Balancing Act", in *TurkeySource*, 1 March 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=618257.

61 Stefanie Glinski, "Turkey's Balancing Act Between Putin and the West", in *Foreign Policy*, 6 March 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/?p=1105985.

62 Ceyda Cagalayan and Jonathan Spicer, "Turkey Halts Transit of Sanctioned Goods to Russia -Exporter, Diplomat", in *Reuters*, 20 March 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/

To conclude, neither China nor Turkey can be seen as separate poles in the multipolar competition that plays out in the Ukraine conflict. Rather, China has been cautiously backing Russia in the struggle against US hegemony, while Turkey as a NATO member was unavoidably part of the Western "pole" although also seeking an independent agency as a regional power and using the war to its benefit. However, there is a dangerous potential for China taking a stronger role in support of Russia, which would elevate the global significance of the war in Ukraine as part of tightening great power competition between the US and China.

3.2 Regional fragmentation

Regional fragmentation at different levels has made the Ukraine conflict more difficult to manage. Historically the regional fragmentation was largely frozen in the Cold War era bipolar confrontation and came to the fore during the post-Soviet transformation. Arguably since 2014, the increasingly dominant dynamic of geopolitical competition has overshadowed regional fragmentation.

One can identify three levels of regional fragmentation that have affected the Ukraine conflict: post-Soviet, pan-European and the national level within Ukraine. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the regional structures that had been created by the Kremlin and imposed on a large part of Central and Eastern Europe for half-century or, in the case of Ukraine, for seventy years, vanished in a moment. The region fragmented, with the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) undertaking a rapid "triple transition" and a clear course towards joining the Euro-Atlantic structures.[63]

The former Soviet republics, excluding the Baltic states, formed a new organisation for regional cooperation, the aforementioned Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Ukraine never became a full member of CIS, but was selectively participating in its initiatives prior to 2014. Georgia withdrew from the CIS in 2008 following the Russo-Georgian war, and Ukraine made a decisive turn away from any Russian-led integration projects in 2014 following the annexation of Crimea and instigation of war in Donbas by Russia.

turkey-halts-transit-sanctioned-goods-russia-exporter-diplomat-2023-03-20.

63 Attila Ágh, *The Politics of Central Europe*, London, Sage, 1998.

The end of the Cold War also encouraged ideas of pan-European integration. For a while in the 1990s there were hopes that Russia might have joined the liberal rules-based order in Europe. However, Russia failed to establish democracy at home and to develop rules-based cooperation with its neighbours abroad. The main pan-European organisations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, where Russia is/was a member, could not prevent the gradual increase of tensions between Russia and several of its neighbours or strengthening authoritarianism in Russia since 2000.[64]

A further factor exacerbating regional fragmentation was state weakness and lack of good governance in many of the post-Soviet republics, including Ukraine. The Orange Revolution of 2004 and Maidan of late 2013-early 2014 were bottom-up protests against autocratic tendencies of corrupt leadership and slow or failed reforms, which were intertwined with the wish of a large part of the population to anchor the country's development to a clear European orientation. At the same time these revolutionary events led to Russia exploiting existing regional divisions between the European-oriented capital and western parts of the country on the one hand and more Russian-oriented eastern and southern parts of Ukraine on the other by magnifying their scale in its rhetoric and politics. These divisions lessened after 2014 and largely disappeared after 24 February 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion united the country behind a Euro-Atlantic orientation.[65]

3.3 Intra-EU contestation

The enlargement of 2004 resulted not only in the deepening of EU–Ukraine relations, but also the emergence of strong internal divisions among EU member states regarding relations with Russia and the "new Eastern neighbours". The new Central and Eastern European (CEE) member states, in particular Poland and the Baltic states, saw Russia as a country that had not given up its imperialist attitude towards neighbouring countries and therefore as a latent threat to their security,

64 Mike Smeltzer and Noah Buyon, *Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression*, Freedom House, January 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/node/4974.

65 Maria Zolkina and Olexiy Haran, "Changes in the Foreign Policy Orientations of Ukrainians after the Euromaidan. National and Regional Levels", in Olexiy Haran and Maksym Yakovlyev (eds), *Constructing a Political Nation: Changes in the Attitudes of Ukrainians during the War in the Donbas*, Kyiv, Stylos Publishing, 2017, p. 111-131, https://spa.ukma.edu.ua/en/?p=5857.

but their views were marginal in the EU and regarded as paranoid by many in Western Europe.

Contrary to the so-called "cold warriors", notably Lithuania and Poland, many of the old member states took a more "pragmatic" stance or, in the case of Germany, France, Italy and Spain, even prioritised a "strategic partnership" with Russia.[66] There was a similar divide regarding relations with Ukraine: most of the new Eastern member states were strong advocates of Ukraine's EU membership perspective, while many old member states were opposed. Furthermore, Greece and Cyprus acted as "trojan horses", allowing Moscow to influence EU policies through their close bilateral relationship with Russia.[67]

These divisions were to some extent reduced from 2014 onwards, when the EU adopted a harder and more critical approach to Russia, condemning the annexation of Crimea and "destabilisation" of Donbas. Poland and the Baltic states were the most vocal voices in the EU advocating for sanctions against Russia and strong support to Ukraine. In 2014 and even more strongly in 2022, these countries experienced a moment of "we told you so", with many Western leaders acknowledging that "they should have listened to countries with a far deeper knowledge of the Kremlin and a bitter historical memory of the violence that Moscow is willing to unleash to pursue its goals".[68] During 2014–2022, the "doves" continued to pursue selective engagement of Russia in parallel with sanctions. From February 2022, the earlier intra-EU divisions became almost irrelevant in terms of their impact on EU policies. Only Hungary remained an outlier of the new consensus, trying to stay neutral regarding the war and putting brakes on the adoption of sanctions.[69] Also at the level of public opinion, support for Ukraine has been strong and even increased during the first year of the war.[70] Beneath the consensus, however, political disagreements and criticism of the adopted policies

66 Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, "A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations", in *ECFR Policy Papers*, November 2007, https://ecfr.eu/?p=3148.

67 Ibid.

68 Stuart Lau, "'We Told You So!' How the West Didn't Listen to the Countries that Know Russia Best", in Politico, 9 March 2022, https://www.politico.eu/?p=2014478.

69 Kadri Liik, "The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born: A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, December 2022, https://ecfr.eu/?p=99611.

70 Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Fragile Unity: Why Europeans Are Coming Together on Ukraine (And What Might Drive Them Apart)", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, March 2023, https://ecfr.eu/?p=103093.

remained significant in some member states. A recent study singles out Italy and Romania where support for a compromise settlement as soon as possible, whereby Ukraine would give up some of its territories to Russia, was relatively high (preferred by 41 and 37 per cent of the respondents respectively).[71]

Table 1 | Constraining factors on EUFSP towards Ukraine

EUFSP constraint	Operationalisation	Explanation
Multipolar competition	*Scope and nature of competition*: zero-sum competition along three dimensions: security, political and economic	· Geopolitical competition with Russia on the one side and Ukraine, EU, US and NATO on the other side; zero-sum nature visible since 2014 · Competition (1) over European security order, (2) between democracy and autocracy, (3) between projects of economic integration
Regional fragmentation	*Three levels of fragmentation*: Regional pan-European, regional post-Soviet, and national	· Failure of pan-European organisations (OSCE, CoE) to prevent/manage the escalation of tensions · Failure of post-Soviet integration projects led by Moscow · State weakness and Russia-amplified regional tensions within Ukraine
Intra-EU contestation	*Contesting actors*: governments and domestic actors	· Cold warriors (Lithuania, Poland) · Strategic partners (France, Germany, Italy, Spain) · Trojan horses (Cyprus, Greece, Hungary)
	Object of contestation: overall relationship with Russia	· Opposition to (neo-)imperialism vs · Selective engagement

4. The EU's responses to constraints: From mitigation tactics to geopolitical actorness

Since 2004, EU policy towards Ukraine has been under constant pressure to adapt to the changing developments in Ukraine and the external environment, find ways to mitigate the effects of the above-described constraints on EU policy or to tackle and reshape the constraints. This section analyses four main elements of the EU approach to the Ukraine conflict and their evolution over time.

[71] Ibid.

4.1 Denial of multipolar competition

As competition between the EU and Russia over their "shared neighbourhood" started to grow from 2004 onwards, the EU was for a long time in denial about it. The launch of the Eastern Partnership and negotiation of AA/DCFTAs with four Eastern neighbours reflected a recognition that the EU needed to step up its engagement in the region. For sure, the EU did not wish to do this in terms of a zero-sum competition with Russia; it constantly underlined that its policies were not directed against anyone and did not aim to create new dividing lines in Europe. At the same time, it stressed that Ukraine (and other neighbouring countries) should be sovereign in making choices about the direction of their foreign policy. Denial of geopolitical competition was endorsed by the "cold warriors" (especially the Baltics and Poland) because they saw it as necessary for achieving EU consensus to increase its engagement in the region, fearing that insisting on a confrontational approach would have pushed the EU to disengage to avoid frictions with Moscow.

As described above, Putin's imperialist vision led to Russia trying to (re-)impose its exclusive sphere of influence on Ukraine, from 2014 by use of force, while denying Ukraine's sovereignty. The EU did not and does not do geopolitical competition on the same terms as Russia does. The EU did not impose its version of European order, let alone by force – but it was committed to defend the rules-based order that respects countries' sovereignty and right to choose their orientation. The incompatibility of these two visions led to a fierce EU–Russia, and more broadly West-Russia, competition over European order.

The geopolitical consequences of the EU's economic policies became visible already when Armenia stepped back from the AA/DCFTA due to Russian pressure in 2013 and took a "surprise decision" to join the Eurasian Economic Union instead.[72] The EU made efforts to develop complementarity between the EU-led and Russian-led integration projects and address the concerns expressed by Moscow at trilateral talks conducted between the EU, Russia and Ukraine during July 2014–December 2015.[73] However, the Russian side did not seem to be sincerely

[72] Hrant Kostanyan and Richard Giragosian, "EU-Armenian Relations: Seizing the Second Chance", in *CEPS Commentaries*, 31 October 2016, https://www.ceps.eu/?p=9659.

[73] European Commission, *No Outcome Reached at the Final Trilateral Ministerial Meeting on the*

interested in complementarity; its goal was to achieve an exclusive role in Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries.

The EU's wish to deny the existence of or at least stay away from multipolar competition up to 2022 partly explains its inability to put limits to Russia's increasingly aggressive behaviour. Both Ukrainian government officials and civil society representatives interviewed for this paper shared the view that the full-scale invasion could have been prevented by a more decisive reaction of the EU in 2014, though they also admitted that the EU and Ukraine of 2014 differed from the EU and Ukraine of 2022, which defined the character of the EU response in 2014.[74] The interviewed EU officials noted that the EU's approach was helpful in buying time for Ukraine to strengthen its resilience.[75] Eventually the tactics of denial proved ineffective and were abandoned on 24 February 2022. Russia's ability to shape EU foreign policy in its favour suffered a severe blow – as noted by a Ukrainian interviewee, "by implementing war as an instrument of hard power, Moscow has almost lost the toolkit of soft power which it successfully used in the EU for years".[76]

For the first time, the EU clearly chose the side of Ukraine in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and mobilised strong support to push back Russia's unjustified aggression. This was a significant shift towards becoming a geopolitical actor, standing in contrast to the EU's usual role of a mediator and facilitator in external conflicts.

4.2 Multilateralisation and minilateralisation

One can distinguish between three levels of EU diplomacy towards Russia regarding the Ukraine conflict: bilateral EU–Russia dialogue, multilateral engagement through the OSCE and other organisations, and the "minilateral" Normandy format consisting of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine that emerged in 2014.

EU-Ukraine Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, 21 December 2015, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_15_6389.

74 Interviews, Kyiv.

75 Interviews, Brussels.

76 Interview, Kyiv, Gov3.

The 2004–2014 EU–Russia active diplomacy did not prevent increased tensions on several issues, including Ukraine. From 2014, the intensity of diplomatic dialogue was greatly reduced, but "selective engagement" continued to be stressed as one of the guiding principles of the EU's Russia policy. Belief in the possibility to improve relations by way of EU–Russia diplomacy was severely hit by HRVP Josep Borrell's infamous visit to Moscow in February 2021 where he was publicly humiliated by the Russian counterpart.[77]

As a way of multilateralising conflict management in the post-Soviet space, the EU has always supported the OSCE as the main pan-European security structure and worked with the OSCE to advance diplomatic settlement of conflicts. The EU was also supportive of the Normandy format that was active from June 2014 to February 2022.[78] At the same time both the EU and US excluded themselves from multilateral diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict and delegated this task to Germany and France, which were most actively engaged in diplomatic relations with Russia.

The Normandy Four created the Trilateral Contact Group including Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE that concluded a peace plan for eastern Ukraine ("Minsk I") in September 2014, followed by a package of measures for the implementation of the agreement ("Minsk II") in February 2015.[79] Although the EU actively backed the Normandy format, this was not an EU diplomatic initiative and France and Germany were not acting in this framework as formal representatives of the EU. Both France and Germany were also pursuing active bilateral diplomatic contacts with Moscow prior to the full-scale invasion, which were viewed with suspicion in CEE and in Kyiv.[80]

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77 David M. Herszenhorn and Jacopo Barigazzi, "Bested by Lavrov, Borrell Faces Fury in Brussels", in *Politico*, 10 February 2021, https://www.politico.eu/?p=1605452.

78 Andrew Lohsen and Pierre Morcos, "Understanding the Normandy Format and Its Relation to the Current Standoff with Russia", in *CSIS Critical Questions*, 9 February 2022, https://www.csis.org/node/63952.

79 Naja Bentzen, "Ukraine: The Minsk Agreements Five Years On", in *EPRS At a Glance*, March 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2020)646203; Clingendael, "Mulling over Minsk: What Do the Agreements (Not) Say?", in *Clingendael Op-eds*, 21 February 2022, https://www.clingendael.org/node/13747.

80 Kristi Raik and Merili Arjakas, "What Went Wrong with Macron's Diplomacy vis à vis Russia?", in *ICDS Commentaries*, 14 February 2022, https://icds.ee/en/?p=47063683.

The Minsk agreements could be interpreted in contradictory ways and lacked a mechanism of enforcement. They foresaw a ceasefire and establishment of OSCE-monitored security zones, to be followed by local elections and the adoption of a "special status law" regarding the conflict areas. Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity were to be respected. Yet Russia tried to turn the agreements into an instrument to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty, as it continued to establish new realities on the ground by force and envisioned the broadening of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions' self-governance. At the same time, Ukraine came under pressure from its European partners to adapt and make concessions.[81] As one interviewed Ukrainian government official said, "most EU member states turned a blind eye to the issue of Crimea and hid behind Germany and France" and accepted the position "let the Germans and the French decide about Donbas first, then we will think about what to do with Crimea, and in the meantime, we will keep trading with Russia".[82] The US stood back and pushed Europeans to take more responsibility for their own security and lead the management of the conflict. It was noted later by then presidential aid Vladislav Surkov that the Russian side did not intend to implement the agreements,[83] while former German Chancellor Angela Merkel has recognised that the Minsk agreements foremost were meant to give time to Ukraine.[84] Thus, although the agreements decreased the conflict intensity significantly, they were never implemented and became a Pyrrhic victory for all parties, freezing the situation for a few years – until 2022.

One of the benefits of multilateralisation was that anchoring sanctions to the violations of OSCE and UN principles helped create consensus among member states. The EU tied its sanctions also to the implementation of the Minsk agreements, which turned out making the sanctions enduring.

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81 Duncan Allan, "The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine", in *Chatham House Research Papers*, May 2020, https://www.chathamhouse.org/node/23605.

82 Interview, Kyiv, Gov 3.

83 "Diplomat Reiterates Russia's Planned Implementation of Minsk Agreements", in *Tass*, 17 February 2023, https://tass.com/politics/1577681.

84 Tina Hildebrandt and Giovanni Di Lorenzo, "Angela Merkel: Hatten Sie gedacht, ich komme mit Pferdeschwanz?" [Angela Merkel: Did you think I'd come with a ponytail?], in *Zeit Online*, 7 December 2022, https://www.zeit.de/2022/51/angela-merkel-russland-fluechtlingskrise-bundeskanzler.

4.3 Supporting Ukraine's reforms and resilience

Despite different views of member states on the evolving geopolitical competition, there has been a strong consensus on the need to support Ukraine's political and economic reforms ever since 2004. In 2014–2022, while the EU stood aside from the war, it strengthened its support to Ukraine's reform efforts.

From 2014, security and resilience became more prominent topics in the EU's Ukraine policy and the ENP more broadly.[85] This was seen by some commentators to undermine the focus on democratic reforms, but one can also argue that in the case of Ukraine these priorities were mutually supportive. The EU mobilised Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) tools in 2014 by establishing the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM). This civilian mission was headquartered in Kyiv, with regional offices in Lviv, Kharkiv and Odesa. The main objective of EUAM Ukraine was to provide advice and assistance to the Ukrainian authorities in the reform of the country's security sector, including the police, the judiciary and the border guard service. The mission worked closely with a range of Ukrainian institutions and partners, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the State Border Guard Service and the General Prosecutor's Office.

The EUAM mandate was implemented according to three pillars:

> strategic advice on civilian security sector reform, in particular, the need to develop civilian security strategies; support for the implementation of reforms through the delivery of practical advice, training and other projects; and cooperation and coordination [to] ensure that reform efforts are coordinated with Ukrainian and international actors.[86]

In addition to its core mandate, EUAM Ukraine provided support to Ukraine in the areas of rule of law, human rights and anti-corruption and aimed to promote democratic values and practices. Several other EU–Ukraine cooperation initiatives

[85] Ana E. Juncos, "Resilience as the New EU Foreign Policy Paradigm: A Pragmatist Turn?", in *European Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2017), p. 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2016.1247809.

[86] EU Advisory Mission Ukraine (EUAM Ukraine) website: *About Us*, https://www.euam-ukraine.eu/?p=156.

were aimed at supporting reforms in local self-governance, public administration, anti-corruption and justice. In 2014–2021, the EU also provided significant support for mitigation of the damage done by the ongoing war in Donbas, including support to reconstruction and internally displaced persons.[87]

4.4 Stretching the limits of EU toolbox

Nowhere is the EU's entrepreneurship more visible than in crafting a united response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The EU and its member states responded to the war in Ukraine by making use of the entire foreign and security policy toolbox in a creative manner and taking unprecedented decisions that had hitherto been considered inconceivable. The European response involved multilateral diplomatic efforts, economic sanctions on Russia and providing humanitarian, military and emergency financial assistance to Ukraine. In all these domains, the EU has shown resolve and unity in countering Russian aggression.

Sanctions. Unprecedented sanctions have been a core element of the EU's response to the aggression. The EU imposed a range of economic sanctions on Russia already in response to its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine. These sanctions included both sectoral and individual measures. The sanctions were massively reviewed and extended in 2022 in response to Russia's decision to recognise the non-government-controlled areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as independent entities and the unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine.[88]

In sanctioning Russia in this unprecedented way, the EU has been leveraging its economic power in an effort to slow down Russia's war machine and make it costly in the long term for the Russian state to finance its military actions.[89] Above

[87] Vsevolod Samokhvalov and Alexander Strelkov, "Cross-dimensional Network of Democracy Promotion: Public Administration Reform in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine", in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 43, No. 7 (2021), p. 799-814, DOI 10.1080/07036337.2020.1807537; Marta Králiková, "Importing EU Norms: The Case of Anti-Corruption Reform in Ukraine", in *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (2022), p. 245-260, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2021.1872559.

[88] Council of the European Union, *EU Restrictive Measures against Russia over Ukraine (since 2014)*, last reviewed on 15 March 2023, http://europa.eu/!cB99XU.

[89] Maria Demertzis et al., "How Have Sanctions Impacted Russia?", in *Bruegel Policy Contributions*, No. 18/22 (October 2022), https://www.bruegel.org/node/8407.

all, by upping their sanctions game, the EU member states have been sending a consistent message of unity and determination in support of Ukraine, defying the Kremlin's expectations of internal discord and sanctions fatigue.[90] The restrictive measures have no doubt been costly to the EU population as well, especially in the area of energy that saw an exponential rise of energy prices in 2022 driving inflation up across the European continent and beyond. The EU member states have nevertheless shown unparalleled resolve in reducing their gas dependence on Russia, cutting imports of Russian gas to the EU by two-thirds from 40 per cent in 2021 to a historical low of 9 per cent at the end of 2022.[91] Not only has "Russia's energy blackmail" failed but it has also catalysed the European green transition away from fossil fuels and towards renewable energy resources, even though in the short term fossil fuels have proven to be hard to replace.[92]

Security instruments. EUAM was affected by the full-scale invasion and could not continue to fulfil all its tasks. In March–April 2022 the mission's mandate was expanded to include new tasks such as supporting "law enforcement agencies to facilitate the flow of refugees from Ukraine to the neighbouring member states and the entry of humanitarian aid into Ukraine".[93] EUAM also engaged in supporting the Ukrainian rule of law institutions to facilitate the investigation and prosecution of war crimes.

With the continuation of war in 2022 and the increase in provision of Western military equipment to Ukraine, the EU member states decided to launch a military CSDP mission to train 15,000 Ukrainian armed forces personnel in several member states. The EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) was established in November 2022 with the aim of providing training on EU soil. Hungary was the only member state to constructively abstain from the Council decision, citing fears of escalation and risks of being drawn into the

90 Agathe Demarais, "Sanctions on Russia are Working. Here's Why", in *Foreign Policy*, 1 December 2022, https://bit.ly/3EThjMD.

91 European Commission, *Keynote Speech EVP Timmermans at EU Hydrogen Week 2022*, 25 October 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_22_6396.

92 European Commission, *Statement by President von der Leyen on 'REPowerEU: Outlook on EU Gas Supply in 2023'*, 12 December 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_22_7669.

93 European External Action Service (EEAS), *Missions and Operations*, 23 January 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/410425.

war.[94] Twenty-four member states offered to contribute to the mission. Two member states – Poland and Germany – agreed to host training centres on their territories.[95] Germany provides "specialised training such as demining and tactical operations, while Poland [offers] multinational operational-level training on air defence, artillery, cyber, and medical support".[96] EUMAM is open to cooperation with third countries and on 6 December 2022, Norway signed an administrative agreement with the EU to contribute financially to EUMAM Ukraine in 2023. The Norwegian government is the first non-EU country to make financial contribution of approximately 14.5 million euro through the European Peace Facility to EUMAM Ukraine.[97] In February 2023, High Representative Borrell signalled the EU's readiness to double the number of Ukrainian troops to be trained to 30,000 in the framework of the mission.[98]

The biggest breakthrough in terms of providing military assistance to Ukraine came with the EU's decision to use the European Peace Facility (EPF) to reimburse member states' provision of lethal weapons to the armed forces of the country. During 2014–2022, the issue of military assistance to Ukraine was divisive among EU and NATO countries. While the US broadly supported the provision of defensive arms to Ukraine since 2014,[99] German and French leaders strongly rejected this idea as a potential cause for the escalation of the conflict.[100] Before February 2022, Ukraine received defensive weaponry from a small number of countries, including the US, the UK, Poland and the Baltic states.[101] After February 2022, the

94 "Hungary Did Not Vote for EU Training Mission in Ukraine", in *Hungarian Insider*, 19 October 2022, https://hungarianinsider.com/?p=11037.

95 Interview 3, Brussels, 8 December 2022.

96 Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU Strikes Political Deal on Ukraine Military Training Mission", in *Euroactiv*, 13 October 2022, https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1823686.

97 Council of the European Union, *EU and Norway Sign an Agreement in Support of EUMAM Ukraine*, 7 December 2022, https://europa.eu/!yQn7XW.

98 Alexandra Brzozowski, "EU Ramps Up Military Support, Doubles Training Mission Targets for Ukraine", in *Euractiv*, 2 February 2023, https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1873562.

99 Peter J. Marzalik and Aric Toler, "Lethal Weapons to Ukraine: A Primer", in *UkraineAlert*, 26 January 2018, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=107756.

100 Michael R. Gordon, Alison Smale and Steven Erlanger, "Western Nations Split on Arming Kiev Forces", in *The New York Times*, 7 February 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/world/europe/divisions-on-display-over-western-response-to-ukraine-at-security-conference.html.

101 Claire Mills, "Military Assistance to Ukraine 2014-2021", in *House of Commons Library Research Briefings*, No. 7135 (4 March 2022), https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07135. For un update, see: Claire Mills, "Military Assistance to Ukraine since the Russian Invasion", in

EPF, conceived as a common off-budget fund for financing the military aspect of CSDP globally, quickly became a major vehicle for financing the delivery of lethal weapons and non-lethal equipment to the Ukrainian army by member states, in addition to bilateral military aid.[102] Coordinated by the EEAS, the EPF has paid for 3.6 billion euro worth of military assistance to Ukraine during the first year of the war.[103]

While EU military assistance has been significant and unprecedented, as noted above, the leading provider of military aid has been the US. The weakness of European defence capabilities and hence dependence of European security on Washington has been once again exposed by the war, but this time many member states have finally launched the difficult and slow process of strengthening their defence capabilities, which is essential for improving Europe's ability to take care of its own security.

Humanitarian aid and technical assistance. The EU has used the full spectrum of its tools for providing humanitarian, budget and emergency assistance to Ukraine, mobilising over 37 billion euro in the aftermath of the Russian invasion.[104] It was quick to activate the Temporary Protection Directive to be able to cater for the massive number of Ukrainian refugees arriving on EU territory. It kept the Ukrainian government on life support by providing direct budget and macro-financial assistance and access to loans to be able to face the extradentary challenges of governing the country in wartime. It helped strengthen Ukraine's cyber protection, open transport corridors for Ukrainian agricultural export, document Russian war crimes on the ground and much more. So diverse was the EU's response that it required coordinated action of the whole Brussels bureaucracy.[105]

House of Commons Library Research Briefings, No. 9477 (30 March 2023), https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9477.

[102] Bruno Bilquin, "European Peace Facility: Ukraine and Beyond", in *EPRS At a Glance*, November 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_ATA(2022)738221; Council of the European Union, *Ukraine: Council Agrees on Further Support under the European Peace Facility*, 17 October 2022, https://europa.eu/!4MWYGg.

[103] Council of the European Union, *Ukraine: Council Agrees on Further Military Support under the European Peace Facility*, 2 February 2023, https://europa.eu/!JNTjgQ.

[104] European Commission, *EU Solidarity with Ukraine. #StandWithUkraine*, March 2023, https://doi.org/10.2775/15365.

[105] Interviews, Brussels, December 2022.

Table 2 | Mitigation tactics: benefits and limits

Mitigation tactics and timeframe of their implementation	Mitigation of multipolar competition	Mitigation of regional fragmentation	Mitigation of intra-EU divisions
Denial of multipolar competition – until February 2022	Limit: the EU's insufficient response to Russian aggression. Benefit: bought time for Ukraine to strengthen its defence and resilience in 2014–2022.	Limit: futile efforts to build complementarity between EU- and Russia-led integration projects.	Benefit: denial of multipolar competition helped to create EU consensus for closer relations with and support to Ukraine.
Multilateralisation and minilateralisation – most relevant in 2014–2022	Benefit: facilitated Ukraine-Russia diplomacy. Limit: the EU did not directly engage in the settlement process.	Benefit: the Normandy format calmed down fighting. Limit: OSCE failed to prevent escalation; Minsk agreements were not implementable.	Benefit: OSCE and UN principles provided legal basis for EU sanctions on Russia, thus neutering diverging views of individual EU member states.
Helping Ukraine help itself – consistent priority since 2004	Limit: Russia refused to acknowledge Ukraine's sovereign agency. Benefit: EU support indirectly helped Ukraine withstand Russian pressure.	Benefit: EU support strengthened Ukrainian statehood.	Benefit: supporting reforms in Ukraine was a common priority that strengthened EUFSP agency in the region.
Stretching the limits of EU toolbox – since February 2022	Benefit: Sanctions against Russia and assistance to Ukraine helped put limits to aggression.	Benefit: further strengthened support to Ukrainian statehood and reforms.	Benefit: get over intra-EU contestation by exercising constructive abstention.

Mitigating intra-EU contestation. It is noteworthy that the European Commission took a key role in forging unity among member states and designing strong measures of support to Ukraine after 24 February 2022. President Ursula von der Leyen has been among the most vocal and consistent European leaders in supporting Ukraine. High Representative Borrell also spearheaded the discussions in Brussels among the member states in building unity and crafting a strong narrative condemning Russia's action.

Since February 2022, the EU has been looking for creative solutions to get around the veto right of one or few countries through existing decision-making mechanisms. The decision to use the European Peace Facility to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine was taken by unanimity, with three neutral member states

(Austria, Ireland and Malta) exercising constructive abstention in accordance with Art. 31 TEU – a possibility that had previously been applied only once (regarding EULEX Kosovo).[106] Likewise, the decision on EUMAM was taken by unanimity, with Hungary using constructive abstention.

Conclusions and policy recommendations: A new, geopolitical EU taking shape after Russia's full-scale invasion

This report exposes the gradual build-up of geopolitical competition between Ukraine, the EU, the US and more broadly the West on the one side and Russia on the other side. The competition has focused on the orientation of Ukraine, but fundamentally, it is a competition between two different visions of the rules and norms that should define the European political, economic and security order. Furthermore, the increased activity of China regarding the war in Ukraine points to the significance of this conflict for the global security order and balance of power. The increasingly aggressive efforts by Russia to re-establish its dominant role in the post-Soviet space have created high tensions and led to a strong backlash from Ukraine together with the EU and other Western actors. The Kremlin was determined not to "lose" Ukraine – and yet this is exactly what its aggressive approach seems to have led to.

The following conclusions can be drawn regarding the three constraints on the EU's policy regarding Ukraine and the conflict over Ukraine, as well as interaction between the three factors.

First, tightening multipolar competition has been the dominant constraining factor in this case, the importance of which has gradually grown since 2004. The Russian aggression against Ukraine that started in 2014 and expanded to full-scale war in 2022 left no doubt that the EU was drawn into a broad zero-sum competition

106 See the formal declarations by Austria, Ireland and Malta on abstention in accordance with the second subparagraph of Article 31(1) TEU: Council of the European Union, *Summary Record. Extraordinary Meetings of the Permanent Representatives Committee 22, 24, 27, 28 February, 1, 3 and 4 March 2022* (7282/22), 16 March 2022, https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7282-2022-INIT/en/pdf.

with Russia.

Second, regional fragmentation as a constraining factor – including both state weakness in Ukraine and lack of effective regional governance structures – has been largely determined and overshadowed by geopolitical competition, with Ukraine being torn between two competing regional integration projects and eventually decisively choosing the EU orientation.

Third, intra-EU contestation used to be a strong constraining factor, with major disagreements between member states in 2004–2014 over EU policy towards Ukraine and Russia. After 2014 and even more so after 2022, this factor has weakened while multipolar geopolitical competition has increased – in other words, faced with a serious geopolitical conflict and war, the EU has become more united. However, the newfound unity is fragile and old disagreements regarding the EU's relations with Russia and Ukraine may resurface once the hot phase of the war ends, or if the war turns into a protracted stalemate.

The EU's responses to the constraining factors and its tactics to reduce their effects have been going through strong changes, reacting to external developments:

First, the EU was largely *in denial about the geopolitical competition* until 24 February 2022 and started to tackle it in earnest only in response to the full-scale invasion. The tactics to mitigate the effects of competition on the coherence and effectiveness of EU policy until then were weak. The full-scale invasion pushed the EU to take the side of Ukraine and tackle the conflict as a *geopolitical actor* in its own right. The EU pursued its goals in the geopolitical competition predominantly through civilian means, but it also took significant steps in the direction of strengthening its hard power capabilities and contributing military assistance.

Second, when Russia's war against Ukraine started in 2014, the EU did not want to be directly involved in conflict settlement but used the tactics of *multilateralisation* (mainly through the OSCE) and *minilateralisation* (through the participation of France and Germany in the Normandy format). These structures had little success in their attempts to reduce regional tensions. The EU's role in future settlement efforts remains to be seen, but so far the EU's diplomatic actorness in this grave conflict can be characterised as underperformance.

Third, where the EU has been consistent and rather unified ever since 2004 is *support to Ukraine's domestic reforms*, which can be seen as the most significant mitigation tactics to manage multipolar competition and regional fragmentation. This factor was further strengthened in 2014–2022 and even more in 2022, supported by the decision to grant Ukraine a candidate country status. Supporting reforms and resilience of Ukraine has addressed mainly the political and economic dimensions of the geopolitical competition and served as an indirect way to help Ukraine withstand the Russian aggression.

Fourth, the EU has shown much creativity and capability of fast adaptation in *upgrading its foreign and security policy instruments* in response to the full-scale invasion in 2022. At the same time, however, the war has exposed the high level of *dependence of European security on the US*. The EU has become a more prominent actor, but it cannot be regarded as an independent "pole" in the multipolar competition. European autonomy vis-à-vis Russia has been strengthened, as the EU rids itself of Russian fossil fuels. However, weakness of the EU's and member states' hard power instruments cannot be remedied quickly. For the time being, strong transatlantic unity makes Europe's dependency on the US a benign one but this may change in future.

Whilst impressive for an EU that is often accused of doing too little too late, its strong response to the war in Ukraine has yet to lead to a comprehensive strategy tailored to respond to the new geopolitical context in a region dominated by geopolitical conflict between Russia and the West, with other state actors such as China and Turkey also vying for influence. Below the threshold of kinetic conflict, different forms of hybrid warfare and political exploitation of socio-economic interdependencies are stress-testing the resilience of Ukraine and other countries in wider Europe. It is essential in the coming years to build further on the geopolitical actorness of the EU that has emerged in response to the war in Ukraine. As the struggle over the future of European order continues, the following strategic goals should be at the centre of EUFSP in the coming years:

First, the EU should *revitalise the enlargement process* and work actively towards full membership of Ukraine and other candidate countries. This is of major geopolitical importance with a view to maintaining rules-based order in Europe

and reaching sustainable security at the EU's eastern borders. There is no fast track to membership but the EU needs to show commitment to achieving that goal and consistently support the efforts of candidate countries. It should develop a staged accession process, with gradual integration of candidate countries in policy areas where they already meet the conditions.[107] The process of fulfilling membership criteria has to be linked to the reconstruction of Ukraine. The EU membership perspective is hugely important for the Ukrainian people, giving them hope for a better future after the devastating war and motivating reform efforts. At the same time, it is an opportunity to turn the EU into a successful transformative power again, after years of stalled enlargement processes. Intra-EU divisions remain a challenge in bringing forward the enlargement process, which is closely linked to the very divisive issue of EU internal reform and requires crafting a new balance between widening and deepening.

Second, the EU will need to consistently push back against Russia's efforts and *weaken the Kremlin's ability to impose its vision of European order by force*. The EU can do this above all by civilian tools: maintaining and expanding sanctions while ensuring their consistent implementation, isolating Russia politically and economically and thus undermining its ability to wage war and use hybrid tactics to destabilise European countries. This approach needs to be maintained until Russia gives up its imperialist agenda, bears responsibility for the war crimes committed in Ukraine and pays reparations for the war damage.

Third, to complement the civilian tools, it is necessary to *strengthen the hard power capabilities* of the EU and member states to cope and have influence in the multipolar world. Most EU member states will continue to rely on NATO for collective defence but there is scope for stepping up the EU's instruments of defence cooperation in order to strengthen European capabilities, reduce their fragmentation and develop European defence industry. EU defence cooperation should not only focus on the needs of crisis management but should be used more to support the ongoing efforts of member states to strengthen their defence capabilities, which is necessary for meeting the requirements of NATO. Furthermore, it is important to continue the EU's contribution to military support

[107] Michael Emerson et al., *A Template for Staged Accession to the EU*, European Policy Centre and CEPS, October 2021, https://www.ceps.eu/?p=34206.

to Ukraine. The recent Council decision on joint procurement of ammunition to support Ukraine's war efforts, coordinated by the European Defence Agency and joined by 22 member states and Norway, is an example of upgrading the existing EU defence cooperation mechanisms and responding to urgent needs of European defence.[108]

All of this goes to show how central Ukraine is to the EU's own future. Ukraine might win the war against Russia, but if the EU does not manage to reform itself and upgrade its foreign and security policy toolbox, together with Ukraine they may lose the peace. The stakes are that high.

[108] Council of the European Union, Delivery and Joint Procurement of Ammunition for Ukraine (7632/23), 20 March 2023, https://europa.eu/!4jfxJp.

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List of interviews

Conducted in Kyiv:
1. Analyst, think tank working on foreign policy (CivSoc1), 2 November 2022
2. Associate Professor of International Relations, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy (CivSoc2), 26 October 2022
3. Expert, ANTS – National Interests Advocacy Network (CivSoc3), 13 October 2022
4. Analyst, Think Tank "New Europe" (CivSoc4), 21 October 2022
5. Government official working on foreign policy and/or European integration (Gov1), 31 October 2022
6. Government official working on foreign policy and/or European integration (Gov2), 29 October 2022
7. Government official working on foreign policy and/or European integration (Gov3), 24 October 2022
8. Member of Ukrainian Parliament (MP1), 2 November 2022
9. Member of Ukrainian Parliament (MP2), 21 October 2022
10. Member of Ukrainian Parliament (MP3), 24 October 2022

Conducted in Brussels:
EU member state official, 2 December 2022
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