

RESEARCH ARTICLE



EU Policy towards Ukraine: Entering Geopolitical Competition over European Order

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ABSTRACT

Since 2004, competition between the European Union (EU) and Russia over the European political, economic and security order intensified sporadically, with a focal point in Ukraine. The EU's main mitigation tactic in response to this competition used to be denial, but in 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this approach became untenable. As a result, the EU entered the competition as an emerging geopolitical actor in three important respects: engaging in a conflict over the European order; utilising its (still limited) hard power; and extending its geographical borders. Most importantly, the EU is actively trying to shape the future of the European order that was challenged by Russia's war against Ukraine. While pursuing its goals predominantly through civilian means, the EU has also taken major steps to strengthen its hard power capabilities and contributed military assistance. Furthermore, by granting candidate country status to Ukraine, it took a clear stance on its future borders, while these were violently contested.

KEYWORDS

EU foreign and security policy; geopolitics; multipolar competition; Ukraine; Russia

The largest European state that re-emerged as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine occupies a central geopolitical position in the historically contested zone coined by Timothy Snyder (2010) as “bloodlands”. 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 (EU) in the aftermath of the Cold War. However, the EU focused primarily on the countries that joined the Union in 2004 and on Russia. It was the big bang enlargement of 2004 that increased the need for a more substantive approach to Ukraine and other new Eastern neighbours. The new approach took the shape of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) launched in 2004 (European Commission 2004) and soon complemented by the Eastern Partnership (EaP) that emerged as the strategic sub-set of the ENP in 2009 (Council of the EU 2009).

Within this new framework, the EU offered to Ukraine enhanced political association and deeper and more comprehensive trade relations, while not responding to Ukraine's

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quest for a membership perspective. Geopolitical considerations, namely the EU's wish not to undermine relations with Russia, was one of the motives for its cautious but counter-productive approach to its Eastern neighbours. Although this was unintended by the EU, the imminent conclusion of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was an important factor in the series of events that culminated with Russia's invasion of Crimea and subsequent instigation of war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. From Russia's perspective, the Association Agreement 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.

The Russian annexation of Crimea and subsequent simmering war in Donbas did not result in a fundamental review of the EU's policy towards Ukraine. The EU condemned Russia's actions and introduced sanctions but did not directly engage in diplomatic efforts to solve the conflict, although it endorsed the controversial Minsk agreements negotiated by the so-called Normandy Group including France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine.

A fundamental change in the EU's approach – what we will call here the EU's 'geopolitical awakening' – finally occurred when President Putin ordered a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This ended the post-Cold War European security order and shattered old illusions in Berlin, Paris and other western European capitals about Russia's true intentions in the so-called 'shared neighbourhood'. The Kremlin's imperialist ambitions were recognised as a major threat to security and democracy in wider Europe. Russia's unprovoked and illegal aggression united EU member states, in close coordination with the US and other like-minded countries, to adopt strong and unprecedented measures to support Ukraine and impose a cost on the aggressor. The EU's new approach included the decision, explicitly formulated as a geopolitical one, to grant Ukraine a membership perspective. Hence, the EU's response to the full-scale war included three important elements of geopolitical actorness, which are explored in the article: engaging in a conflict over European *order*; bringing in and strengthening its (still limited) *hard power*; and extending its geographical *borders* while these are being violently contested. At the same time, there are key differences between the Russian and EU approaches to geopolitical competition: the EU's vision of order remains rooted in rules and international law, which have been grossly violated by Russia; the EU does not violently impose its so-called "liberal empire" (Garton Ash 2023) on other actors; and it continues to reject the very idea of spheres of influence. Thus, the normative insistence on the rule-based order lies at the core of the EU's 'geopolitical awakening'.

In our view, of the three major constraints faced by EU Foreign and Security Policy (EUFSP) as identified in the framework of this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra [forthcoming](#)) – internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition¹ – the latter has been dominant in the case of Ukraine (Raik *et al.* 2023). By focusing on the EU's shifting approach to the increasingly tense multipolar competition² with Russia over Ukraine, the main research questions addressed in the article are: How

¹See the Introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra [forthcoming](#)).

²It might be more accurate to define the EU-Russia competition over Ukraine as 'bipolar' rather than 'multipolar'. We have chosen, however, to use the concept of 'multipolar competition', as it refers to the broader discussion about power dynamics between 'poles' being central to international relations. Furthermore, although the article focuses on EU-Russia competition, it also points to the broader multipolar ramifications of the war in Ukraine.

did the EU seek to mitigate the impact of multipolar competition on its policy towards Ukraine and what kind of mitigation measures – institutional, functional and diplomatic, as defined in the Introduction to this Special Issue – did it apply?³ Relatedly, did the EU adopt a more geopolitical approach over time and engage in competition rather than mitigating it? In what ways did it act (or not) as a geopolitical actor when it comes to European order, hard power and borders? These questions are explored on the basis of a comprehensive review of official EU documents, relevant literature and ten semi-structured interviews conducted with Ukrainian stakeholders (officials, members of parliament, representatives of civil society organisations) in the last quarter of 2022.⁴

The article proceeds as follows. The first section outlines the conceptual framework for the study of multipolar competition as a constraining factor on EUFSP. The next section charts the evolutionary course of the EU's Ukraine policy in the shadow of growing geopolitical tensions since 2004. This will be followed by an analysis of how the three levels of multipolar competition – understood as competition over the European security, political and economic order – played out in the context of EU-Ukraine relations (third section) and an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the EU's evolving tactics to mitigate and counter the effects of multipolar competition on its Ukraine policy (fourth section), followed by a conclusion.

Multipolar competition as a constraint on EUFSP

The EU's Ukraine policy since 2004 has been extensively studied as part of the ENP and EaP frameworks, often through the lens of concepts such as Europeanisation, region-building, external governance and state-building, with many studies seeking to explain the limited influence of the EU on Ukraine and other neighbours (for example, Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2010; Gawrich *et al.* 2010; Delcour 2011; Maass 2020). Since 2014, scholars have paid greater attention to the competition between the EU and Russia over their “shared neighbourhood”, the “rise of geopolitics” and increased attention to security and resilience in the EU's approach to the EaP region (for example, Ademmer *et al.* 2016; Juncos 2017; Nitoiu and Sus 2018). Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine scholarly interest has shifted to explaining the EU's strong response and analysing the nature and scope of the ongoing epochal change of European and international order (Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022; Bosse 2022; Orenstein 2023). The question of whether the EU is developing into a geopolitical actor has been addressed in both policy and academic debates, to which this article also seeks to contribute (Blockmans 2022; Kundnani 2023; Della Sala 2023; Orenstein 2023; Lumet and Perot 2023; Youngs 2022). Semantically, it is important to stress that our object of study is the EU, not ‘Europe’ – noting that several European states have long played a geopolitical role.

The article focuses on the impact of multipolar competition on EU foreign policy, which we identify as the dominant constraining factor of the EU's Ukraine policy since the launch of the ENP in 2004. Rivalry between different understandings of order, at the global as well as regional level, is central to multipolar competition.

³See the Introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra [forthcoming](#)).

⁴The 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. The interviews were conducted with informed consent.

When a common understanding of order is absent, international crises tend to become tactical theatres of systemic strategic contests where each major power tries to reinforce its own vision of order. During such competition, multilateral institutions often become instrumentalised as arenas of strategic confrontation (Herd 2010; Bremmer 2012; Kupchan 2012; Alcaro *et al.* 2016; Alcaro 2018; Bolt and Cross 2018). In an international environment increasingly dominated by multipolar competition, the EU must take into account the involvement of other external powers in order to be able to design an effective response of its own to a crisis or conflict. Furthermore, acknowledgement of multipolar competition may be necessary for the EU to recognise and develop ways to protect itself and its partners against malign external influence – its relationship with Russia being a case in point.

The concept of multipolar competition is akin to the notions of geopolitical competition and geopolitical actorness. In the original meaning of the concept, geopolitics is concerned with the impact of geographical factors on international relations (Scholvin 2016). The study of geopolitics has often been viewed as a “branch of the realist tradition” (Guzzini 2012), although in the 1990s and 2000s there was a popular strand of “critical geopolitics” that applied constructivist theory (Ó Tuathail 1996). More recently, the increase of multipolar competition has been reflected in a revival of scholarly interest in the realist understanding of geopolitics as inter-state competition over territories and spheres of influence. In general, geopolitical rivalry is seen from a realist perspective as zero-sum in nature, with major powers as the dominant actors seeking to maximise their sphere of influence and control over resources. Major power competition may be managed and temporarily softened through settlement of a balance of power, but ever-changing power dynamics eventually lead to attempts by rising powers to establish a new balance. The decisive, though by far not the only, instrument of power in this competition is military force (Mead 2014; Mearsheimer 2001) – an understanding that has been reinforced due to a major war returning to Europe.

Russia’s foreign policy has often been seen to reflect a geopolitical realist view of the world (Light 2008). From this viewpoint, major powers have the right to a sphere of influence which should be acknowledged and respected by other states. Much of Moscow’s grievance with the post-Cold War order in Europe is related to its perception that the West has neglected and violated its ‘legitimate’ security interests in the region that Russia regards as its historical sphere of influence. Hence, in the spirit of zero-sum competition, Russia has increasingly aggressively sought to re-establish its dominance over neighbouring countries.

The EU, by contrast, has rejected the idea of international relations being inevitably conflictual and zero-sum, and has emphasised norms-based cooperation and multilateralism in its foreign policy. Its international actorness has been built on the liberal rules-based order (Tocci 2017). However, the rise of multipolar competition and severe pressure on the rules-based order have exposed the limits of the EU’s ability to defend its values and interests and “created demand for a more geopolitical Europe” (Orenstein 2023) – although it is often not clear what a ‘geopolitical EU’ should look like and there is no consensus among scholars as to whether it has started to emerge (Kundnani 2023). The return of great power rivalry has undermined the very foundation of the EU’s self-understanding of being an exceptional actor that rejects zero-sum geopolitics and great power rivalry (Della Sala 2023). In order to remain relevant in the world of

geopolitical competition, it has been widely argued that the EU must adjust. Yet hardly anyone calling for a geopolitical EU means that it should (or could) mirror the Russian effort to impose its sphere of influence by force and deny the sovereign rights of its neighbours. Geopolitics as practised by the EU is something different from the realist geopolitics practised by Russia, which raises the question of whether it is justified to label it ‘geopolitics’ at all.

This article explores to what extent and in what ways the EU has performed as a geopolitical actor in the context of the war in Ukraine. It suggests three major dimensions where the EU’s emerging geopolitical actorness can be identified.

First, and most importantly, the conflict with Russia over Ukraine is a multipolar *conflict over the European order* where the EU has not remained neutral and which has evolved at three levels: security arrangements, political systems and projects of economic integration (Raik 2019). The EU’s geopolitical actorness is distinguished by the fact that it recognises this conflict rather than denying its existence and defends the EU’s vision of order, which remains rules-based and rooted in international law. Second, the EU has recognised that it needs to be able and willing to use *hard power*, including military power, to defend its vision of order. And third, the EU’s geopolitical actorness in this conflict involves defining and defending its (future) *geographical borders*. By supporting both the territorial integrity and EU membership of Ukraine, the EU has engaged in a conflict that involves contestation of its own future borders. At the same time, it does not violently impose its vision of order, or sphere of influence, but has been characterised as a liberal empire based on voluntary choice of countries to join.

The EU’s Ukraine policy in the shadow of growing geopolitical tensions

The emergence of the EU’s geopolitical actorness *vis-à-vis* Russia is the result of a decades-long process during which competition slowly but steadily morphed into a sort of bipolar (rather than multipolar) confrontation which suddenly accelerated as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Over the years, the EU tried to mitigate the constraints on its foreign policy emanating from competition with Russia by resorting to institutional, functional and diplomatic/coalitional measures.

In 2004, the EU welcomed eight new member states from Central and Eastern Europe (plus Cyprus and Malta). Later that year, domestic dissatisfaction with corrupt and ineffective leadership and electoral fraud sparked the so-called ‘Orange Revolution’ in Ukraine, marked by demands for democracy and European integration. Both these landmark events were conducive to enhancing EU-Ukraine relations while also increasing tensions with Russia. Western Europe gradually awoke to the idea of Ukraine becoming one of the 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” (Council of the EU 2003). 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” (Ibid). The launch of the ENP in May 2004 aimed to mitigate the exclusion effects for countries like Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova and prevent them from being disadvantaged by the change of EU borders (European Commission 2004).

The Orange Revolution in Ukraine brought to power a new leadership determined to accelerate reforms and bring Ukraine closer to the EU. They also asked for a membership perspective, which the EU, however, was not willing to offer. The newly launched ENP, conceived as a substitute for the enlargement policy, failed to respond to the expectations of Ukrainians (Wolczuk 2009). Instead, Ukraine was offered an advanced Association Agreement (AA), including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which was negotiated between 2007-12. However, Viktor Yanukovich, elected as President in 2010, bowed to Russian pressure and made a U-turn, suspending preparations to sign the AA/DCFTA in November 2013. This geopolitical shift triggered mass protests throughout the country commonly known as ‘Euromaidan’ or ‘revolution of dignity’. In February 2014, the Maidan uprising culminated in a mass shooting of protesters, followed by Yanukovich and his entourage fleeing the country and pro-European, pro-Maidan forces taking charge in parliament.

The victory of the Maidan movement signified Ukraine’s clear break away from Russia’s sphere of influence in favour of a pro-European path. An EU-Ukraine Association Agreement was signed in June 2014 by the newly elected President Petro Poroshenko and entered into force in September 2017 (Government of Ukraine 2023). Russia, however, fought Ukraine’s attempts to move closer to the EU. In March 2014, it first occupied and then annexed the peninsula of Crimea. Meanwhile, it established ‘separatist’ movements in parts of Eastern and Southern Ukraine (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018; Åtland 2020). Active opposition from the Ukrainian population and authorities prevented Russia from gaining ground 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 (Umland 2014; Wilson 2016; Giuliano 2018).

In subsequent years, the EU did not play an active role in the conflict resolution process,⁵ which was left to France and Germany, acting as mediators in the *ad hoc* ‘Normandy framework’ that also included Ukraine and Russia. The historic turning point came on 24 February 2022. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia was met by a strong EU response that mobilised the whole EUFSP toolbox. On 28 February 2022, Ukraine formally applied for EU membership. In the face of Ukraine’s resolve to fight for its European future and European values, and in response to geopolitical challenges, EU member states granted it candidate country status in June 2022 (European Council 2022).

The war has brought about a substantial change in the EU member states’ conception of the European political order and Ukraine’s place in it. It has also led to a profound revision of EU policy towards a Russia now seen as the biggest threat to peace and stability in Europe (Meister 2022).

Three levels of multipolar competition in Ukraine

While the EU’s Ukraine policy was not designed as an act of geopolitical competition, this is how it was perceived from the Russian perspective – and Moscow responded in the spirit of a zero-sum battle. Since the 1990s, Russia has found it hard to reconcile itself with Ukraine’s independence, regarding all the post-Soviet space as a sphere of

⁵Interview with CivSoc2, 2022.

Russia's strategic interests (Krickovic 2014; Rezvani 2020). As the EU became more engaged in Ukraine after the launch of the ENP in 2004, and particularly its Eastern Partnership component added in 2009, the new common neighbourhood became a contested one (Ademmer *et al.* 2016). At the same time, the Orange Revolution of 2004 marked a clear Western shift in Ukraine's orientation, which provoked a strong negative response from Russia (Pastukhov 2011). From the Kremlin's perspective, Ukraine had become an object of Western hegemonic aspirations and hence terrain of geopolitical competition, which unfolded in the economic, political and security field.

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 (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2014). Subsequently, President Yanukovich reneged on the AA/DCFTA and it took the massive Euromaidan protests and the change of leadership 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 steps to align with the EU-inspired democratic model and Russia becoming increasingly authoritarian under Putin's rule. Although Russia has not intentionally aspired to project its own political model, it has consciously promoted conservative ideas and non-democratic practices throughout the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood, including Ukraine (Casier 2022). In the context of the Ukrainian popular protests in both 2004 and 2014, it was important for the Russian leadership to portray these as unconstitutional and instigated by Western-backed violent extremists, *inter alia* criticising the West for its illegitimate interference in Ukraine's domestic politics (Noutcheva 2018). Ukrainian agency and the bottom-up nature of Ukrainian protests and demands were denied by Russia.

The Russian leadership framed the large-scale invasion of Ukraine as part of a broader plan to create a "multipolar world", while claiming that Western "attempts to create the unipolar world have got the ugly form" (Abramov 2022; Istomin 2022). According to the Kremlin, one of the main reasons for the invasion was that NATO had advanced closer to the Russian borders (Kommersant 2022). Before ordering troops into Ukraine, the Russian foreign ministry put forward proposals regarding changes to the European *security* order. In two documents presented in December 2021, Russia clearly articulated its revisionist demands aimed at restoring its sphere of influence and driving NATO's presence in Europe back to pre-1997 levels (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2021a; 2021b). In January 2022 the US and NATO made clear that it was inconceivable to enter negotiations based on Russia's core demands, although the US was open to talks on issues such as arms control, nuclear treaties and military transparency measures (Herzenhorn 2022).

Although Russia has actively worked against Ukraine's European orientation, it is important to note that, according to the Russian rhetoric, its main adversary in Ukraine has been the US, while the Kremlin does not see the EU as an independent (security) actor. Yet 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 US's subsequently decisive role was highlighted by the Ukrainian

experts interviewed for this paper, both as a donor⁶ and in pushing the EU to play a more active role regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war.⁷

Apart from Russia, the EU, the US and the United Kingdom (UK),⁸ other actors have played a limited role in the conflict. The People's Republic of China's (PRC) economic relationship with Ukraine grew during the 2010s (Zongyuan 2022), while the Sino-Russian partnership deepened. Even after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the PRC tried to adopt a neutral position. Many of Beijing's positions were, however, supportive of its strategic partner Russia. In its proposal for a settlement put forward on 24 February 2023, the PRC did not condemn the invasion and instead expressed criticism of Western hegemony and "unilateral sanctions" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2023). In addition to rhetorical and political support, the PRC has supported Russia by intensifying trade relations; this has negatively impacted on the effectiveness of the Western sanctions (Devonshire-Ellis 2023). Furthermore, there has been concern in the West about the PRC providing non-lethal support that can be used for military purposes, and the possibility that Beijing might also eventually provide lethal support (Chiacu and Lynch 2023).

Another significant actor is Turkey, who tried to play the role of a mediator during the full-scale invasion. With interests that lie on both sides, Ankara has consistently supported Ukraine politically and militarily without alienating Russia economically (Gaber 2023). Turkey is still a safe haven for Russian companies, with many Russian investors buying property and opening businesses in 2022 (Glinski 2023). This boasted the weakened Russian economy and prolonged its ability to sustain the war effort and circumvent EU sanctions, at least until early March 2023 (Cagalayan and Spicer 2023).

Neither the PRC (cautiously backing Russia) nor Turkey (a NATO member) can be seen as separate poles in the multipolar competition that plays out in the Ukrainian conflict. If the PRC were to take a stronger role in support of Russia, this would elevate the global significance of the war as part of intensifying great power competition between the US and the PRC.

The EU's responses: from mitigation tactics to engaging in geopolitical competition

Since 2004, EU policy towards Ukraine has been under constant pressure to adapt to the changing developments in Ukraine and the external environment, and find ways to either mitigate the constraints linked to multipolar competition on EU policy or tackle and reshape such constraints. This section analyses the main elements of the EU approach to the Ukraine conflict and their evolution over time (see also Table 1).

Denial of multipolar competition

As competition between the EU and Russia over their 'shared neighbourhood' grew from 2004 onwards, the EU was for a long time in denial about it. The launch of the Eastern

⁶Until January 2023, the US was by far the largest donor to Ukraine with EUR 25.11 billion in financial aid, EUR 3.72 billion in humanitarian aid and EUR 44.34 billion in military aid (Statista 2023).

⁷Interviews with CivSoc1, CivSoc4, Gov1, Gov2, MP1 and MP3, 2022.

⁸Interview with MP2, 2022.

Partnership and negotiation of AA/DCFTAs with four Eastern neighbours reflected a recognition that the EU needed to increase its engagement in the region. The EU was careful not to frame 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 their foreign policy choices. By contrast, Putin's imperialist vision led to Russia trying to (re-)impose its sphere of influence on Ukraine, from 2014 on by use of force, while denying Ukraine's sovereignty. The EU did not impose its version of European order, but was committed to defending the rules-based order that respects countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity. The incompatibility of these two visions led to a fierce EU-Russia, and more broadly Western-Russian, competition over the European order.

The EU made an (unsuccessful) effort to develop complementarity between the EU-led and Russian-led economic integration projects, which can be categorised as functional mitigation. It also tried diplomatic-coalitional mitigation by addressing the concerns expressed by Moscow at trilateral talks conducted between the EU, Russia and Ukraine between July 2014 and December 2015 (European Commission 2015).

When the Ukraine-Russia war began in spring 2014, the EU was not only reluctant to become directly involved but even refused to call it a war. At the same time, it increased its functional mitigation tactics of supporting Ukraine's reform efforts (Wolczuk 2016). Although the EU refused to recognise Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and introduced sanctions against Russia, it did not engage in conflict resolution. While there was a growing recognition in the EU that its energy dependence on Russia was problematic (European Commission 2014), little was done to reduce it – on the contrary, Germany went ahead with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which would have further increased dependence.

The EU's wish to deny or at least stay away from multipolar competition up to 2022 partly explains its inability to impose limits on Russia's increasingly aggressive behaviour. Both Ukrainian government officials and civil society representatives interviewed for this article shared the view that the full-scale invasion could have been prevented by the EU reacting more decisively in 2014, though they also admitted that the EU and Ukraine of 2014 differed from the EU and Ukraine of 2022.⁹ In 2014, Ukraine was in a turmoil with its state capacity diminished during Yanukovich's presidency. Ukrainian society was also not yet fully supportive of the Euro-Atlantic orientation, with significant segments preferring a multi-vectoral foreign policy. The subsequent eight years of war with Russia changed Ukraine and made it more united and resilient. The ongoing war and marginally successful peace process also had an impact on the EU, raising its awareness about Russia's foreign policy objectives and outlook on the world order. Furthermore, the EU began to recognise Ukraine's potential and efforts rather than seeing it as a weak or even failed state. Ukraine was indeed better prepared to defend itself against a full-scale invasion in 2022 than in 2014, in part thanks to increased EU support. It should be noted, though, that during the years 2014-21 the EU did not intend to 'buy time', since most member states did not expect a full-scale war to happen and wanted to avoid zero-sum competition.

⁹Interviews with CivSoc3 and Gov1, 2022.

Eventually the tactics of denying geopolitical competition with Russia proved ineffective and were abandoned on 24 February 2022. For the first time, the EU clearly chose the side of Ukraine in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and mobilised strong support to resist Russia's unjustified aggression. This was arguably a significant shift towards the EU becoming a geopolitical actor in contrast to its usual role of a mediator and facilitator in external conflicts.

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 Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and other organisations; and the 'minilateral' Normandy format consisting of Germany, France, Russia and Ukraine that emerged in 2014.

Active EU-Russia diplomacy between 2004-14 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 of improving relations by way of EU-Russia diplomacy took a severe hit during a visit by the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell to Moscow in February 2021, when he was publicly humiliated by his Russian counterpart (Herzenhorn and Barigazzi 2021).

As a way of multilateralising conflict management in the post-Soviet space, the EU has supported and worked with the OSCE as the main pan-European security structure. The EU was also supportive of the Normandy format that was active from June 2014 to February 2022, which revolved around the delegation of diplomatic efforts to Germany and France (Lohsen and Morcos 2022).

Indeed, although the EU actively backed the Normandy format, this was not an EU diplomatic initiative and France and Germany did not participate as formal representatives of the EU. Thus, the Normandy format was a controversial institutional measure that emerged in response to the EU's reluctance to engage. 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 (European Parliament 2020). 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 self-governance in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

At the same time, Ukraine came under pressure from its European partners to adapt and make concessions (Allan 2020). 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 agreed to "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”.¹⁰ As was noted later by then-Russian presidential aid Vladislav Surkov, the Russian side did not intend to implement the agreements (*Tass* 2023), while former German Chancellor Angela Merkel recognised that the Minsk agreements foremost were meant to give Ukraine time (Hildebrandt and Lorenzo 2022). Thus, although the agreements decreased the conflict intensity, they were never implemented and became a Pyrrhic victory for all parties, freezing the situation until 2022.

One of the benefits of multilateralisation was that anchoring EU sanctions to the violations of OSCE and UN principles and their removal to the implementation of the Minsk agreements helped create consensus among member states and made the sanctions enduring.

Supporting Ukraine’s reforms and resilience

Despite member states holding different views on the evolving geopolitical competition with Russia, there has been a strong consensus on the need to support Ukraine’s political and economic reforms since 2004. Between 2014–22, while the EU stood aside from the war, it strengthened support for Ukraine’s efforts through a number of functional measures. The AA triggered a process of reforms in different sectors including decentralisation of power and anti-corruption efforts. The EU provided essential political, financial and organisational support, but did not respond 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 EU rules and regulations to various sectors and creating an institutional framework for convergence with the EU (Emerson and Movchan 2021). Other EU-Ukraine cooperation initiatives were aimed at supporting reforms in local self-governance, public administration and justice (Samokhvalov and Strelkov 2021; Králiková 2022).

From 2014, security and resilience became more prominent topics in the EU’s Ukraine policy and the ENP more broadly (Juncos 2017). Some commentators saw this as undermining the focus on normative goals and democratic reforms (Ibid; Biscop 2016), but in the case of Ukraine these priorities were mutually supportive. In 2014, the EU mobilised Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) tools by establishing a European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM) 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, judiciary and border guard service. In 2014–21, the EU also provided significant financial support for mitigation of the damage done by the ongoing war in Donbas, including support for reconstruction and internally displaced persons.

Mobilising the whole EU toolbox in an open confrontation with Russia

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine prompted the EU to profoundly revise its policy towards Russia and engage in a struggle over the future of European order. At the same time, the strongest possible support for Ukraine became a geopolitical necessity.

¹⁰Interview with Gov3, 2022.

The EU and its member states responded to the war by making use of the entire foreign and security policy toolbox and taking decisions that had hitherto been considered inconceivable. The EU's functional measures involved economic sanctions on Russia and providing economic, military, humanitarian and emergency assistance to Ukraine. In all these domains, the institutional leadership of the Commission was strong and there was close diplomatic coordination with the US, UK and other like-minded countries.

Sanctions

Unprecedented restrictive measures have been a core element of the EU's response to Russian aggression. The EU had already imposed a range of economic restrictions on Russia, including both sectoral and individual measures, in response to its annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its role in the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which the EU avoided calling a 'war'. The sanctions were extensively reviewed and extended in 2022 in response to the "unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine" (Council of the EU 2022; 2023).

The EU has been leveraging its economic power to slow down Russia's war machine and make military action too costly for the Russian state in the long term (Demertzis *et al.* 2022). Above all, by strengthening sanctions, the EU member states have been sending a message of unity and determination in support of Ukraine, defying the Kremlin's expectations of internal discord and sanctions fatigue. The restrictive measures have no doubt been costly to the EU population as well, especially in the area of energy that saw a steep rise in prices in 2022 driving inflation up across the European continent and beyond. Nevertheless, EU member states managed to cut 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 (Timmermans 2022).

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" (Council of the EU 2022). EUAM also engaged in supporting the Ukrainian rule of law institutions to facilitate the investigation and prosecution of war crimes.

As the war continued and the provision of Western military equipment to Ukraine increased, EU member states decided to launch a military CSDP mission to train 15,000 Ukrainian armed forces personnel. 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 not to vote for it, citing fears of escalation and risks of being drawn into the war, although it let it pass by way of constructive abstention. Twenty-four member states offered to contribute to the mission. In February 2023, the EU expressed its readiness to double the number of Ukrainian troops to be trained to 30,000 (Brzozowski 2023).

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 for providing weapons to the Ukrainian armed forces. During 2014-22, the issue

of military assistance to Ukraine was divisive among EU and NATO countries. While the US has broadly supported the provision of defensive arms to Ukraine since 2014 (though initially of a ‘non-lethal’ nature) (Marzalik and Toler 2018), German and French leaders regarded it as potential cause for escalation of the conflict (Gordon *et al.* 2015). Before February 2022, Ukraine received defensive weaponry from a small number of countries, including the US, the UK, Poland and the Baltic states (Mills 2022). After February 2022, the 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 military equipment to the Ukrainian army by member states, in addition to bilateral aid (European Parliamentary Research Service 2022). The total military support of the EU and member states to Ukraine from February 2022 to November 2023 amounted to EUR 27 billion (European Commission 2023).

While EU military assistance has been significant, the leading provider of military aid has been the US, as noted above. The weakness of European defence capabilities and hence dependence of European security on Washington has been once again exposed by the war. However on this occasion many member states have finally started to strengthen their defence capabilities, which is essential for improving Europe’s ability to take care of its own security (European Defence Agency 2023).

Humanitarian aid and technical assistance

The EU has used the full spectrum of its tools to provide humanitarian, budget and emergency assistance to Ukraine. It was quick to activate the Temporary Protection Directive in order to cater for the massive number of Ukrainian refugees arriving in EU territory. It kept the Ukrainian government on life support by providing direct budget, macro-financial assistance and access to loans to face the extraordinary expenses associated with running a 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.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the European Commission played a key role in forging unity among member states and designing strong measures of support to Ukraine

Table 1. Mitigation tactics: benefits and limits

Mitigation tactics and timeframe of their implementation	Effect of mitigation measures
<i>Denial of multipolar competition – until February 2022</i>	Benefit: bought time for Ukraine to strengthen its defence and resilience in 2014–22. Limit: fuelled the perception in Moscow that the EU was not willing to compromise its relations with Russia over the ‘shared neighbourhood’.
<i>Multilateralisation and minilateralisation – most relevant in 2014–22</i>	Benefit: facilitated Ukraine–Russia diplomacy; helped to temporarily stop large-scale violence. Limit: did not impede Russia from undermining Ukraine’s sovereignty and creating new realities on the ground; the EU did not directly engage in the settlement process.
<i>Helping Ukraine help itself – consistent priority since 2004</i>	Benefit: indirectly helped Ukraine withstand Russian pressure. Limit: Russia refused to acknowledge Ukraine’s sovereign agency.
<i>Stretching the limits of the EU toolbox – since February 2022</i>	Benefit: Sanctions against Russia and assistance to Ukraine have helped put limits on aggression. Limit: the war of aggression continued.

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 to build unity and craft a strong narrative condemning Russia's action. Geopolitical and normative considerations were both strongly present and intertwined in the rhetoric of EU leaders.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the gradual build-up of multipolar competition between Ukraine, the EU, the US and more broadly the West on one side, and Russia on the other side, with a focus on EU policies. Although the confrontation has centred on Ukraine's foreign policy orientation, 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 the PRC regarding the war in Ukraine points to the significance of this conflict for global security and balance of power. The competition with Russia has been the dominant constraining factor on the EU's Ukraine policy, the importance of which has gradually grown since 2004 with crisis-induced surges. The Russian aggression against Ukraine that started in 2014 and expanded to full-scale war in 2022 eventually left no doubt that the EU had been drawn into a broad zero-sum competition with Russia. The increasingly aggressive efforts by Russia to re-establish its dominant role in the post-Soviet space 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.

In the case of Ukraine, the EU's tactics to reduce the effects of multipolar competition have fundamentally changed over time, reacting to external developments. 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 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. In 2014–21, the EU developed a functional approach that emphasised Ukraine's security and resilience, but still sought to stay out of geopolitical competition as it lacked the political will or tools to address the growing tensions between Ukraine and Russia.

When Russia's aggression against Ukraine started in 2014, the EU used the institutional and diplomatic tactics of *multilateralisation* (mainly through the OSCE) and *minilateralisation* (through the participation of France and Germany in the Normandy format) rather than being directly involved in conflict settlement. These structures had little success in reducing regional tensions. Since the Russian full-scale invasion, the focus of EU institutions has been on assisting Ukraine's war efforts and imposing a cost on Russia's aggression, to create more favourable conditions for a future settlement.

Instead, where the EU has been consistent since 2004 – while progressively upscaling the scope and ambition – is in its *functional support* for Ukraine's political and economic reforms, which can be seen as its most significant tactic for managing geopolitical competition with Russia over Ukraine. This was further strengthened in 2014, when the implementation of the AA started. 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. This changed as Ukraine was granted candidate country status in 2022. Supporting Ukraine's reforms and resilience has addressed the political and economic dimensions of the geopolitical competition and served as an indirect way to help Ukraine withstand the Russian aggression.

In parallel, the EU has proved its ability of fast adaptation in *upgrading its foreign and security policy instruments* in response to the full-scale invasion in 2022. The EU's response has involved strong functional (sanctions and assistance), institutional (leadership of the Commission) and diplomatic elements (close coordination with the US, UK and other partners). At the same time, however, the war has exposed the persistently 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 has largely rid itself of imports of Russian fossil fuels. However, a shortage of member states' hard power capabilities cannot be remedied quickly.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a historical turning point that has forced the EU to become an actor in the biggest geopolitical conflict in Europe since World War II. The full-scale invasion pushed the EU to take the side of Ukraine and tackle the conflict as an emerging geopolitical actor in its own right, engaging along the three dimensions of order, hard power and borders. The EU pursued its goals in the geopolitical competition predominantly through civilian means, but it also took significant steps toward strengthening its hard power capabilities and contributing military assistance. Furthermore, by granting candidate country status to Ukraine, it took a clear stance on the EU's future borders, while these were being contested by the Russian aggression. At the same time, however, the EU did not engage in geopolitics on the same terms as Russia – it was defending its vision of European order and Ukraine's determination to be part of this order, without imposing it. Thus, from the EU's perspective, the geopolitical competition also involved a strong element of values and norms. The nature of the EU's response, including its emphasis on values and its limited hard power, raises the question whether 'geopolitics' is the most appropriate concept to characterise the EU's response, as it was not geopolitical in the common realist understanding of the notion. Yet, and this is the point here, it was the first time the EU engaged in a conflict that can be characterised geopolitical.

The future direction of the EU as a nascent geopolitical actor and its ability to shape the future European order will undoubtedly require extensive further research. As the fundamental norms and values of the European order are under attack, the EU's ability to defend these will have far-reaching implications for Europe and beyond. The EU's response to the war in Ukraine is likely to have a long-term, profound impact on further development of EUFSP – and research about it. In EU foreign policy studies, there has been a strong focus on institutional aspects – and yet, in responding to the war in Ukraine, the EU's actions were not overly constrained by institutional factors, and neither did the war (thus far) lead to major institutional changes. It was rather the EU's ability to generate political unity among member states, partner with the US and other like-minded countries, and make maximum use of the existing functional toolbox that made the 'geopolitical awakening' possible. At the same time, the limits of the toolbox, especially the lack of hard power capabilities, acted as a major constraint on the EU's actorness, which poses pressing questions about the urgency of their further enhancement.

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List of interviews

1. Analyst, Ukrainian foreign policy think tank (CivSoc1), 2 November 2022.
2. Professor of International Relations, Ukrainian university (CivSoc2), 26 October 2022.
3. Expert, Ukrainian foreign policy experts network (CivSoc3), 13 October 2022.
4. Analyst, Ukrainian foreign policy think tank (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.