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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.

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

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 2024) – internal contestation, regional fragmentation and multipolar competition[1] – 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 competition[2] with Russia over Ukraine, the main research questions addressed in the article are: How

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[1]See the Introduction to this Special Issue (Alcaro and Dijkstra 2024).

[2]It 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.