Geopolitical *and* Technocratic: EU International Actorness and Russia's War Against Ukraine

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 marked the start of the largest and most brutal war at the heart of the European continent since World War II. It inevitably came as a "cold shower" for the EU and Member States' politicians, demonstrating with absolute certainty the fragility of the international and European security order. The EU responded to the invasion with unprecedented sanctions against Russia and Belarus and multi-faceted resolute support to Ukraine. The latter included the breaking of many previously existing taboos, such as the first ever use of the European Peace Facility to procure weapons for a third country at war or offering collective protection to about 8 million Ukrainian citizens and residents, fleeing the war.

The war prompted EU leaders to deeply reconsider the role the Union aspires to play "in a world shaped by raw power politics". Scholarly and policy debates about EU actorness and its international role increasingly revolve around its "geopolitical awakening", announced by the High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Joseph Borrell roughly a month after the invasion. What exactly does the "geopolitical awakening" imply? How can the EU develop its strategic autonomy to become a hard power? How far has the EU advanced on its path to being geopolitical? Irrespective of how exactly individual authors answer these questions, it is the technocratic Union that is evidently being pushed from the EU foreign policy agenda.

The EU's long-term stubborn attempts to avoid (geo) politics in its relations with its Eastern neighbours generally and Ukraine, specifically, do deserve some

criticism[1]. Had the Union been more geopolitical, more could have probably been done to strengthen the EU's and Member States' security cooperation with their partners in the region and improve their preparedness for various forms of Russian aggression. Yet, we argue that a new European approach, one based on expertise and local knowledge, that is aimed at redesigning its collaboration with and support of third countries, would benefit the geopolitical Union. Technocracy, understood as "the adaptation of expertise to the tasks of governance[2]", which entails de-politicization, is often associated with the European Union[3]. In particular, technocracy in the EU has been related to: i) the role of the European Commission and its central position in various networks, ii) the EU's production of regulatory policy aimed at efficiency rather than distributive policy; iii) knowledge as the decisive resource for the production of regulatory policy rather than budget and iv) the belief in consensus on rational policy solutions and the absence of political conflicts and ideological debates[4]. The latter is closely related to what Giandomenico Majone has called *copinage technocratique*, which "develops between Commission officials and national experts interested in discovering pragmatic solutions rather than defending political positions[5]". Used in the right dose, it is an asset the Union and its Member States have, and it can be harnessed to complement the EU's hard power and strategic autonomy aspirations. We illustrate this statement by looking at the EU's role and policies in Ukraine and, when relevant, other Eastern neighbours, before and during Russia's full-scale invasion. Based on this, we will show how the combination of geopolitics and technocracy can help the EU regain and strengthen its role in the Eastern

[1] Wetzel, Anne (2014): Die Europäische Nachbarschaftspolitik gegenüber der Ukraine: Vom Scheitern einer Politik mit technokratischen Mitteln

[2] Fischer, Frank (1990): Technocracy and the Politics of Expertise. Newbury Park: Sage, p. 18.

[3] Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio (2017): From a Deficit of Democracy to a Technocratic Order: The Postcrisis Debate on Europe

[4] Radaelli, Claudio M. (1999): The Public Policy of the European Union: Whither Politics of Expertise?

[5] Majone, Giandomenico (1994): The Rise of the Regulatory State in Europe

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Neighbourhood once the war is over and Ukraine regains its territorial integrity.

THE EU'S PRE-WAR POLICIES VIS-À-VIS UKRAINE AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: NO POLITICIZATION BUT RESILIENCE

The EU's efforts to engage more actively with non-EU countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus date back to the its 2004 Big Bang enlargement. This revealed "a major change in Europe's geopolitical reality as it shifted the EU/Russia 'common neighbourhood' further east to encompass countries that Russia considered part of its historical zone of influence, most notably Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus[6]". The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was thus conceived as a proximity policy that aimed to "avoid drawing new dividing lines in Europe[7]" and promote security as well as stability in the region through trade and cooperation. Russia was originally offered a stake in this initiative, but it rejected the idea and insisted on a bilateral strategic partnership with the EU for this to remain its only cooperation format with the Union.

The EU's own consciousness about new enlargements and its awareness of the special role of the Eastern Neighbourhood for the Kremlin explain the 'strategically ambiguous' framing of the ENP and, later on, the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Yet, early ENP documents, such as the 2004 Action Plans for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, reflect the EU's high integration and transformative ambitions vis-à-vis these countries. The Action Plans brightly exemplify the EU's nuanced technocratic approach considering the peculiarities of partner countries' political and legal systems and envisaging deep regulatory convergence. The key incentives for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia at that point were the prospect of free trade with the EU, as well as financial and technical assistance for reforms. Thus, the ENP's first decade for these countries combined active reform efforts and negotiations for more ambitious agreements with the EU than the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs), concluded in the 1990s. A noticeable incentive for political and justice system reforms in

Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia was the prospect of visa liberalization with the EU. Though touching on very sensitive issues, such as anticorruption, the negotiations on a visa-free regime (at least based on Ukraine's experience) were also marked by a structured approach and the EU's extensive reliance on both local expertise and its missions and projects in the country.

The refusal of the former President of Ukraine, Victor Yanukovych, to sign the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU at the Vilnius Eastern Partnership Summit in November 2013 gave rise to the Euromaïdan Revolution. The Revolution marked the start of turbulent times for Ukraine, including the change of government and Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in Eastern Ukraine. These events also became a stress-test for the EU's technocratic approach towards the ENP and how it dealt with Russia's geopolitical aspirations towards the 'common neighbourhood' in two ways. On the one hand, the Union and the Member States had to refrain from technocracy and bring the [geo]political back in to respond to Russia's disregard of Ukraine's territorial integrity as a violation of international law. At the same time, the EU had to mobilize all its reform support experience and available financial and technical tools to stabilize an increasingly fragile economic situation and the governance of the country.

Whether or not the EU managed to pass the "stress-test one" is a challenging question. From the perspective of what the EU foreign policy cooperation constituted in 2014/2015, the very fact of coordinated EU sanctions was assessed in academia as a breakthrough. "Pragmatic engagement" with Russia was regarded by the EU as the right strategy, and the EU's dependency on Russia's fossil fuels was hardly taken as a concern in several EU member states, including Germany and Italy. Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine changed these perceptions. All of a sudden, commentators started to argue that the response to the 2014 crisis was too weak and required not only stronger sanctions against Russia but also better thought-through economic and energy policies.

[6] *DeBardeleben, Joan (2017): The European Union's Eastern Policy and the Ukraine Crisis: Causes and Impacts*

[7] Wider Europe – Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours, COM(2003) 104 final

Hardly any doubt comes with "stress-test two": the technocratic solutions the EU adopted in response to the 2014/2015 crisis did not only prevent Ukraine from weakening at that time but they contributed to its resilience to the Russian invasion in 2022 with some lasting achievements. The EU-Ukraine AA, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) was eventually signed in 2014, and the EU extensively employed technical assistance and network-building projects to facilitate its implementation in Ukraine. Ukraine's economic reorientation from Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries' markets to that of the EU led to some losses for the Ukrainian economy in the short-term but it helped the country build a reliable long-term bond with the Union. The DCFTA served as an impetus for significant regulatory convergence between the Union and Ukraine in multiple domains, such as public procurement, reduction of technical barriers to trade and environment. Energy sector reform, which enabled Ukraine to join the EU power grid soon after the invasion, made it more resilient to Russia's weaponization of energy.

Importantly, the 2014/2015 crisis prompted the EU to complement its support for the AA implementation with an emergency state-building reforms package[8]. A triumph of the EU's and Member States' joint institution- and capacity-building efforts, in this vein, was the decentralization reform. The key idea behind it was to make Ukraine's territorial communities more resilient and prosperous through their amalgamation, broader competencies, and access to more funds. The reform brought public services (e.g., health, education) closer to communities' inhabitants and offered a fruitful ground for their digitalization. The multi-donor "U-LEAD" platform, led by the European Commission, not only supported reform implementation in financial and technical terms but offered a forum for communities to cooperate between themselves and peers from the EU. All of these examples aim to highlight that the EU's technocratic assistance helped Ukraine evolve to become a more resilient state, less dependent on Russia and more connected to the EU at different levels, and, thus, able to defy Russia's 2022 invasion. In addition to influencing the EU's approach to its relations with Ukraine, the 2014/2015 crisis also changed the EU's vision of its role in the Eastern Neighbourhood as a whole. The EU lowered its transformative ambitions vis-à-vis the countries of the region and introduced a stronger focus on security, stability and resilience, as manifested in the 2015 ENP Review and the 2016 EU Global Strategy[9]. As in the Ukrainian case, the EU has been actively using its 'technocratic toolbox' to support the AAs' implementation by Moldova and Georgia. Though Belarus, Armenia and Azerbaijan have been drifting away from the EU in the foreign policy realm for a long time, and Belarus left the format in 2021 in response to EU sanctions, the EU chose to preserve the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership initiative. Conceived as an ambitious and multi-aspect cooperation framework, the EaP ended up being both loose in formulations and focused on depoliticized tangible objectives, such as the 20 Deliverables for 2020. Thus, despite very different status-quo and prospects, depoliticization, strategic ambiguity and the focus on technocratic means were characteristic for the EU's pre-war relations with all of its Eastern Neighbours.

EU'S ROLE IN UKRAINE AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD DURING WARTIME: EUROPEAN AWAKENING

The EU's resolute response to the invasion of Ukraine and its wartime discursive shift to (geo)politics after years of strategic ambiguity and indecision towards its Eastern Neighbours naturally attracted much attention. As the scale of the EU's sanctions against Russia and its support for Ukraine exceeded commentators' expectations, they widely labelled the invasion as a "turning point", a "watershed" or even a "cathartic" moment for the EU foreign policy. Many also stressed the EU's unity even on potentially contested measures within the EU emergency response, such as banning Russia's banks from SWIFT, freezing assets belonging to its oligarchs EU-wide and using the European Peace Facility to procure weapons for Ukraine. This inspired EU foreign policy researchers Heidi Maurer, Richard Whitman and Nicholas Wright to conceptualize the invasion as a "reality check" for EU

[8] Rabinovych, Maryna (2019): EU's Development Policy vis-à-vis Ukraine after the Euromaidan: Securitisation, State-Building and Integration.

[9] Rabinovych, Maryna et Anne Pintsch (2023) : Sustainable Development: A Common Denominator for the EU's Policy Towards the Eastern Partnership?

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foreign policy cooperation and "collective European responsibility to act" in times, when EU fundamental values were being blatantly challenged from outside.

The war also highlighted three of the Union's major weaknesses that required collective political will and action. Though slowly, the EU has managed to overcome its dependency on Russian fossil fuels, with little contestation to this policy even by large consumer states, such as Germany and Italy. The Union's dependence on the U.S. on security and defence appears a more complex matter. The invasion of Ukraine showed quite clearly that Europe is not immune to aggression and that it ought to have enough capabilities to defend itself. Yet, the war also "reinforced the centrality of U.S. political leadership and military role for European security, weakening the position of those who argue that Europe should be more autonomous". On this terrain, EU leaders are still muddling through and lack consensus as to what the EU's joint forces should look like beyond its Rapid Deployment Capacity of 5000 troops, as provided for by its Strategic Compass for Security and Defence. Not least, as the EU unequivocally took Ukraine's side in the war and announced its "geopolitical awakening", its strategic ambiguousness vis-à-vis the associated Neighbours became obsolete. Despite the initial scepticism and contestation by some of the Member States, the European Council managed to agree on a candidate country status for Ukraine and Moldova – a development one would hardly have imagined prior to the war.

We think that the EU's (geo)political response to war should be taken with a pinch of salt. The EU did much to support Ukraine and address its weaknesses. Yet, as Richard Youngs writes, its "main policy decisions have been guided by a desire not to get directly involved, not to have the responsibility of quickly integrating Ukraine, and not to have to manage deeply intertwined international interdependencies". Candidate country status is only the first step in a lengthy enlargement process, and the EU leadership seems to have abandoned the "fast track" procedure ideas for the war-torn country. Though "geopolitical awakening" presupposes the EU becoming stronger in hard power terms, we hardly see an orchestrated strategy by the Member States to turn dependence on the USA in security terms into a synergy. Despite noticeable developments, there is thus a gap between the EU's geopolitical rhetoric and its actual role in Ukraine and the broader region.

What many commentators concentrating on (geo) politics forget however, is the EU's ability to build resilience both within and beyond its borders through technocratic means. The former aspect can be exemplified by the Commission's REPowerEU Plan, combining energy-saving measures, clean energy production and diversifying energy supplies to counter the EU's energy dependency on Russia. The Commission has also employed multiple technocratic measures to ensure that Ukrainian authorities can sustain their functions during the war, ranging from unprecedented economic aid (worth 18 Bn EUR for 2023) to repurposing the missions and technical assistance projects in the country and launching new ones. The Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA), established back in 2014, coordinates various EU entities and Commission's DGs involved in assisting Ukraine. The "U-LEAD" offices in communities serve as hubs for infrastructural support and the deliveries of humanitarian assistance. The EU Advisory Mission to Ukraine (EUAM) launched in 2014 to support the civilian security sector reform, is involved in the investigation of war crimes. Salient examples of the new wartime initiatives are the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM) which trains Ukrainian soldiers and repairs the equipment and the EU Solidarity Lanes that make it easier for Ukraine to export its goods, while Russia blocks the Black Sea.

In the absence of these tailor-made measures, it would be hardly possible for the Ukrainian government to sustain the challenges of the invasion and preserve their institutional capacity. We thus argue that the EU should be not just geopolitical – as it seeks to be – but preserve technocracy as a worthy aspect it already enjoys.

EU'S ROLE IN UKRAINE AND THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AFTER THE WAR: BUILDING TOMORROW'S EUROPEAN ARCHITECTURE

In our view, and in particular the EU's ability to be *both* a geopolitical and technocratic power will determine its future role in the Eastern Neighbourhood and beyond.

Being geopolitical will require that the Member States and EU institutions find new ways to navigate between mutually beneficial cooperation and dangerous dependencies on others in various domains, be it energy or defence. The Union will also be forced to respond to ever more sophisticated hybrid threats, as the contemporary networked world offers opportunities to weaponize everything: from food to health and culture. As emphasized by Joseph Borrell, EU's "geopolitical awakening" is also about "building diverse coalitions" and "taking decisions faster". The former signifies the EU's flexible approach to cooperation, allowing for selective engagement with governments that are not genuinely like-minded and engaging with civil society and activist groups, when a government is not responsive. Yet, as the examples of the EU's selective engagement with Russia and Belarus show, such a strategy may be interpreted by autocratic leaders as a weakness and be misused by them. Considerable difficulties also stem from the pressure to take foreign policy decisions faster, as many EU Member States seek to preserve their veto power. This may be particularly true for the so-called "trojan horses[10]" in EU foreign policy, such as Hungary, that tend to use their veto power to achieve their own political agenda, distinctive from those of the Union.

All of these challenges form the gap between the EU's geopolitical rhetoric and it being such a power. As a more strategically autonomous power with diverse coalitions and quick decision-making, the EU will have greater chances not only to preserve its current position in the Neighbourhood but to strengthen it. The more Russia's role in the region shrinks because of the war and sanctions, the higher the chances for the geopolitical Union to establish deeper ties with

Armenia and Belarus (provided there is regime change there). Energy, trade and climate issues will continue to be central to the EU's pragmatic cooperation with Azerbaijan. The preservation of the multilateral dimension of the EaP also leaves some opportunity for the format's revival. In both the bilateral and multilateral ties with the non-associated neighbours much also depends on whether the EU will manage to combine its geopolitical ambitions with a technocratic substance and make partners interested in specific technocratic projects.

The combination of resolute geopolitics and technocratic routine is needed to allow Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia become EU Member States, as the former two countries recently joined the cohort of candidate states, and Georgia was rejected due to political challenges.

Georgia is currently a difficult case, not only because a part of its territory is occupied by Russia, but due to the dissonance between the mainly pro-Western public opinion and the foreign policy of the ruling "Georgian Dream" party. Nevertheless, AA/DCFTA implementation, technical projects, multilateral initiatives and careful dialogue on political issues may help the Union preserve its role in Georgia until more favourable political conditions emerge. A potential challenge the EU may encounter in Georgia is the growing number of anti-Western immigrants from Russia, who fled Russia to avoid mobilization together with their families. Moldova is experiencing considerable Russian pressure, especially in the energy sector, and is suffering the immediate consequences of the war, such as a massive refugee inflow and power outages. It also has a weak security and defence sector, which exposes it to the threats from Russia and separatist Transnistria. Furthermore, its progress towards fulfilling the Commission's requirements regarding the rule of law is modest. The EU can assist the Moldovan government with a multi-aspect resilience-building toolbox, *inter alia*, based on the EU's experience of building Ukraine's resilience following the 2014/2015 crisis and amid the war. Given its unprecedented scale, Ukraine's post-war recovery, seen by the Commission as embedded

[10] Orenstein, Mitchell A. and R. Daniel Kelemen, R. (2017): Trojan Horses in EU Foreign Policy

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in its path to EU membership, signifies both valuable opportunities and considerable risks for the EU. The multistakeholder reconstruction process in Ukraine, coupled with political reforms and culminating in Ukraine's EU membership promises to become a pinnacle of both the EU's growing leverage in the region and the triumph of its technocratic efforts. A sovereign, reconstructed, modern Ukraine may become the last of the EU's success story, supporting its ambitions worldwide. Yet, the risks challenging the EU's power and image are also high, as the war continues and the harm done to Ukraine's economy, infrastructure and people grows every day.

The EU has already travelled a long technocratic path in the Eastern Neighbourhood, sometimes not even fully aware that it has also taken a geopolitical lane. A geopolitical EU with former Eastern Neighbourhood countries as Member States will not be possible without routine technocratic work and constant new agendas, projects as well as tangible cooperation initiatives. They are building blocks and cement for e geopolitically ambitious endeavours.

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