ENC ANALYSIS

The Eastern Neighbourhood between Shifting Logics of Power

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ABSTRACT: *The European Union has long been seen as a novel form of strategic actor, based in no small part on its 'normative power'. This paper argues that, the current crisis of liberalism has put that normative power, and the continued coherence of EU foreign policy under unprecedented threat, especially in relation to its 'Eastern neighbourhood'. The internal logic of 'normative power' has been compromised in its two components -- 'appropriateness' and 'consequences' – among others, through democratic backsliding in Central Europe and the emergence of right-wing populism. Right-wing populism and a reinvigoration of the nation-state moreover threaten EU foreign policy's future effectiveness and coherence. Current EU policies towards the neighbourhood should therefore intensify their emphasis on local ownership and resilience in view of building their partners' self-sufficiency, while both state and societies in the neighbourhood should prepare for a worst-case outcome of increased incoherence or disengagement.*

The European Union: a Normative Power?

Two decades ago, the European Union's status as a strategic actor seemed assured. Granted, in terms of the hardest of hard powers – military capabilities - the EU was a negligible force, certainly compared to the United States which, as the sole superpower, occupied the uncontested top echelon, with its apparently effortlessly maintained full-spectrum dominance. Not so in the purely civilian realm, however: when it came to its economic, and 'soft' power, the European Union's vast combined GDP, and its liberal values made it a pole of attraction, especially to new (and old) prospective candidates to its newly liberated East. In fact, in that heyday of liberalism, some argued that nation-states were a thing of the past, and that in a

brave new, globalised world, the technocratic European Union would become the model of a new, exemplary form of supra-national political organisation.[1]

While - as apparent in the focus of the latest Munich Security Conference on the idea of 'Westlessness'[2] - a sense of crisis is palpable in the West as a whole, the European Union appears to be faced with a particular challenge in adapting to new realities. No longer is its technocratic supranationalism seen as a potential replacement for the sovereign nation-state, which, with the rise of populism and Brexit, returned to political relevance, with a vengeance; its reliance on civilian capabilities appears hopelessly outdated in view of – among others - Russia's ability to act as a spoiler through hybrid forms of power-projection;[3] and it is also no longer able to assume a confluence of interests between itself, and the United States in its outsourcing of hard security.[4] In short, far from being a novel great power, the European Union appears woefully unprepared to a 'hardening' of international politics in the more unforgiving times of the 21st century.

This will, no doubt, have consequences for the states participating in the European Union's Eastern Partnership (EaP). Much of the logic behind the EaP was based on the assumptions of a fast-receding era more forgiving of liberal policies based on cosmopolitan ideas. The apparent effectiveness of approximation through economic integration and conditionality during various enlargement waves enabled the EU, and its Eastern partners, to engage in geopolitics, while at the same time maintaining a measure of plausible deniability. For the Commission, Council and the member states, the outsourcing of military matters to NATO allowed for the continued claim that enlargement, and initiatives like the EaP were not about the *realpolitik* of old, but about the expansion of security and peace through shared prosperity and democratic norms, even as its partners to the East, and its new Central and Eastern European

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[1] Kirkham R and Cardwell PJ. (2006) The European Union: a Role Model for Regional Governance? *European Public Law* 12: 403-431; Laffan B. (1998) The European Union: a Distinctive Model of Internationalization. *Journal of European Public Policy* 5: 235-253.

[2] Munich Security Conference. (2020) *Westlessness: the Munich Security Conference 2020*. Available at: https://securityconference.org/en/news/full/westlessness-the-munich-security-conference-2020/.

[3] Delcour L and Wolczuk K. (2015) Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratization?: Russia's Role in Georgia and Ukraine. *Democratization* 22: 459-478.

[4] Polyakova A and Haddad B. (2019) Europe Alone: What Comes After the Transatlantic Alliance. *Foreign Affairs* 98: 109-120.

member states also included more instrumental factors – such as the containment of Russia - in their calculations.[5]

Now that the plausible deniability of geopolitics and the effectiveness of past 'soft' strategies and NATO outsourcing have become less tenable, the EU and its Eastern partners will be faced with difficult choices. For an unconventional entity like the EU – built as it is on premises antithetical to Europe's traditional power-politics and its assumption of unfettered state sovereignty - their complex and at times paradoxical nature will pose a serious, perhaps even insurmountable challenge. Although some shift towards a more flexible, and more openly interest-based foreign policy is visible in recent iterations of core policy documents,[6] greater shifts and reconfigurations may emerge in the future, driven, among others, by the ongoing crisis of the liberal post-Cold War system; if at all possible in light of its transformative effects on the EU itself, it is by no means certain that such a shift would fit into the long-held expectations of the participants to the Eastern Partnership, who would have to take the possibility of such change into consideration in their worst-case scenarios on future developments.

What will this shift towards greater pragmatism mean for the normative aspects of EU power? Can the EU maintain its longer-term relevance, and, indeed, coherence, in light of this shift? And what are the implications of such a shift for Europe's neighbours, and partners, in the Eastern neighbourhood? The answers to these questions depend, among others, on the extent to which the EU's conditional engagement will be driven by what the literature refers to as instrumental 'logics of consequences', as opposed to morally-driven 'logics of appropriateness';[7] a move away from the latter - which a more flexible, pragmatic approach implies - will have important implications on the European Union's ability and willingness to live up to

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[5] Higashino A. (2004) For the Sake of 'Peace and Security'? The Role of Security in the European Union Enlargement Eastwards. *Cooperation and Conflict* 39: 347-368; Tymoshenko Y. (2007) Containing Russia. *Foreign Affairs* 86: 69-82.

[6] Smith KE. (2017) A European Union Global strategy for a Changing World? *International Politics* 54: 503-518; Tereszkiewicz F. (2020) The European Union as a Normal International Actor: an Analysis of the EU Global Strategy. Ibid.57: 95-114.

[7] March JG and Olsen JP. (1989) *Rediscovering Institutions,* New York: Free Press.

the commitments towards its partners, and conversely, the justified expectations of those partners towards the Union.

The Unbearable Lightness of Norms

Much of the EU's engagement with the wider world has, so far, been based on its status as a normative model – backed up with a measure of economic clout. Indeed, this has been acknowledged by a host of documents, including the instruments underlying the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership

themselves.[8] Socialisation into a distinct body of norms stands at the centre of initiatives like the ENP and the EaP; and while a considerable proportion of these norms – embodied in the 'Acquis' - are technical in nature, some – including democracy, good governance, the rule of law, minority rights – have a very strong *moral*, rather than purely *instrumental* content. They are seen as values in themselves, rather than merely drawing their worth from, say, the rather more utilitarian aim of facilitating economic growth through integration.

Conditionality has thus worked through what social scientists refer to as logics of consequences, and logics of appropriateness: norms are exported or adopted

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[8] European External Action Service. (2019) *Eastern Partnership*. Available at: http://eeas.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm; European Commission. (2020b) *European Neighbourhood Policy*. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/neighbourhood/european-neighbourhood-policy_en; European Commission. (2020a) Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions. In: Policy HRotUfFAaS (ed). Brussels: European Commission.

because they are *useful*, and/or because they are seen as inherently *right*. States and societies desiring accession or integration have gravitated towards the EU for reasons that include motivations of both types: because of the resulting socio-economic gains, and the strengthening of their sovereignty on the one hand; or because of values aspired to by their elites and societies on the other. The same goes the other way round: the European Union has, traditionally, promoted its values because it has seen them as inherently *right*, while also considering them, along with the more technical elements of the acquis, a worthwhile tool for outside engagement, not least in the creation of a 'zone of stability' around itself.

Disentangling these two logics is well-nigh impossible. While some (convincingly) point out that the 'logic of appropriateness' has always played a subordinate role to its more consequentialist, instrumental counterpart, both remain relevant.[9] A sense of moral superiority over Machiavellian power-politics forms an indelible part of the European Union's institutional identity, and thus puts certain limits on what it can say, and do. Likewise, partner states and societies desire integration not merely out of instrumental considerations: witness the high costs paid by Ukraine, and Georgia for their Euro-Atlantic orientations. But these logics are crumbling – from both sides – at risk both from their internal contradictions, and from a reinvigoration of the nation state as the repository of both interest, and values.

Normative Power Threatened

Firstly, the EU's normative power risks becoming impaired in view of both its internal workings, and broader political developments. This impairment goes beyond the greater flexibility shown in the EU's external relations in recent years; partly in response to Russia's spoiling, the EU has indeed moved towards a more geopolitical, and less conditional stance in relations with its Eastern neighbours, bilateralising the Eastern Partnership, and loosening the criteria for interaction with openly autocratic states, including Belarus, and Azerbaijan.[10] While this recalibration towards the more pragmatic has already moved EU policy away from a values-based approach, the question still remains – to paraphrase Stalin - as to whether one can at all play

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[9] Tocci N. (2008) *The European Union as a Normative Foreign Policy Actor,* Brussels: CEPS.
[10] Nitoiu C and Sus M. (2019) Introduction: The Rise of Geopolitics in the EU's Approach in its Eastern Neighbourhood. *Geopolitics* 24: 1-19.

geopolitics without (military) divisions. Twenty years ago, discounting the military issue-area would have been tenable; but, as examples in Ukraine and Georgia show, such a discounting has come at the price of irrelevance in the most important shocks and crises in the Eastern neighbourhood.

A more fundamental potential threat to normativity emerges from growing Eurosceptic right-wing populism within the Union: more than a simple recalibration of policy, this challenge risks entirely de-railing the very foundations on which such interaction has been based, from two angles: firstly, through the weakening of both the 'logics of appropriateness' and 'consequences' driving the EU's normative power. Secondly, through the possible impairment of the Union's ability to reach a consensus on its underlying values, and, in fact, collective foreign and defence policy itself, because of its reinvigoration of the nation-state as the centre of high-politics decision making.

To begin with, the EU's continued adherence to normative power was based on two requirements. From the point of view of a 'logic of appropriateness', that the EU continue to both see itself, and be seen as an aspirational model exhibiting the virtues of democracy, and liberalism; from a 'logic of consequences' perspective, that the export of these norms and values continue bringing concrete, positive results to both the European Union itself and its Eastern partners in facilitating a set of stabilising, integrating goals in its neighbourhood – stability, modernity, prosperity, and the like. Both of these 'logics' are in danger of becoming seriously impaired in this brave new world of liberal crisis.

The 'logic of appropriateness' of the European Union is now in doubt because of the emergence of populist regimes in Hungary and Poland, and the broader populist challenge in several larger, Western member states. The first, most obvious problem in their rise is the internal weakening of the project as a 'community of values', from the perspective of both the EU, and its Eastern Partners: part of the basis for its attractiveness to societies in its neighbourhood, and, in fact, of its identity as a supra-national actor. The breakdown in consensus on the *moral* values that drive the Union, its fragmenting between the various member states has formed a palpable internal fracture within the EU; moreover, from the outside perspective of states and

societies aspiring to these values, the very presence of such illiberalism at the heart of the EU will, if left unaddressed - as it arguably has been over the previous years - weaken its ability to stand as a model for 'democracy' and the 'rule of law'.

As for the more instrumental 'usefulness' of socialisation: from the European perspective, the rise of the likes of Orbán clearly demonstrates that the 'maturing' of liberal democracies is *not* irreversible, as it was once assumed to be.[11]

While this is not yet apparent over the shorter term, over the longer term such reversibility ends up further undermining the European Union's 'logic of consequences', the assumption of 'stabilisation through democratisation and liberalisation' underlying Eastward engagement. That logic has already been compromised through the demonstrable lack of stability brought about by Russian 'spoiling'; it may lose even more of its power if liberal democracy itself is seen as reversible, and, therefore, inherently unstable. The same applies for those partner states, and societies, aspiring to market-based economies, and democratic political systems subject to the rule of law: suddenly, their efforts risk not having a clear, irreversible 'maturation' endpoint – even when guaranteed by the EU, and even in the (still unlikely) event of EU membership.

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[11] Shekhovtsov A. (2016) *Is Transition Reversible? The Case of Central Europe,* London: Legatum Institute.

But the emergence of right-wing populism across the European Union has another, more insidious and generalised potential consequence for the functioning of the EU as a strategic actor. While it is true that Brexit has moved many of these movements away from a radically anti-EU stance (public opinion in most, if not all, member states is now generally in favour of continued membership – although this might be changing in light of the shocks of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis),[12] their presence may quite conceivably weaken a general commitment to the collective definitions of security and interest that would underlie any future EU external policy.

Rather than being the result of a free-standing, conspiratorial subservience to Russia, there is a broader ideological underpinning to this process: a redefinition of world-views away from a cosmopolitan concern for liberal-democratic values, towards a more narrowly defined, state/'people'-centric, communitarian view of the national interest.[13] This is especially visible in member states with strong, right-wing populist parties; and even before their coming to power, this alternative is exerting pressures on leaders in the European 'core' – notably France's Macron – to redefine national and European foreign policies away from an expansive, normative agendas of the previous decades.

The broad lines of EU foreign policy already tend to emerge from a 'lowest common denominator' found through complex interactions between the EEAS, Commission, and Council;[14] if anything, recent years have seen the emphasis either shifting towards the latter, or major policy decisions – in Ukraine and elsewhere – being kept well outside the confines of the EU and its institutions.[15] A populist takeover of a major European state would lead to an exacerbation of this tendency, through a final, decisive shift of the centre of gravity of 'high politics' away from its institutions, towards the nation-states, and a resultant move towards sovereign, incompatible,

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[12] Krastev I. (2020) *Seven Early Lessons from the Coronavirus*. Available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_seven_early_lessons_from_the_coronavirus?fbclid=IwAR3xvRyjYxI1 krT4nrBo8teRIbc_gWQKlO9EGg-PzcdXXtZl4OVIxtOLPyI.

[13] Betz H-G and Johson C. (2017) Against the Current-Stemming the Tide: the Nostalgic Ideology of the Contemporary Radical Populist Right. In: Mudde C (ed) *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader.* London: Routledge, 68-82.

[14] Scharpf FW. (2006) The Joint-Decision Trap Revisited. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 44: 845-864.

[15] ECFR. (2017) *Wider Europe: Support for Ukraine*. Available at: https://www.ecfr.eu/scorecard/2016/wider/30.

and fractured, rather than supra-national, collective, and pooled notions of interests and values. Manufacturing a 'lowest common denominator' from now fractured irremediably splintered priorities and values would then either lead to these policies' dilution into greater ineffectiveness, or even – in the very worst case - an end to any efforts at devising such collective responses.

The Revenge of the State

All of the above suggests the extent to which turning the European Union into a relevant great power – as recently suggested by Joschka Fischer[16] – is contradicted by pre-existing material impediments, amplified by fundamental structural changes in the broader ideational context: first of all, the weakening of one of the elements that were traditionally seen as the basis of its power – the normative elements – does not bode well for the future. While its various aspects functioned well at the height of the liberal era, internal contradictions have greatly weakened its effectiveness: the EU is no longer as good as it used to be in extolling the virtues of liberal democracy and economic integration, and its normative power is, in any case, of limited value in realising the goal of long-term regional stability in an age increasingly driven by the power-political.

But neither does the introduction of a measure of *realpolitik* into its foreign policy – notably the Eastern Partnership – provide a viable answer. While its economic resources are formidable, it lacks one attribute that would be absolutely essential in such a move: sovereign control over military capabilities. The twenty-first century is the age of a particularly complex globalised form of realpolitik; and those who do not bring the required 'kit' to the table are likely to be ignored. The irrelevance of the European Union on the ground in Syria - one of the defining crises of our age, and one that has directly affected its very stability - is instructive in that regard.[17]

If anything, internal developments point *against*, rather than *towards,* a necessary strengthening of the collective elements that were slated for reform during the

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[16] Fischer J. (2020) What Kind of Great Power Can Europe Become? *Project Syndicate*. (accessed 19 March 2020).

[17] Karacasulu N and Karakir IA. (2016) The Dog that Didn't Bark? EU Crisis Management and the Syrian Crisis. *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 28: 525-544.

troubled previous decade: populists may have become less committed to their opposition to the EU[18] – but they haven't turned into confederalists either, and would no doubt be prepared to depart from their new-found moderation in the event of a major internal EU crisis. Their communitarian view diverges from the European Union's universalism, and fragments the EU's status as a 'security community' of states with a collective definition of security (or insecurity), in favour of individual nation-states, even without their coming to power in a major European state; and the presence of Marine Le Pen as the main opposition to Emmanuel Macron and worrying recent developments in Italy make that a distinct possibility in the near future.

And that brings us to the crux of the matter: the institutional incompatibility of realpolitik with the continued functioning of the European Union in its current form. Pragmatism is only one aspect of a realist foreign policy; at its core, it also implies the existence of a political community (a '*polis*' or 'people') which such an approach is supposed to safeguard. The fundamental problem is that the EU, having defined itself in expansive but indeterminate universalist terms since its inception, lacks both the means of putting in place such policies, and a community towards which such policies would be enacted – having been unable to create a united sense of European citizenship. A realpolitik approach would risk being eclipsed by a political

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[18] Van Kessel S, Chelotti N, Drake H, et al. (2020) Eager to Leave? Populist Radical Right Parties' Responses to the UK's Brexit Vote. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 22: 65-84.

form of organisation that boasts both - the nation-state – and that has re-emerged into relevance, with a vengeance, during the previous decade.

The distinctly *national* responses to the ongoing Covid-19 crisis are quite indicative of this process of *national* rather than *supra-national* identification: the personalities providing leadership in their particular states were still *national* leaders, and populations tuned in to the reassurances of their chancellors, prime ministers and presidents – not the presidents of the Commission or the Council. The very valid argument of subsidiarity and limited competencies may very well end up eclipsed by the EU's perceived – correctly or not - absence and populist nationalism in subsequent, inevitably politicised debates. What's more, the crisis has given licence to authoritarians like Orbán to intensify their machinations in ways that would, if left unchallenged, further fray the credibility of the EU as a democratising and modernising project.

In that sense, the previous years may very well have been one of lost opportunity. Greater integration may have been possible in this century's first decade, but that window appears to have now closed in the light of the clear failure of the half-measures taken at the time. Proposals regarding defence, fiscal and banking unions - suggested with regularity, often as knee-jerk responses to various failures and crises - remained unrealised, while democratic backsliding by Central and Eastern European governments was treated with relative leniency. While the ideological environment might still have made them both necessary and feasible up to several years ago, the current political environment makes them highly doubtful.

Whatever the EU becomes in the future, it is therefore unlikely – or, at least, even less likely than in the past - to become the kind of entity capable of formulating coherent and forceful policies, backed up by the required capabilities: a *conditio sine qua non* for great power status, or, indeed, general strategic relevance in a more power-political age. Instead, extrapolating from the experience of the previous decade, and the direction of EU policy, a loose 'community of states' appears to be a much more likely outcome – especially where foreign and security policies are concerned. The twenty-first century, with has seen a return to traditional state-centric geopolitics in combination with more novel security challenges - will be one where

players will have to bring more than merely universal ideals and economic carrots and sticks to the table.

Implications for the Eastern Partners

This pessimistic view is, admittedly, based on worst-case assumptions and extrapolations, and may therefore turn out to be quite mistaken. There is, of course, an alternative scenario where the European Union gets its act together, acknowledges the fundamental crisis in the liberal foundations on which it is built, tackles the challenges posed by the complexity and distance of its institutions and the absence of a clearly defined political community, and, against the odds, presents a clear, mobilising alternative to the right-wing populist challenge that goes beyond the half-measures of old. But, given the current arc of history, that remains unlikely: this is an age that favours fragmentation, not integration.

Indeed, current political realities point in the direction of an intensified shift of EU foreign policy away from the normative, towards the more indeterminate, or even a paralysis of the supranational entity in light of the increased salience of the selfish nation-state. While Eastern Partnership states and societies can themselves do little in addressing the challenges posed by these potential developments, while they still can, both the European Union and its partner states can take measures aimed at

independently enhancing the long-term anchoring of liberal-democratic values within their societies, in order to ensure their survival even in the face of a weakening normative commitment by the EU.

On the part of states striving for greater integration with the European Union, this would involve a recalibration of expectations *away* from the assumption that the organisation itself will continue to provide the same kind of broad and deep engagement seen in previous years. In that sense, the move by the EU itself towards a more pragmatic approach should be seen as a double-edged sword: if conditionality is no longer as much of a requirement, or an asset, as in the past – because its underlying normative logic has now been impaired – it does indeed give Eastern partners more agency in defining their relationship with the Union. Conversely, a less normatively driven policy makes the EU and its member states less committed to its democratising counterparts: with the 'logic of appropriateness' no longer limiting action, and democratisation no longer holding the stabilising promise it once had, previously inconceivable compromises with, for instance, Russia, become a possibility.

This should provide additional incentive for partner states to continue deepening *bilateral* relations with EU members able and willing to assist them in achieving their strategic goals by supplementing or complementing the Union's role. It should also encourage a reinforced emphasis on self-sufficiency, and the ability to drive liberal-democratic development, and resilience in the face of external challenges – notably from Russia – with less outside assistance. From that perspective, the European Union's recent – and albeit practically limited[19] - emphasis on local ownership may be a step in the right direction, especially in countries where important sections of civil society and media are able (or close to able) to independently hold their governments to account: in the absence of the Union's top-down incentives, *they* will be the primary, bottom-up proponents of liberal-democratic values in the face of their

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[19] Petrova I and Delcour L. (2019) From Principle to Practice? The Resilience–Local Ownership Nexus in the EU Eastern Partnership Policy. *Contemporary Security Policy* 41: 336-360.

elites' possible temptation to abandon them in the face of Russian incentives.[20] Twenty-first century realism will thus require these states and societies to recognise both the limits of external institutions, and the power of their own agency - and responsibility - in determining their own future.

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[20] Roberts S and Ziemer U. (2018) Explaining the Pattern of Russian Authoritarian Diffusion in Armenia. *East European Politics* 34: 152-172.