

Geopolitical EU? The EU's Wartime Assistance to Ukraine

ELISABETH JOHANSSON-NOGUÉS¹  and FRANCESCA LESO² ¹Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals (IBEI), Barcelona ²Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Barcelona

Abstract

This article explores the European Union's (EU's) assistance to Ukraine through the lens of critical geopolitics with a view to ascertaining whether the EU has become more geopolitical in its thinking and actions towards Eastern Europe. Our findings point to a mixed picture. Whilst the EU 'mindscape' appears to have shifted in relation to Eastern Europe, Ukraine and itself as an actor in the region, it is less apparent that the EU's foreign and security policy action has become geopoliticised. The 2022 Russian invasion has certainly seen a step change from the hesitant and self-conscious approach that characterised the EU's engagement with Eastern Europe prior to 2022. However, declarations such as that by the High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission (HRVP) around the 'birth of geopolitical Europe' appear to be somewhat premature, as there is limited evidence at this stage that the EU is willing to provide leadership on the geospatial (re)ordering of the region.

Keywords: assistance; EU; geopolitical; mindscape and geospatial ordering; Ukraine; war

Introduction

I think this is the moment in which the geopolitical Europe is being born. (HRVP Josep Borrell, 1 March 2022)

For the European Union (EU), the Russian invasion of Ukraine has meant a clear before and after in its relations with Eastern Europe.¹ Prior to 2022, the EU tended to proceed in a very careful and self-conscious way in its approach towards the region. Aware of the Russian desire for regional pre-eminence and unwilling to cause further tensions, the EU tried to maintain a relatively low profile in the eastern part of the continent. The EU member states were, as a consequence, reluctant to get too deeply involved in the region's various social crises or armed conflicts, which have occurred in the last decades (e.g., Barbé and Johansson-Nogués, 2008; Delcour, 2010; Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Härtel, 2022; Wolczuk, 2009).

The Russian invasion in 2022, however, clearly shifted the EU's attitude towards the region, in particular in relation to Ukraine. Aside from opening the doors to a future Ukrainian EU membership, during the first 18 months of the war, the EU has allocated over 31 billion euros in the largest macro-financial assistance, budget support, humanitarian aid and emergency aid ever given to a third country. The EU and its member states have also taken unprecedented steps to allow temporary protection for Ukrainian refugees, open solidary lanes on goods and provide lethal military assistance. The unparalleled scale and scope of the EU's wartime assistance to Ukraine, together with a willingness to break longstanding policy taboos, clearly indicate the EU's strong desire

¹For our purposes here, 'Eastern Europe' is a heuristic used to refer to all countries in geographical Eastern Europe that are not currently EU member states.

to, in the words of the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, ‘do everything possible to support [...] and to make sure that Ukraine will win the war’ (European Council, 2022a). Echoing such views, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, has declared that ‘[t]he entire EU stands behind Ukraine’ (European Commission, 2022a).

To the High Representative and Vice President of the European Commission (HRVP) Josep Borrell, this newfound boldness in the EU’s engagement with and commitment to Ukraine represents a new stage for the EU as an international actor and marks the ‘birth of geopolitical EU’ [European External Action Service (EEAS), 2022a; see also European Commission, 2023a]. A month into the conflict, Borrell expressed his belief that the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine had constituted a watershed for the geopoliticisation of the EU’s foreign, security and defence policy as

[f]or years, Europeans have been debating how to make the EU more security-conscious, with a unity of purpose and capabilities to pursue its political goals on the world stage. We have now arguably gone further down that path in the past weeks than we did in the previous decade. (EEAS, 2022a)

However, whilst it is true that the EU has shown a relatively exceptional unity over and solidarity with Ukraine as of 2022 and indeed acquired new motivation with which to assist the country in a way it could not in the context of the 2014 Crimean crisis, the open question that warrants more in-depth academic scrutiny is whether this properly heralds the transformation of the EU into a geopolitical actor in Eastern Europe.

We will employ a critical geopolitical theory lens and a cross-case study method to interrogate the EU’s wartime assistance to Ukraine during the first 18 months of the conflict for its potential connection to the vaunted emergence of a geopolitical EU. The article is structured as follows: the first section provides background information and a literature review, as well as outlines the conceptual framework. The second section unpacks the EU’s wartime assistance to Ukraine across the various dimensions of aid provided: humanitarian, economic, energy and military. The final section provides an analysis of the shifting mindscapes amongst EU policy elites towards Eastern Europe and whether geopolitical markers have come to predominate in the EU’s foreign, security and defence policy towards the region.

I. The EU, Ukraine and Critical Geopolitics

Beyond the Russian Federation, Eastern Europe represented, for a long time, a no-go zone for the EU. In the 1990s, the EU was primarily centred on avoiding the meltdown and further destabilisation of Russia in its turbulent first decade of independence (Herrberg, 1997; Zimmermann, 2007). This ‘Russia-first’ policy, together with the concern over Russian susceptibilities for the then-pending Eastern enlargement, entailed that the EU was not inclined to engage with other Eastern European countries beyond a limited set of trade and co-operation agreements (Wolczuk, 2009). However, as the Eastern enlargement process came to an end, various EU member states began expressing a desire to strengthen ties with Eastern Europe, beyond Russia (Johansson-Nogués, 2007). The 2004 European Neighbourhood Policy and the 2009 Eastern Partnership,

encompassing Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, thus aim to expand the EU's engagement with the region.

The EU's relations with Eastern European countries through the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership have been the focus of intense scholarly scrutiny. For some, the EU's policies towards the region represented a functionalist or depoliticised style of co-operation (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009) or a kneejerk exercise of institutional isomorphism (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015; Kelley, 2006). For these scholars, the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership entailed technocratic and legalistic practices, lacking in overall geostrategic vision, which stood in sharp contrast to the high politicisation and geopolitical awareness amongst EU member states on Russia (Haukkala, 2016). For yet others, the EU's policies towards its eastern neighbours represented highly political acts (Browning, 2018), even (c)overt modes of colonialisation and empire building (Zielonka, 2018), of 'buffer zones' (Marchetti, 2018) or were designed to foment ontological security for the EU as an international actor (Johansson-Nogués, 2018a). However, most of these scholars still tended to find the EU's relations with its Eastern European neighbours as they developed over time void of the habitual markers of geopolitics, as the EU's region-building exercises were more frequently than not self-referential to the EU and its policies, as well as for the fact that its focus on promotion of universal norms and values was delinked from geospatiality.

The 2014 Crimean crisis was to mark a turning point that made it evident how the EU's action in Eastern Europe had contributed – even if inadvertently – 'to turn the region into a space of geopolitical competition' (Gehring et al., 2017). In November 2013, then President Viktor Yanukovich's decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the EU plunged Ukraine into the Euromaidan crisis. The popular outpouring into the Ukrainian streets in turn triggered Russia's annexation of Crimea, its support for the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as energy and trade retaliations (Dragneva and Wolczuk, 2015). The EU responded by adopting a mix of coercive diplomacy and mediation. On the one hand, it imposed a series of sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, it endorsed the mediation efforts that two of its member states, Germany and France, carried out through the so-called Normandy Format. In parallel, the EU also intensified its ties with Kyiv under the new government of Petro Poroshenko (Young, 2017). The Association Agreement, the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, the launch of the EU Advisory Mission Ukraine (EUAM) and the establishment of a visa-free regime were all meant to promote political reforms and economic growth as well as, in general, mitigate the effects of Russian geopolitical designs on the country. The EU also became a major financial donor to Ukraine. It is estimated that between 2014 and 2021, the EU provided Kyiv with approximately 17 billion euros in loans and grants, along with 190 million euros in humanitarian aid (European Parliament, 2023).

Yet, various observers believe that the EU's response to the Crimean crisis ultimately turned out to be relatively weak, with measures that can be mostly qualified as indirect and soft balancing (Nováky, 2015). Sanctions were mixed with a pragmatic engagement with Russia, which effectively constrained the EU's leverage over Moscow (Härtel, 2022). The EU's energy dependency on Russia also decidedly limited its freedom of manoeuvre and prevented a stronger EU diplomatic response. The decision not to provide military

assistance to Ukraine nor to establish a monitoring or peacekeeping mission highlighted the unwillingness of most member states to directly confront Russia, reaffirming the EU's longstanding hesitation towards becoming drawn into Eastern European (in)security (German and Tyushka, 2022; Nováky, 2015). The EU thus only played a marginal role in the political and diplomatic management of the Crimean crisis and the changing Eastern European geopolitical landscape. The lion's share of conflict management was left in the hands of other institutions, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and some EU member states, like France and Germany, which, as some have argued, ended up accommodating Moscow's requests at the expense of Ukraine's interests (Kuzio, 2017).

Against this background, we will try to assess whether the EU's response to the 2022 Russian invasion marked a change in the EU's outlook on Eastern Europe and for its foreign, security and defence policy towards this region by employing some insights from critical geopolitics theory. Critical geographers hold that geopolitics refers to any policy or political behaviour that is predominantly informed by geographical or geospatial markers. To critical scholars, physical borders, territorial sovereignty and indeed even the concept of the 'state' are non-essentialised political constructs invoking geography without being determined by it (Dalby, 1991). Physical landscapes are thus only relevant in terms of how they are transformed into political 'mindscapes' for policy-makers. Mindscapes are the cognitive map that the intellectuals of statecraft use to articulate their vision of the 'world' populated by particular types of places, peoples and unfolding dramas (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992). Mindscapes thus perform a dual-regulating function. It establishes the grounds upon which actors are able to understand and relate to their surroundings, as well as providing prescriptions to guide policy action. As a product of political conventions and socially constituted boundaries, mindscapes hold radically undetermined effects on inter-state relations and/or foreign policy conduct (Van Hotum, 2005). In essence, claims about geographical markers of politics are themselves geopolitical practices, and hence, one could argue that geography is what policy-makers make of it. To unpack the mindscape of policy-makers, critical geopolitical scholars investigate in what way geospatialised notions of 'self' and 'other' and their inter-relation are articulated. In this way, critical geopolitics interrogates how spatialised discourses and practices come to inform and inscribe new ideas, identities and behavioural norms on territorial expanses and their inhabitants. Critical geopolitics also pays special attention to how reconfigured and spatialised self–other relations produce new, or affect already sedimented, power hierarchies. As the relation between self and other is revalorised or devalorised based on changing mindscapes, a redistribution of relative power between the two may occur. Self might adopt a hegemonic role in relation to other, or vice versa. Critical political geographers are therefore sensitive to how power (re)distribution is affected by shifting elite mindscapes and if the discourses act to impose 'geospatial ordering' or not, that is, act to discipline self and other into conforming to certain roles, expectations, social conventions or behaviour (Dalby, 1991; Scott, 2011).

On a methodological note, we have employed a cross-case study method to explore the EU's changing mindscape of Eastern Europe, Ukraine and itself, as well as to examine the potential for a geopolitically informed EU foreign and security policy towards the region. The cross-case analysis allows us to compare and contrast the materiality of power in the discourses and practices inherent to the multifaceted and highly diverse ambits of the

EU's wartime assistance to Ukraine in order to ascertain the EU political leaders' attitudes and outlook towards Ukraine and Eastern Europe. The resulting cumulative data from discourse and action provide us with an understanding of the prevailing mindscape inside the EU as well as if there are any burgeoning ambitions for geospatial ordering of the region. We have grouped the EU's sectoral assistance in the first 18 months of the war into three broad groups: humanitarian, economic and trade, as well as military, to facilitate our analysis. We have scrutinised primary sources in the form of official documents or speeches and employed secondary literature to provide further contextualisation of different EU actions.

II. The EU's Post-2022 Wartime Assistance to Ukraine

Since the Russian invasion in 2022, the EU has provided unprecedented levels of direct assistance to Ukraine, a fact that has surprised many longstanding observers.² During the first 18 months of the war, it is estimated that the EU allocated approximately 31 billion euros in humanitarian and economic support, whilst an additional 5.6 billion euros from intergovernmental funds have been devoted to military assistance. In what follows, we will explore the details of the measures adopted by the EU during the period.³

Humanitarian Assistance

To respond to the humanitarian crisis, the EU has allocated 685 million in support for the various aid programmes that international and local partners – e.g., United Nations (UN) agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and various NGOs – have been implementing for the almost 18 million Ukrainians who require some form of humanitarian assistance [European Commission, 2023b; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023]. Beside this financial support for third actors, the EU has also deployed a series of its own instruments. In particular, the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism has co-ordinated the delivery of emergency assistance material that EU and non-EU countries, as well as private entities, have donated to Ukraine (e.g., medical supplies, shelter items, power generators and school buses). Ukraine has in this manner received 95,800 tonnes of supplies, worth approximately 769 million euros, including over 127 million euros worth of supplies from *rescEU*, the Union's own emergency stockpile. The size and scale of the co-ordination effort are held by the EU as 'the largest, longest lasting and most complex operation' that the EU has ever conducted under this framework (European Commission, 2022b).

Along with humanitarian aid and provisions to assist those internally displaced inside Ukraine, the EU has also taken a series of steps to address what has become 'one of the fastest-growing refugee emergencies in history, and the largest since World War II' (UNHCR, 2023). On 4 March 2022, the EU member states unanimously decided to

²With direct assistance, we refer to aid that has been allocated to help Ukraine cope with the consequences of war, defend itself and prevent state failure. We therefore exclude, for example, EU sanctions on Russia, as the latter only has indirect effects on Ukraine. For an overview of EU sanctions on Russia, see Bosse (2022).

³In June 2023, the European Commission proposed the establishment of the 'Ukraine Facility', a package of 50 billion in loans and grants to support Ukraine financially until 2027. In parallel, the High Representative Josep Borell mentioned the proposal of 20 billion in military assistance for the next 4 years. In February 2024, the European Council eventually agreed on the 50 billion financial support package, whilst, at the time of writing, EU member states have not yet made a decision with regard to the proposal by the HRVP.

activate, for the very time since its creation in 2001, the Temporary Protection Directive, which allows persons fleeing conflict to receive immediate assistance without the lengthy processes involved in standard forms of international protection. It is estimated that since 2022, approximately 4.1 million Ukrainian refugees have benefited from this scheme, which includes residence permits, access to education, healthcare, housing and the labour market. The president of the Commission has alleged that the EU has wanted to show the refugees that they ‘are welcome here [in the EU]. It is wonderful to have them here and we want to give them shelter and support, and help as much as possible’ (European Commission, 2022c).⁴

Finally, the EU has also contributed to ongoing international efforts to ensure that war crimes are duly addressed. Upon mounting allegations, the Ukrainian General Prosecutor, the International Criminal Court (ICC) and 14 EU member states have launched investigations into potential crimes committed in the context of the war. For its part, the EU has supported the ICC financially with 7.5 million euros, helped to co-ordinate the various investigation efforts and has also taken a series of steps to assist the relevant Ukrainian authorities (European Commission, 2023b). For instance, the EUAM’s mandate was extended to include the advisory and training of local authorities in the investigations and persecution of war-related crimes, whilst legal amendments were made to also allow Eurojust to collect, store, analyse and share evidence related to international crimes (European Parliament and Council of the EU, 2022).

Economic and Energy Assistance

The EU has played a crucial role in providing Ukraine with economic and energy assistance in the first year of the war. The conflict has had a significant impact on Ukraine’s economy. The country’s GDP is believed to have contracted by at least one third in 2022, leaving a budget gap that the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022) estimates to be around 38 billion dollars. In response, the EU has, according to von der Leyen, ‘mobilised our [the EU’s] economic might like never before’ (European Commission, 2022d) and agreed to provide Ukraine with an emergency macro-financial assistance (MFA) programme for a total of 25.2 billion euros (7.2 billion in 2022 and 18 billion in 2023) in the form of highly concessional long-term loans. Whilst the various MFA packages constitute the bulk of the EU’s economic aid, the EU has also supported Ukraine through other forms of economic assistance. In particular, the European Commission (2023b) reports that at least 2 billion euros have been mobilised in the form of grants, whilst the EU budget has been used to guarantee loans allocated by European and international financial institutions for a total value of 2.6 billion. The overall financial and budget assistance provided by the EU in the first 18 months of the war makes it the largest financial contributor to Ukraine, ahead of other donors such as the US and international financial institutions (Trebesch et al., 2023).⁵ The aim of the economic assistance is to ensure that the Ukrainian state may continue to provide basic public services for the population, repair vital infrastructure and guarantee the country’s financial stability. Furthermore, as of 2023, the macro-financial assistance package is coupled with a reform

⁴It is worth noting the difference in attitude towards Ukrainian refugees with the securitised approach that characterised how EU member states responded to the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis.

⁵Albeit arguably not the most generous, the EU has relied predominantly on concessional loans instead of grants.

plan expected to lay the foundations for the longer term post-war reconstruction process and to help the country on its road to EU membership. The ambition, according to EU officials, is to work 'together' on 'a very clear roadmap on how to deliver and how to orchestrate this reconstruction, with full transparency, full accountability, to help Ukraine rise from the ashes' (European Commission, 2022e).

The EU has also resorted to extensive trade liberalisation measures that a spokesperson for the European Commission (2022f) are described by the Commission as an 'unprecedented gesture of support for a country at war'. In 2022, the Commission launched the so-called 'EU-Ukraine Solidarity Lanes' with the aim to optimise existing EU-Ukraine logistic routes and develop alternative ones. The goal is to provide immediate relief for Ukrainian trade constraints caused by the conflict, as well as to ensure that Kyiv can import goods of basic necessity. As a measure, the Commission has, for example, provided technical support to speed up customs checks and address bottlenecks at the borders. It has also concluded a road transport agreement allowing operators to transit across the respective territories without the need for specific permits or international driving licences. The EU has also acted to temporarily suspend import duties on all Ukrainian exports, as well as all the anti-dumping and common safeguard measures imposed on steel (European Commission, 2023b).

Finally, the EU has been supporting energy re-exporting schemes to guarantee the steady flow of electricity and gas into Ukraine. For example, through the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity, a project to harmonise the Ukrainian electricity grid with the continental power system, in place since 2017, was finalised in a record time of just a few weeks into the war. As an additional measure, the European Commission (2023b) requested the Energy Community, an international organisation established with the aim of developing an integrated and sustainable energy market between the EU and neighbouring countries, to set up an Energy Support Fund, which has provided more than 220 million euros to date.

Military Assistance

The EU's military assistance to Ukraine is considered a particular watershed for the EU's foreign, security and defence policy. The European Peace Facility (EPF) was activated in the first days after the Russian invasion to provide Ukraine with the military means to resist the assault on its territory.⁶ The EU ministers not only agreed to fund member states' supply of protective equipment, first aid kits and fuel but also, in sharp contravention of its erstwhile 'everything-but-arms' assistance policy, decided to employ the EPF's funds to reimburse member states' provision of military equipment and platforms designed to deliver lethal force (Council of the EU, 2022). The EPF contribution for the delivery of military equipment in the period reached a total of 5.6 billion, of which 2 billion were specifically dedicated to the reimbursement and joint procurement of ammunition and missiles (Council of the EU, 2023). During a visit to Kyiv, von der Leyen justified the EU's change of policy, given that the widespread feeling within the EU was that

⁶Prior to 2022, the EPF was limited to financing the common costs of common security and defence policy missions, supporting peace operations carried out by partner organisations and strengthening the non-lethal military capacities of third countries.

[y]our [Ukraine's] fight is our fight. [...] Ukrainian people are holding up the torch of freedom for all of us. The European Union is sending weapons to your country [...] With this we support the brave Ukrainian soldiers, fighting for Ukraine's freedom. And for everyone's freedom. (European Commission, 2022g)

The EU's decision to use EPF to fund lethal weaponry is perhaps one of the very few areas of wartime assistance in which there have been some cracks in the EU's otherwise relatively cohesive support for Ukraine. Controversy emerged amongst EU capitals over the speed and quality of some member states' weapons supply, and the EU has encountered some difficulties in securing the member states' support for additional rounds of EPF funding. However, notwithstanding such polemics, it is fair to note that overall EU cohesion over military aid to Ukraine has been notable (Blockmans and De Agostini, 2022). For Charles Michel, the decision to 'deliver military equipment, is a substantial step forward that shows that Europe can, if we so desire, have a real capacity for influence and power in the service of peace and of our values' (European Council, 2022b).

Another type of military assistance provided by the EU to Ukraine is the European Union Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM), launched in November 2022.⁷ EUMAM is also funded through the EPF, and its aim, according to an EU official, is to strengthen the Ukrainian Armed Forces' capacity 'to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity [...] and to deter and respond to possible future military offensives by Russia and other potential aggressors' (EEAS, 2022b). Twenty-four member states are involved in the mission, which will have trained over 25,000 Ukrainian soldiers by September 2023, well beyond the initial target of 15,000 (European Commission, 2023b). For the EU, EUMAM is qualitatively different than the other military training missions the EU has carried out to date in countries such as Somalia, Mali, the Central African Republic and Mozambique. The latter missions have been circumscribed in their mandates as focusing on counterterrorism or combating internal armed and militia groups. EUMAM marks the first time that the EU and its member states provide military training to a country currently involved in an active armed conflict for the purpose of territorial defence against foreign aggressions.

III. The Birth of the Geopolitical EU?

As the previous section attests, the EU has provided Ukraine with unprecedented levels of symbolic, financial, material and technical wartime assistance in the first 18 months of the conflict. If, in the context of the 2014 Crimean crisis, Dragneva and Wolczuk (2015, p. 128) argued that 'Ukraine's problem is that the EU does not care enough about Ukraine's pro-European choice – and Russia cares too much', the situation would appear different today. The EU response in terms of discourse and practice in the aftermath of the 2022 invasion is thus a sea change compared with that in 2014. We will argue that what prompts the EU's engagement with Ukraine today is a set of shifted geopolitical mindscapes on Eastern Europe, Ukraine and the EU itself in relation to the region. However, as we will also argue, the shifting mindscapes amongst the EU's political leaders have yet to produce a corresponding modification in the markers of the EU's

⁷The idea of setting up a military operation in Ukraine was first fielded in 2014, although at the time EU member states could not agree on a mission with a military dimension (German and Tyushka, 2022).

foreign, security and defence policy, which would unambiguously point to a 'geopolitical EU'.

First, in terms of shifting mindscapes, the EU's leaders' attitude towards and outlook on different countries in Eastern Europe – Ukraine foremost amongst them – has clearly changed as a consequence of the war. There has been a realignment of EU institutional and member states' attitudes towards Ukraine and the other countries affected by the war in their condition of being 'victims' of Russian territorial ambitions and/or quest for regional domination. In particular, the EU's political leaders feel a duty to support Ukraine and other Eastern European countries, as the perception in EU capitals is that these countries have, in part, become targets due to their 'European choice' or desire for closer relations with the EU. For example, in terms of Ukraine,

[f]rom the early days of the Maidan on, Ukraine has bravely resisted against Russia's aggression. It went through repression and uprising. It went through territorial annexation, and now outright war. It is the only country where people got shot because they wrapped themselves in a European flag. Ukraine has gone through hell and high water for one simple reason: Its desire to join the European Union. (European Commission, 2022h)

The EU's political elite has also come to see Ukraine as a spatialised 'proxy warrior' or 'defender' of fundamental EU values and principles. The war between Russia and Ukraine is being interpreted as a territorially contained showdown between the two parties over democracy, international law, the rules-based international order and human dignity. Hence, for the EU, it is essential to support Ukraine as the 'Ukrainian people are giving their lives to protect the values on which our Union is built' (European Commission, 2022i). In essence, in the words of von der Leyen, Ukraine is portrayed as

fighting *our* war. It is our fight that they are in. Because it is not only Ukraine fighting for its sovereignty and integrity, but they are also fighting for the question whether humanity will prevail or whether heinous devastation will be the result. It is the question whether democracy will be stronger or if it is autocracy that will dominate. It is the question whether there is the right of might dominating or whether it is the rule of law. (emphasis added; European Commission, 2022c)

As Eastern European countries have come to be seen as 'fighting our fight', the EU's political leadership's mindscape on Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia has clearly shifted to embrace them as a much more integral part of EU–Europe. The view in EU institutions and member states is that 'our Union should be the home of all European countries that share our values. Our European family of values shall flourish and be on good terms with its neighbours' (European Commission, 2022j). This discursive move, in effect, erases any meaningful geospatial distinction between the east and west in geographical Europe. Rather, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia are cognitively reorganised into those that belong to the European 'family', presumably aligned with the EU and its member states, and those that do not. This indeed reveals a novel mindscape amongst the EU political elite of the Eastern-European-other-as-self, which in itself is designed to be seen as a 'message of geopolitical determination' towards Moscow (European Council, 2022c).

Second, there is also evidence that the military onslaught on Ukraine has meant a clear reassessment of EU policy-makers' mindscape of Russia. The EU does no longer appear to be beholden to its erstwhile, and much criticised, caution in its approach towards

Ukraine and other Eastern European countries in deference to Russia's preferences. Russia's war on Ukraine is described by EU political leaders as an 'illegal' and unjustifiable act of 'atrocities', 'aggression' as well as a source of 'incredible human suffering' (European Commission, 2022c). If in 2014 the EU firmly condemned the violation of the borders and mindscapes of Ukraine by Russia, now the concern in EU capitals is that the 'Kremlin wants to eliminate Ukraine. Its statehood, its independence and democracy. And [...] Ukrainians: Their national identity. Their sense of being. Their history, and their hope in the future' (European Commission, 2023c). Hence, the Russian invasion appears to represent a change in the EU's attitude of appeasement, which, from the 2008 Georgian war to the Crimean crisis in 2014, even if not condoned, conceded to Russia the de facto 'right' to maintain a larger geostrategic influence and political control over Eastern Europe. However, in the EU policy-makers' mindscape since 2022, Russia has lost all legitimacy in its claim to predominance in the areas composing the former Soviet Union. To the EU's political leaders, Eastern Europe is no longer the 'backyard' of the Russians; it is now an 'open' region in which any third actor, such as, for example, the EU, can and indeed should intervene and support.

On many levels, the EU's wartime assistance indeed indicates that EU decision-makers' mindscapes in Ukraine and Eastern Europe are undergoing a transformation. With the exception of Russia (and Belarus), the other Eastern European countries have become revalorised. However, what is less clear is whether and how the changing self-other mindscapes are conclusively producing a corresponding shift in the EU foreign, security and defence policy towards the region, whereby geographical/spatial markers have come to predominate or to displace alternative and longer standing foreign policy markers. There is also scarce evidence of a determined EU will for geospatial ordering in Eastern Europe.

First, we note that most of the various EU assistance instruments and mechanisms to support Ukraine, as outlined in Section II, were already policies in place, fully operational and only moderately modified to provide aid once the war began (Genschel, 2022), for example, the macro-financial assistance programme, trade liberalisation measures, the EU's Civil Protection Mechanism or the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity. When new EU initiatives were adopted to support Ukraine, they frequently relied on existing directives (e.g., the Temporary Protection Directive), already planned missions (e.g., EUMAM) or took place within existing EU frameworks (e.g., military assistance funded by the EPF). Arguably, whilst the initial impulse to help Ukraine could be attributed to the predominance of geographical markers at the moment in which the EU's foreign policy decision was adopted, the ensuing assistance, in contrast, rests predominantly on the isomorphic, depoliticised, technocratic, regulatory and functionalist principles that have tended to characterise EU foreign policy much prior to 2022. Similarly, whilst the EU's decision to accept Ukraine and Moldova as EU candidates might have stemmed from geopolitical pressures in the early days of the war, we note that the dynamics of the EU accession process itself remain intact without modifications or concessions to the Eastern European countries in

⁸We note in the context that the geopolitical rationale for granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova did not extend to Georgia, which had its application rejected in 2022 due to failure to fulfil longstanding accession criteria in terms of democracy. However, at the end of 2023, candidate status was also awarded to the southern Caucasus country.

terms of the domestic reforms required.⁸ Most of the EU instruments put in place in support of Ukraine and other Eastern European countries thus reflect the enduring and habitual markers of the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, that is, isomorphic, technocratic practices, together with the promotion of norms, values and standards delinked from particular locales or geospatial considerations (Johansson-Nogués, 2018b). Stated differently, if a shifting mindscape and the geopolitical concerns of the day were the trigger for the EU's wartime assistance, the assistance instruments in terms of content and mandate – or more broadly, the ethos of the EU's foreign, security and defence policy towards the region – appear not to have been modified nor substantially 'repackaged' as a consequence.⁹ The main exception to such a finding might be the decision to provide Ukraine with lethal military assistance. The EU's decision to provide military assistance to Ukraine reveals mindscapes that attest to the fear of Russian annihilation of a sovereign country on the EU's borders as well as a lack of deference to Russia's refusal to accept external interference in the social and armed conflicts in the former Soviet space. Indeed, such assistance thus appears to be at least partly driven by geographical/spatial markers, although the evidence is inconclusive as it is also common to find EU narratives framing the military assistance as one to strengthen normative objectives, such as Ukraine's right to self-determination and the inviolability of international borders.

Second, whilst there has been a clear shift in EU policy-makers' mindscape and an altered appraisal of the Eastern-European-other-as-self as a consequence of the 2022 Russian invasion, the EU is ambiguous about its own role in the region. On the one hand, there is a shift in the EU mindscape in terms of how the EU is, in part, perceived as having a 'newly found responsibility to protect Ukraine and its citizens' (Bosse, 2022). For the EU political leaders, to assist Ukraine is 'not only in our interest [...] but it is also our moral duty, our moral obligation' (European Commission, 2022k). If prior to 2022, Kyiv was perceived as having been left to its own devices 'to try to fend off the [...] Russian challenge to its European choice' (Haukkala, 2015, p. 36), in the wake of the Russian invasion, EU decision-makers feel prompted to become more involved in Eastern Europe as they are frontline countries in defence of 'the dignity, the freedom and the democracy of the whole of Europe' (European Council, 2022d). Several aspects of the EU's assistance point to more EU engagement in the region. The 2022 invasion appears to have overcome self-imposed restraints on closer integration with determined Eastern European countries, whether in the form of EU accession or closer interconnections on trade, transport and energy, even in the face of Russian vehement opposition to such softening of borders (Freudlsperger and Schimmelfennig, 2023).

However, beyond the consensus amongst EU capitals that the EU should continue to be engaged in and lend assistance to Eastern European countries as the latter reconfigure themselves in the wake of the 2022 invasion, there appears not to be a shared intra-EU agreement in terms of what role the EU should play. Despite its higher level of engagement through its wartime assistance, EU policy-makers do not appear to be willing or capable to assume a dominant or hegemonic role or to effectuate a geospatial ordering of the region (Haukkala, 2021). Evidence for this is first that, whilst unprecedented in

⁹For a similar argument about the continuity of the EU's foreign decision-making in the wake of the Russian 2022 invasion, see Maurer et al. (2023).

scale and scope, the EU's assistance is not likely to have a determining impact on the eventual conflict's outcome. Some analysts have argued that Ukraine would not have been able to withstand Russia's aggression if it had depended exclusively on European support (Blockmans and De Agostini, 2022). The EU's wartime assistance alone is hence not expected to contribute to any profound shift in power dynamics or geospatial reordering in Eastern Europe. Second, the discourse surrounding the EU's assistance to Ukraine, whilst rhetorically staunchly in favour of Ukraine's war effort and its relative well-functioning as a state, gives little indication of will for any dominant role for the EU to act as a guide or leader for the region. The EU rather portrays itself as having a secondary, supportive function in relation to the events in Ukraine. Even in the post-conflict reconstruction scenario, the EU assigns itself a secondary role. The EU's political leaders envision 'a process that is fully owned by Ukraine' in which the EU and Ukraine works 'side by side', that is, not one that the EU will try to pre-empt or steer in the name of Ukraine (European Commission, 2022e). There thus appears to be little appetite amongst EU member states to engage in discourses or practices that would have them step into the void left by the collapse of Russia's geospatial ordering in Eastern Europe. Indeed, for most EU leaders, a dominant role might not be on the cards for the EU, despite the HRVP's professions to the contrary, as most EU member states resented Russia for claiming such a role for itself in the post-Soviet space (EEAS, 2022a). In essence, for the EU, a more prominent geospatial ordering role in Eastern Europe would inevitably face the conundrum of whether the EU, as an international actor, represents the idea of soft normative diffusion or more forceful, coercive normative dictates. In essence, for the EU's political elite, the question is whether 'we believe in spheres of influence or in the free choice of sovereign states?' (EEAS, 2022c).

Conclusions

For the EU and its member states, engagement in Eastern Europe in the past decades has always been circumscribed by the will not to destabilise or cause tension with Russia. Aware of the geopolitical dynamics at play, the EU member states have overall been reluctant to become involved in or assume responsibility for resolving the region's various social crises or armed conflicts in the last decades. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 appears to have shifted the thinking in EU capitals.

By employing critical geopolitics concepts, we managed to capture the nuances of a changing relationship between the EU and Ukraine, as well as between the EU and Eastern Europe more broadly. We have unpacked how geopolitics frequently starts with a rethinking of geographies and of the peoples that inhabit the territory. The new mindscapes clearly open up new avenues for interaction, undo erstwhile cognitive barriers for relations and can even break longstanding taboos inherent to action or behaviour. However, as we have also noted, mindscapes are only part of the geopolitical equation.

Empirically, we found that the EU appears indeed to have undergone a significant rethinking process in terms of its mindscapes towards Eastern Europe, Ukraine and itself, which has facilitated new avenues of interaction. This is evident by the strong political support as well as the financial and military assistance the EU has provided Ukraine and other Eastern European countries affected by the conflict. However, we also argued that the shifting mindscapes have (yet) to produce a consistent shift in the EU's foreign,

security and defence policy towards the region. Whilst we granted that military assistance is an ambiguous case, most other EU wartime assistance instruments or mechanisms used to support Ukraine and the region are rooted in the longstanding EU's foreign policy ethos based on universalist, de-spatialised norms, values, standards and functionalist principles. The lack of clear geographical markers thus makes claims to a geopoliticalisation of EU foreign policy ambiguous. Moreover, we found that the EU is still not clear about what role it should play or what overarching geopolitical vision it has for the region. There is a generalised lack of support amongst EU member states for the idea of the EU stepping into the erstwhile role of Russia as regional hegemon and/or geospatial orderer. We found no concerted EU efforts so far to transform the conflict or the Eastern European geopolitical space to inscribe new ideas, identities or behavioural norms on the region and its inhabitants. The EU appears to be comfortable in its role as a supportive, technocratic but secondary actor to countries in Eastern Europe, similarly to its role prior to 2022. After our above conceptual and empirical unpacking of the EU's wartime assistance to Ukraine, we find that the HRVP's proclamation of the birth of the 'geopolitical EU' might have been somewhat premature.

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Correspondence:

Francesca Leso, Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB), Bellaterra, Cerdanyola del Vallès, 08193 Barcelona, Spain.

email: francesca.leso@autonoma.cat

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