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## The EU's Actorness in the Eastern Neighbourhood

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### 1 Introduction

The European Union (EU) has always sought to enhance its regional clout by establishing strong political and economic ties with its immediate neighbours. In Central Eastern Europe, the enlargement policy has proved to be the EU's finest tool. However, with the notable exception of the Baltic countries, in post-Soviet Eastern Europe the enlargement process could not be advanced. This has left the EU in the position to deal with an “unfinished business” scenario, where most of the ex-Soviet republics remained outside the EU project.

Thus, in order to reconcile the pressing need to accommodate the enlargement calls from post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the pragmatic stance against the EU widening taken by some of the EU old member states, the Union heralded the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), an innovative new form of relations with the neighbours described as

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“sharing everything with the Union but institutions” (European Commission 2002). Despite carrying lesser transformative impact than enlargement (i.e. the full-fledged EU membership promise is missing from the ENP), this partnership between the EU and the neighbours was underpinned by both the commitment to a similar set of values that are part of the European community’s identity (democracy, respect for the rule of law and human rights, etc.) and also by the “joint ownership” of the neighbourhood process, which means that negotiating the bilateral agreements is conducted together with each ENP country. The “joint ownership” has been incorporated into the ENP approach in order to overcome the idea of a Union that is merely transposing its own vision to the partners. Yet, it is generally recognised that the EU has had an asymmetric and unilateral approach towards the neighbourhood, since the Union premised the access to various benefits of European integration by the adoption of its menu of rules, regulations and norms, without really taking into account the needs and interests of the neighbourhood states (Juncos and Whitman 2015; Gnedina 2015; Nițoiu 2017).

Almost one year after the Russian-Georgian War in August 2008, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) emerged to show down the increasing the EU’s concerns vis-à-vis the region. Although placing even more emphasis on the “shared ownership” (Council of the EU 2009, p. 5), the new initiative has not managed to muster enough added value. Instead, it simply offered an overhaul of the ENP’s original package of procedural measures in post-Soviet Eastern Europe by also including a multilateral approach. Despite growing dialogue, several initiatives and institutional collaboration, reform in the EaP region has been limited, whilst political freedom and civil liberties in the six countries do not score high (Korosteleva 2012; Moga 2017a). This has questioned the EU’s ability to wield enough transformative power in the Eastern neighbourhood, where the Union’s influence is supposed to be strong, owing to geographic proximity reasons.

Furthermore, the pressing security concerns from the EaP region having the ongoing Ukrainian crisis as centrepiece are still unsettled, which point to the increasing salience of traditional geopolitical considerations. The conflict over Ukraine brought the relations between the Euro-Atlantic community and Russia to a historical nadir. Against this background, the EU’s capacity to sustain itself as a meaningful entity in the

Eastern neighbourhood appears very much determined by the political development of the EU-Russia relations. This is not a facile approach on behalf of the EU, since *vis-à-vis* Russia the Union constantly needs to balance between constructive engagement (namely, diplomatic dialogue) and credible deterrence (by means of sanctions).

This chapter argues that the EU's actorness has not succeeded to wield enough transformative power in the Eastern neighbourhood, owing to both internal and external limitations. Domestically, the post-Soviet space appears to have gradually lost its appeal among the EU member states, while the European institutions seem now much more focused on solving systemic challenges (such as Brexit). Externally, Russia's counteractions to block the aspirations of the former Soviet states to further integrate into the EU cooperation frameworks have thwarted the Union's policy agenda towards its neighbours and pushed it, in turn, to act cautiously in the region. This has contributed to the crawling image of the EaP witnessed in the past years. Moreover, the EU member states look increasingly less united in their stance to Russia. In spite of the existing sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia, some EU countries seem much more inclined to chart bilateral diplomatic relations with Russia. For instance, Italy has enhanced its economic ties with the Russian Federation, while Germany allowed the construction of North Stream 2, to the disillusionment of the Central European countries and the European Commission (European Political Strategy Centre 2017). Most obvious, there is a notable absence of the EU from the conflict resolution in Ukraine's Donbass region, the so-called Minsk peace process, where France and Germany through the Normandy format, have taken leading roles in brokering the negotiations between Ukraine and Russia.

This chapter is structured as follows: the first section briefly examines the latest developments at the level of the ENP-EaP, focusing on the institutional innovations following the 2015 ENP Review and the 2016 European Union Global Strategy (EUGS), such as the concept of resilience and "principled pragmatism". The second part of this chapter looks at the main tenets, studying the EU's actorness and identifies which constitutive elements undergird the EU's role internationally. The third section brings to the fore some of the internal and external constraints that bound the EU from exerting a much more influential role in the

post-Soviet Eastern European space and concludes with a discussion about the current challenges the EU's actorness is facing in the Eastern neighbourhood.

## 2 Overhauling the Neighbourhood Instruments: Continuity and Change in the EU's External Relations

The ENP was launched in 2004 and, since then, has enjoyed a special role in the context of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The EU has constantly been concerned about the stability of its immediate proximity, thus the ENP builds on the enlargement experience and aims to enhance existing political and economic ties with the neighbouring countries. However, almost a decade and a half of ENP has only produced mixed results for the partner countries, which are still lagging far behind the EU members in terms of democratic standards, liberalisation and reforms. The most worrisome trend has been security-wise, since the "ring of friends" the EU originally aimed for has gradually turned into a "ring of fire". The past years have seen the rise of an arch of instability, stretching from the Eastern borders to the Mediterranean South, which has negatively affected the security of the neighbourhood and, ultimately, questioned the efficiency of the ENP in times of conflict and geopolitical upheavals. Thus, in 2015, the EU acknowledged "the need for a new approach, a reprioritisation and an introduction of new ways of working" (European Commission 2015) and launched a public consultation and reviewed the policy to adjust it to the challenges and crises that have hit the neighbourhood in the past years. The revised ENP aimed at reinvigorating the relations between the EU and its neighbours, with a greater focus on stabilisation, security and resilience (European Commission 2017a). In particular, the EU has been preoccupied with the vulnerability and fragility of its neighbours, where structural challenges, such as weak governance and flawed democracy, could undermine the stability of the countries and disrupt the societal peace and territorial cohesion. Thus, building resil-

ience against these challenges in the neighbouring countries appears, according to the 2015 ENP review, as a preventive measure undertaken by the EU to cushion the growing political volatility and deteriorating security situation. Resilience has lately been a hallmark of the EU's external actorness, since the term was employed—together with its adjectival form “resilient”—no less than 50 times (nine entries in the 2015 ENP review and 41 entries in the EUGS) (Moga 2017b). Whilst the ENP review was one of the first documents to introduce resilience-building as an EU central foreign policy goal, resilience was later defined in the EUGS as “the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises” (EEAS 2016, p. 23). Likewise, the EUGS puts particular emphasis on “building state and societal resilience to our East and South” and places this action among the five top priorities for the EU's external action in the years ahead.

Resilience-building chimes well with the EU's new rationale in international affairs branded “principled pragmatism”, a sort of mixture of realist and normative objectives in foreign policy (Juncos 2017, p. 2; EEAS 2016, p. 8). Such novel approach signals a move away from the proactive stance the EU has held in the neighbourhood, premised on the idea that the liberalisation and democratisation processes in the region are both inevitable and irreversible, and that attaining the EU standards by the ENP members is just a matter of time. Concurrently, the past years have shown that the ENP states cannot merely be altered from the outside, and change should be determined from within. Such understanding persuaded the EU to pursue a new operating principle when exerting its actorness, one which embraces a “pragmatic philosophy”. According to Tocci (2017, p. 64), the EU should “pragmatically look at the world as it is, and not as it would like to see it”. This means that from now on, the EU will no longer prioritise values over interests but rather maintain a much more balanced and prudent approach when engaging internationally.

The pragmatic approach has been most obvious in the case of the EaP, which has also undergone serious reshuffling. In fact, the 2013 EaP Vilnius Summit and the unexpected decision of the then Ukrainian President Yanukovych not to sign the Association

Agreement (AA) between the EU and Ukraine was a critical turning point for the future of the Eastern neighbourhood. The “domino effect” sparked off by Yanukovich’s decision commenced with the Euromaidan protests, followed immediately afterwards by the Russian annexation of Crimea and the conflict in the Donbass region. This chain of causal events the EU witnessed in the post-Soviet Eastern European space is regarded as one of the main triggers for the 2015 ENP review and for revamping the European Security Strategy as a whole (currently rebranded EUGS) (Hahn 2015). Likewise, the aftermath of the 2013 Vilnius Summit represented a moment of rethinking and reassessing the EaP’s effectiveness in times of regional challenges. The subsequent summits (in Riga, in 2015 and in Brussels, in 2017) reinforced cooperation between the EU and the six post-Soviet states, while the EU reaffirmed its commitment to the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of all the countries. Moreover, the Union “acknowledged the European aspirations and European choice of partners who signed AA with the EU, namely Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine” (Council of the EU 2017). Strengthening the resilience of the EaP partner states remains a recurring concern of the EU, since the term emerges twice in the Joint Declaration of the EaP 2105 Riga Summit, whilst the number of entries in the Joint Declaration of the EaP 2017 Brussels Summit is no less than ten. The fivefold increase from 2015 to 2017 has been determined by the EU’s growing preoccupation with boosting resilience against new challenges, such as disinformation and hybrid warfare. Moreover, the EU is currently working on new framework, entitled “20 deliverables for 2020”, aimed at enhancing the ties with the EaP states by focusing particularly on their civil societies (European Commission 2017b).

The EaP entered this year into its tenth year of existence. The EU looks set to invest even more resources beyond 2020, which makes the partnership one of the most relevant foreign policy instruments at the Union’s disposal in the post-Soviet space.

### 3 Theorising the EU's Actorness

The European Union's actorness in the international arena has been a "developing" concept, closely connected with the evolution of European integration and with the various perspectives in the field of International Relations (IR). Moreover, it is characterised by a peculiar combination of analytic and normative concerns, most of them originating in the EU's unique status and experience. This section adopts the "EU actorness and power" perspective: actorness refers to its capacity to define and pursue policies, while power refers to the EU's ability to use its resources to influence international political processes (Peters 2016, p. 4).

There have been numerous attempts to define and operationalise the EU's actorness. One of the earliest came from Sjöstedt, for whom the EU's actorness meant the ability "to behave actively and deliberatively in relation to other actors in international system" (Sjöstedt 1977, p. 16) and was reflected in the degree of internal cohesion to design and implement policies, as well as in the EU's level of autonomy in foreign affairs decision-making. For Hill, actorness requires a clear identity, a self-contained decision-making system and the practical capabilities to affect policy, which amounts to a system of three interconnected dimensions: presence, procedure and capability (Hill 1993, p. 308; Toje 2008, p. 203). The "capabilities-expectations" gap (Hill 1993) and, in the light of the subsequent developments in the field of EU security and defence policy, the "consensus-expectations" gap (Toje 2008, pp. 207–208) have been influential in conceptualising the EU's failure to play a more significant part in world affairs.

Bridging rationalist and constructivist research on the EU, Jupille and Caporaso (1998) identified four essential criteria underpinning actorness for any entity that operates internationally: cohesion (its ability to articulate internally consistent policy preferences); authority (the legal sanctioning of its activities); autonomy (a distinctive identity and interests that are independent of other actors); and recognition (other actors recognise, accept and interact with the entity). Recognition and autonomy have been particularly salient for the EU: recognition is primarily interpreted in the traditional legal sense and points to the influence of the

external system over the purported actor; autonomy highlights the need for an institutional apparatus that remains distinctive, even if it may intermingle with member-states governmental structures (Jupille and Caporaso 1998, p. 217).

For their part, Bretherton and Vogler (2006) advance a constructivist framework based on three factors related both to the EU's internal features and to its external environment: opportunity (namely, the EU's behaviour in the international arena hinges on the political context in which it acts); presence (the EU's capacity to project power and wield influence externally so as to alter the behaviours of others according to its own will); and capability (basic resources needed to perform well internationally). They identify four capability-related elements for strong actor-ness which could fill the EU's capability-expectations 'gap': common values to be diffused externally, domestic legitimization of the foreign policy actions, ability to formulate policy decisions in a coherent and consistent manner and a capacity to efficiently exploit the instruments at the EU's disposal, such as trade and economic tools (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, p. 30).

In the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis, Bretherton and Vogler (2013) shared a pessimistic view on the EU's actorness. Their doubts relate to the effects of the economic and financial crisis on the EU's single market, the main driver of the EU's presence abroad. As far as opportunity is concerned, the policy space available to the EU has diminished considerably across several issue areas, mainly—but not solely—following the emergence of China and other economic powers, their growing assertiveness and lack of commitment to the established norms of diplomacy. However, in terms of capability, the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty can bring about positive change, mainly due to the improvements in the vertical coherence of EU international action: member-states' foreign policies display consistency with one another and complement, rather than contradict, the EU's conduct in foreign affairs (Bretherton and Vogler 2013, p. 386).

In the same vein, Niemann and Bretherton (2013) recommend an increased focus on the effectiveness of EU action, while da Conceição-Heldt and Meunier (2014) explore the complex relationship between EU internal cohesiveness and foreign policy effectiveness, concluding that, in certain issue areas, a high degree of internal cohesiveness may prevent the



EU from extracting more concessions by confronting the negotiating partner(s) with a credible risk of no deal.

Assessing the EU's inter-regional relations with bodies like Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and *Mercado Común del Sur* (MERCOSUR), Mattheis and Wunderlich (2017) have recently proposed a broad conceptualisation of actorness in the case of international organisations, based on three dimensions: institutions, recognition and identity. The latter is “a social category informed by constitutive norms, social purposes, relational comparisons (defining group identity by what it is not, i.e. against the “other”) and cognitive models (background worldviews and common understanding of political and material conditions)” (Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017, p. 3). Engaging with other regional organisations has not only strengthened the EU's recognition but also contributed to its identity-building, as the EU promoted its norms and interests within inter-regional negotiations and relations (Mattheis and Wunderlich 2017, p. 10).

Recognition is a key issue in conceptualising the EU's actorness in international institutions. Gehring et al. (2013) argue that EU formal membership in such institutions, alongside its member-states, is less important in obtaining recognition as a relevant actor, expressed by EU participation in the process of negotiation and implementation of international agreements. Recognition is granted when the EU is capable to contribute, separately from its member-states, to cooperation in the issue areas covered by the institution. Gehring et al. (2013, pp. 860–861) connect capability and recognition, two of the widely acknowledged dimensions of the EU's actorness, and conclude that enhancing the latter would require the EU to gain control over more governance resources in a particular issue area, meaning more EU-level integration.

Similarly, Niemann and Bretherton (2013) have recommended moving away from the conceptualisation of the EU as a *sui generis* actor, highly influential in the field of European Studies (Drieskens 2017, pp. 1536–1537), and using IR tools for a better understanding of the EU's actorness. In fact, the recent security challenges in the southern Mediterranean and in the Eastern neighbourhood have already inspired a new strand of literature (Schumacher 2015; Noutcheva 2015; Hyde-

Price 2018; Nitoiu and Sus 2019), dealing with the increasing need for the EU to engage with Realist theory and traditional geopolitical analysis. The transition to an interest-laden approach in international affairs announced with the launch of the 2016 EUGS seems, nevertheless, hard to implement in practice. The EU's strategic culture has framed itself as a peace project with a distinct nature whose original goal was to desecuritize and transcend Realist ideas such as the balance of power (Buzan et al. 1998; Wæver 1998). Thus, exerting actorness guided by pragmatic cost-benefit assessments risks delegitimising the EU's mantra and could lead to a credibility deficit in the European neighbourhood (Smith 2016a). Moreover, it would challenge the conceptualisation of the EU as "Normative Power Europe (NPE)" (Manners 2002, 2006, 2008, 2010; Manners and Diez 2007).

The concept of normative power, associated with the EU, has questioned the efforts to explore the EU's actorness starting from more or less implicit analogies with the traditional nation-state. The historical context of the EU's development, its hybrid character and its political-legal constitution contributed to the emergence of a unique identity (Manners 2002, p. 240), pointing to a change of political culture, away from the Westphalian framework and towards "EU cosmopolitics". The EU's prominence in the international arena derives from its efforts to shape the conceptions of the "normal" in international politics by promoting norms: sustainable peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development and good governance (Manners 2008, p. 66; Manners and Diez 2007, p. 175).

The NPE approach has generated intense debates (Sjursen 2006; Diez 2013; Diez and Pace 2011; Hyde-Price 2007, 2008; Pace 2007; Youngs 2004), covering a variety of topics: the EU's failure to live up to its own standards in the field of external action; claims that behind the normative discourse, the EU advances its own strategic interests, insights about the power of NPE as a discursive device, the salience of concepts such as normative hegemony or normative empire or—from a Realist perspective—the weakness of an "ethical foreign policy" and the dangers of moralism (Hyde-Price 2008, pp. 34–35).

For Hyde-Price, the EU is neither as a unified actor, nor a neutral space of interaction, but rather a complex institutional field whose structures strategically select among the various actors that strive to advance their own interests and strategies (Hyde-Price 2007, p. 53). It is an instrument used by member-states for advancing their interests in the international economy, for collectively shaping the regional milieu, as well as a repository for their second-order normative concerns (Hyde-Price 2008, p. 31). The low organisational ability and lack of collective will prevents Europe from becoming a great power, despite the fact that its population, resources, technology and military capabilities would qualify it for such a status (Waltz 2000, p. 31).

The European Union has been highly dependent on actors and relationships situated outside the EU institutional landscape, such as the member-states themselves and the trans-Atlantic connection. For many structural realists, this connection is vulnerable, and the intended development of the CSDP might lead to a revised partnership and to a split between two (friendly) competing blocks within NATO. The EU member-states might also want to develop instruments for managing security issues at the European periphery.

Toje (2008, p. 210) argues that the EU (understood as distinct from its member-states) has been acting as a small power in the international arena, as its limited capacity to project hard power has influenced its strategic actorness, generating a propensity for constructive engagement and normative positions and a dependent strategic behaviour, relying on US political leadership and military support.

Most if not all of the major efforts to conceptualise the EU's actorness have taken into account its variations across territories and issue areas. The next section brings a more circumscribed approach, focusing on the Eastern neighbourhood and on the issues that are prominent in the EU's relations with the region. The ENP and the EaP make up a suitable framework for discussion.

### 3.1 The EU's Actorness in the Eastern Neighbourhood

The EU developed the ENP and the EaP as an effort to institutionalise its relations with some of the post-Soviet countries, laying the ground for a flexible pattern of cooperation. The ENP is a composite policy, combining an international dimension with a cross-border extension of EU sectoral policies. Consequently, as noted in several studies that assess the relevant literature in the field, most of the theoretical approaches take into account both territories and issues and use inputs from IR theory, the study of EU external relations and foreign and domestic policy analysis (Gstöhl 2017; Schunz 2017; Bicchi and Lavenex 2015; Hoffmann and Niemann 2018; Bechev 2011).

For instance, Hoffmann and Niemann (2018) discuss the Eastern neighbourhood actorness within the wider framework of EU external affairs, pointing to the need to connect it with effectiveness. The focus on performance is also adopted by Papadimitriou et al. (2017), who explore the relation between outcome-driven and process-driven performance and argue that EU performance in the region can be assessed, alternatively, starting from its own stated priorities, the partners' expectations and the constraining factors on the ground.

For his part, Bechev (2011) argues that most of the concerns with the EU's actorness in the region are present in the literature that highlights domestic responses to external impulses and much less so in the research focusing on the longer-term institutional aspects of the relationship. Starting from the insight that the relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours are characterised by asymmetric interdependence, he conceptualises two roles for the EU: gatekeeper and proactive agent (Bechev 2011, p. 424).

Bicchi and Lavenex (2015) note that the literature on Europeanisation and external governance adopts a decentred and fragmented view of the EU's actorness, as it concentrates on the roles of various EU agencies in extending sectoral regimes to partner countries. The scholarship on external democracy promotion by the EU in the neighbourhood has also shown the limits of the EU's actorness in the region, in contrast with the

literature on EU enlargement. As for the body of literature dealing with the EU as a foreign policy actor in the Eastern neighbourhood, the discussion should go beyond the various conceptualisation of actorness, towards notions such as hegemony and empire (Bicchi and Lavenex 2015).

Indeed, the focus on hegemony or empire naturally follows from the NPE approach. Manners (2010) explicitly advanced NPE as a powerful tool for studying the ENP, since it could inspire a critical assessment of the principles that lay at the foundation of the policy, the means of their enactment and the impact of normative power. In his view, the EU should strive to enhance the legitimacy of its principles, the persuasiveness of its actions and the impact of its use of norms as instruments of socialisation in the region (Manners 2010).

Haukkala's (2008) conceptualisation of the EU as a normative hegemon in the Eastern neighbourhood departs from Manners' approach mainly by laying the accent on "power", rather than on "normative", and by focusing on the way the EU acts, rather than on the way it should act. The EU has been a much more assertive norm entrepreneur, as illustrated by the process of enlargement. The ENP "would seem to reveal the uglier face of the Union's normative power as one based on domination.... By denying its neighbours' calls for belonging and demanding that they nevertheless conform to its norms and values, the Union can be seen as acting precisely in this way" (Haukkala 2008, pp. 1612–1613).

The EU's drive for regulatory convergence in its periphery has led Del Sarto (2016) to call it a "normative empire", building on Zielonka's (2006) well-known conceptualisation of the EU as empire. The range of arguments includes size, the diversity of its constituent elements, the variable geometry of its functional borders as well as the mechanism by which the export of practices towards the periphery perpetuates imperial rule. The EU behaves in this manner "because of what it is", proving its capacity to reconcile utility-maximising strategies and norm-based behaviour" (Del Sarto 2016, p. 227). Using a similar approach, Pänke (2015) identifies an imperial-type "civilising mission" in the advancement of EU normative agenda: it is the very foundation of the EU's actorness. The failure of normative imperialism in the Eastern neighbourhood can be explained primarily by a weak EU "gravitational pull" towards political elites interested in remaining in power.

This type of literature brings into the forefront the conceptualisation of the “other” in the theoretical approaches to the region. The “neighbourhood” can be seen as a label that emerged out of the struggles between various EU institutional agents, without too much consideration for the domestic situation, and was connected to a “threat discourse” that fosters securitisation (Jeandesboz 2007). The ENP is implicitly built on the contrast between the European heartland and a potentially threatening “east and/or south” (Tonra 2011). It has helped the EU take hold of “Europe” (Balzacq 2007) and build a new type of frontier. The ENP can also be framed as an interface between the EU and a group of inferior and dependent states (Bengtsson 2008). The narrative of “EU good neighbourliness” sustains the claim that EU norms must have precedence over the culture and values of the neighbourhood countries (Nițoiu 2013). The substance of “good neighbourliness”, projecting the Eastern neighbourhood as a well-ordered community, runs against the utility-based use of conditionality and differentiation by the EU, generating a dilemma in terms of external input legitimacy (Jansson 2018).

For most of the proponents of Realism in IR theory, the ENP is a collective instrument for advancing the interests of member-states in the Eastern neighbourhood through “security maximisation, milieu-shaping and the pursuit of second-order normative concerns” (Hyde-Price 2018). Realists generally believe that the ENP is a flawed instrument, for several reasons. Firstly, it is inspired by conflicting goals, as illustrated by the fact that promoting democratisation abroad can destabilise a non-democracy. Besides, democratising countries may be prone to international conflicts due to the (re-)emergence of domestic tensions suppressed by the former authoritarian regime (Mansfield and Snyder 1995). Secondly, Realists deplore the neglect of geopolitics in the EU’s drive to create the Eastern side of its “ring of friends”. For instance, Mearsheimer (2014, 2018) concludes that the US and its European allies are to blame for the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, as their efforts to integrate Ukraine into the Western “security community” prompted the Russian response.

Smith (2016b) uses a neoclassical Realist framework in order to assess the EU’s Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) offer to Ukraine, before the 2013 Vilnius EaP summit. As the EU has exclusive competencies and the Commission enjoys extensive powers in

international trade, the field of international trade is one in which the EU approximates, to a certain extent, the Realist state-based view of international actorness. The economic power advantage for the EU in its relationship with Ukraine created the opportunity to act, but its action was constrained and the final decision was weakened, and the Yanukovich Administration eventually turned down the DCFTA offer. One of the intervening variables that affected the translation of systemic factors into EU policy decisions was the EU's normative-actor role identity, which shapes its interests and acts as one of the transmission belts between the international system and the policy decision (Smith 2014, 2016b, p. 15).

The issue of the EU's actorness in the Eastern neighbourhood has also been relevant for the literature on EU state-building, as illustrated by Maass (2019) in an article on Ukraine. The connection consists in a system of benchmarks for assessing the EU's state-building efforts in the region—generation of legitimacy, coherence, regulation of violence/ability of enforcement (Bouris 2014)—which mirrors the opportunity-presence-capability framework used by Bretherton and Vogler (2006). Maass (2019) concludes that neither before nor after the Russian annexation of Crimea did the EU simultaneously possess all the three facets of actorness. In the same vein, Dobrescu and Schumacher (2018) argue that, in dealing with Georgia and the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the EU has shown a high degree of flexibility across issue areas, leading to divergent patterns of presence and capabilities and, consequently, to a fractured record of actorness. As expected, conflict management has been the most difficult area, as the policy of non-recognition has prevented the EU from using its capabilities in order to engage the separatist regimes, and undermined its presence in the breakaway republics. This is an issue area where the authorities in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali show an increased sensitivity, given their claims to sovereignty, and where Russian actorness is considerable. Similar considerations constrained the EU's actorness in the fields of migration and mobility, and trade, as the Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities refused to accept any provision that would have undermined their territorial control. Contrary to optimistic expectations, neither visa-free movement in the EU nor inclusion in the DCFTA proved sufficiently attractive, in this respect (Dobrescu and Schumacher 2018, p. 17).

Finally, the incorporation of resilience into the official EU discourse on the Eastern Partnership should help policymakers circumvent the stability versus democracy dilemma (Ülgen 2016). Indeed, “the accent moves from a transformative narrative mainly centred on democracy promotion to creating the conditions and capacity for sustainable, endogenous political processes and economic development” (Grevi 2016, p. 7). The EU would promote a more differentiated approach towards its partners, responding to one of the most frequent line of criticism against the ENP-EaP framework, and would play the part of a sponsor and facilitator, providing knowledge and financial transfers, while abandoning the top-down approach of large-scale state-building (Juncos 2017, p. 9; Eickhoff and Stollenwerk 2018, p. 4). It remains to be seen whether this conceptual innovation will open new ways to deal with the persistent problem of the incentives for reform in the Eastern neighbourhood, in the absence of a credible prospect of EU accession.

#### **4 Domestic and External Limitations to the EU’s Actorness in the Eastern Neighbourhood**

The theoretical literature and the policy-oriented efforts to assess the EU’s approach in the Eastern neighbourhood have identified several impediments to the EU’s actorness and effectiveness in the region. This section provides brief discussions centred on four important topics, each of them connecting the neighbourhood policies with broader issues of EU foreign policy and European integration. The first is rather paradoxical: the use of enlargement-inspired instruments has been widely viewed as inadequate for countries that lack the formal prospects of accession. However, three of the EaP states (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) explicitly target EU membership as an endpoint to their integration efforts, which raises the question whether, in the long run, they would be satisfied with the more modest approach currently adopted by the EU. The second topic of interest is the inadequacy of the EU neighbourhood instruments: so far, the EU has been rather unsuccessful in finding the proper balance



between principles and interests and in pursuing differentiation against the background of multiple domestic obstacles to its transformative ambitions. Another outstanding issue is the Russian presence and actorness in the region, which points to the renewed salience of geopolitics in EU action and highlights the difficulty of promoting domestic reforms in the face of an assertive and often aggressive Russian presence, and without the security guarantees the candidate countries of the late 1990s and early 2000s had enjoyed, as EU and NATO accession practically overlapped. Finally, if the EU's efforts to promote its norm-based order in the Eastern neighbourhood are to succeed, the EU must uphold not only its internal coherence but also its attractiveness as a model of democratic governance.

#### 4.1 In the Shadow of the Enlargement Process

In spite of being developed as an alternative to enlargement, the neighbourhood frameworks have been in fact conceptualised almost in the same vein as the enlargement strategy. The successful experience with the last accession waves into the EU has left an enduring impression on the EU policymakers and strengthened the EU's belief that it developed a unique capacity to determine domestic transformations of the partner states. Two sets of observations show strong elements of path dependency in the design of the neighbourhood instruments in post-Soviet Eastern Europe (Moga 2017a, pp. 111–113).

First, conceptually, the diffusion of NPE within the neighbourhood project has had a similar goal to the enlargement process: the internalisation of the community values by outsider states (Simão 2011; Fischer 2012, p. 33; Schimmelfennig 2012). Yet, this objective turned difficult to achieve. Whereas the enlargement process has provided incentives for strong community effects (i.e. states subject to the enlargement have been offered a *finalité politique*—the membership perspective), within the neighbourhood project these prerequisites have been loose and lacked substance to stimulate the partner countries to undertake serious reforms (Edwards 2008). Faced with increasing demands from its Eastern partners for continuing the accession process, but pressed from the inside by

the member states to halt the enlargement, the Union has not been able to offer a concrete accession perspective to the EaP states, opting instead for an “more for more” approach (i.e. in order to obtain benefits from the EU, the EaP states need first to undertake substantive reforms).

Second, functionally, the EU enlargement blueprint has also been heavily employed in the Eastern neighbourhood. As Kelley argues the ENP “is a fascinating case study in organizational management theory of how the Commission strategically adapted enlargement policies to expand its foreign policy domain” (Kelley 2006, p. 29). In earnest, the wide range of instruments applied by the EU in the post-Soviet space (namely, Action Plans, Country Reports, Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, etc.) are all tools borrowed from the Union’s enlargement strategy (Tulmets 2011; Korosteleva et al. 2013). Yet, the rigorous application of conditionality used in the enlargement process could not have been demanded to the ENP states, since the ENP lacked momentum and persuasiveness. Thus, the transfer of the whole traditional normative package, including institutional and legislative approximation, was applied selectively at best and partially failed to attain the desired effects. For instance, the legal approximation required by the Association Agreements signed with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia has proved much more difficult than initially thought as the evidence from Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia has shown (Delcour and Wolczuk 2013).

## 4.2 In...Adequate/Consistent/Coherent Neighbourhood Instruments

The EU has often been criticised for its capacity to offer only a vague concept of convergence with partner countries. According to Valiyeva (2016, p. 11), the EU’s ambivalent actorness in the Eastern neighbourhood, which has been shaped both by value-based and interest-based considerations, while lacking strategic coherence, represents one of the main reasons for the ENP’s modest results.

Likewise, Simão (2017, p. 346) points out the ambiguous nature of the ENP, which intended from the very beginning to apply a

“one-size-fits-all” formula for partnership to a diverse array of countries and, instead, affected policy-making and identity-building processes in the neighbourhood. As such, the EaP was envisaged to overcome the limited impact of the ENP, and for this purpose, it sought to engage the post-Soviet space countries not only at the state level but also directly cooperating with non-state actors, such as NGOs and civil society. Yet, according to Korosteleva (2011), the EU's capacity to exercise actorness could not be sufficiently boosted by the EaP, since this new neighbourhood instrument did not manage to substantially depart from ENP's initial formulation.

Although the emphasis on differentiation and joint partnership has been salient, the ENP-EaP dyad has often appeared as a rather technocratic “top-down” (Eurocentric) exercise undertaken by the EU (Grant 2011, p. 1; Korosteleva 2016; Zielonka 2018), which overlooked some “resilient” features of the partner countries, such as weak statehood, unconsolidated sovereignty, pervasive corruption, modest democratic record and geopolitical interests at stake (Moga 2017a, p. 106). Their relatively short history of post-Cold War independence makes their institutional background still fragile and in much need of external support. However, the “soft” conditionality envisaged by the EU has so far not been able to produce similar transformative effects as in the case of the Central and Eastern European countries, subject to the enlargement process. Moreover, the democracy promotion included in the ENP-EaP has been insufficiently backed up by concrete funding, since only 30% of the ENP budget has been directed to serve this goal (Shapovalova and Youngs 2012, p. 3). Respect for human rights has been selectively enforced throughout the Eastern neighbourhood; while the EaP front runners, namely Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia, tend to abide by the EU acquis, countries such as Belarus and Azerbaijan are being labelled as “authoritarian regimes” and, thus, often criticised for human rights violations and its persecution of non-governmental organisations, independent journalists and opposition politicians. On top of that, the growing “geopoliticisation” of the Eastern neighbourhood, following the current EU-Russia stalemate over the Ukrainian crisis, has increasingly hindered the EU's efforts to “Europeanise” its post-Soviet proximity and deemed the neighbourhood instruments no longer adequate and consistent. All these

factors generated legitimacy and effectiveness challenges for the EU in the eyes of the partners and, ultimately, contested its ability to exercise actorhood.

Against this background, the EU's increasingly pragmatic approach to conducting foreign policy appears more evident than before. Most recently, the EU has lifted some of the sanctions against Belarus and invited President Lukashenko to the 2017 EaP Brussels summit, after the EU declined a similar invitation in 2015. In the same year, Brussels accepted to sign a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Armenia, in spite of the country's participation in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, and it is currently negotiating a special agreement with Azerbaijan, although the Caspian country has a controversial track record in terms of political freedoms (Crombois 2019, p. 5).

### **4.3 Russian Influence as a Limit to the EU's Regional Actorhood**

The EU's Eastern neighbourhood is Russia's Western neighbourhood or "near abroad", a uniquely important area for Russian great-power identity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the EU has acted cautiously towards the new independent republics, as its main priority was reaching a solid partnership with Russia. As the 2004 round of EU enlargement was approaching its final stages, the EU included most of the post-Soviet republics into its ENP framework, without much Russian opposition. However, after the 2004 NATO enlargement, the intensification of the geopolitical competition led to a change in Russian perceptions of the EU, so that the ENP and the subsequent EaP have been seen as attempts to challenge Russian influence in a highly sensitive region.

Especially since the Russian annexation of Crimea and outbreak of crisis in Eastern Ukraine, geopolitics is a major component in most theoretical accounts, aiming to assess Russia's influence over the EU's actorhood in the region (Hyde-Price 2018; Nitoiu and Sus 2019). The EU lacked the capability to coerce Russia to change its course, including the implementation of the initial Minsk Agreement. This opens the discussion whether EU hard power capabilities would really have coerced Russia

to step back: perhaps one should not expect too much of the EU, in terms of exerting influence over Russia on issues that are central to its claims of sovereignty or identity (Forsberg 2013, p. 37).

An important line of research has focused on the type of power exerted by the EU in the EaP countries, as compared to Russia's attempts. Normative power (Manners 2010), normative hegemony (Haukkala 2008), normative imperialism (Pänke 2015) or a combination of institutional, structural and productive power creates a framework in which Russia sees its interests threatened. Consequently, it turns to traditional "compulsory" power (Casier 2018), using force in Ukraine. The EaP versus Eurasian Union dilemma is a reflection of the EU-Russia structural power competition, as both sides try to institutionally define the region. This approach has the merit of illustrating an important limit to the EU's regional actorness: structural power cannot be easily converted into a short-term foreign policy tool (Cadier 2014).

The regional competition also affects the evolution of political regimes, turning into a legitimacy contest between the EU and Russia, in which both sides use soft influence to persuade major domestic political actors and legitimise their actions (Noutcheva 2018a, b). From this perspective, Russia acts as an obstacle to the EU's actorness in the field of democracy promotion.

Russia's presence is also one of the main obstacles to the EU's actorness in "contested statehood" areas. Noutcheva's (2018a, b) research on the Abkhazia-Georgia issue, following the Russian intervention (2008), concluded that the EU's actorness was affected by internal divisions among member-states (mainly as a result of their attitudes towards Russia), as well as by a lack of significant influence in Abkhazia, although the EU was able to maintain a degree of presence in the separatist region. Strong actorness by the EU in such situations is unlikely in the face of open Russian opposition in "contested statehood" areas (Noutcheva 2018a, b).

#### **4.4 European Union Internal Dynamics: Cohesiveness and Democratic Legitimacy**

The EU's attempts to pursue its transformative action in the Eastern neighbourhood have raised the issue of member-state cohesiveness and

that of the legitimacy of the ENP. They are distinct, but interrelated: both are connected to the EU internal decision-making process and to its ambition to project democratic legitimacy abroad.

In the earlier stages of the ENP, goal inconsistency rather than internal cohesiveness was the major issue (Börzel and van Hüllen 2014), failing to confirm initial fears that the Eastern enlargement would negatively affect foreign policy cohesiveness (Ekengren and Engelbrekt 2006). As the need for a more region-focused approach emerged, harmonising French and German geographic priorities was essential in policy development for the Mediterranean and for the Eastern neighbourhood (Lippert 2008). The growing tensions in the EU-Russia relations, culminating with the Ukraine crisis, have raised concerns over the behaviour of those governments that seemed most sensitive to Russian arguments or pressures.

The “Trojan horses” (Cyprus and Greece), the “strategic partners” (Germany, France, Italy and Spain) and the “friendly pragmatists” (a larger group including Hungary and Austria) identified by Popescu and Leonard (2007, p. 2) were the categories that included those member-states that were deemed to be, at least in principle, most likely to advocate a softer reaction to Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Nevertheless, Germany, took charge of the process of formulating a response, together with France and the UK, and countered Russian attempts to cultivate the four “Trojan horses” of the day: Cyprus and Greece but also Hungary and Italy (Orenstein and Kelemen 2016, p.10). The Russian use of geopolitical power projection in Ukraine has set in motion centripetal forces in the EU, harming Russia’s earlier and rather successful strategy of creating divisions through geoeconomic instruments of power projection (Wigell and Vihma 2016). Nevertheless, the “Trojan horse” behaviour remains an issue, as the CFSP mechanisms cannot prevent the EU member-states from pursuing independent foreign policies (Orenstein and Kelemen 2016).

Another limit to the EU’s actorness in the Eastern neighbourhood can arise from a decline in its internal legitimacy. Most of the various conceptualisations of the EU’s actorness include more or less direct references to

legitimacy (Čmakalová and Rolenc 2012). For its part, the wider IR literature dealing with actors, including state actors, has connected foreign policy behaviour with the domestic legitimacy of the polity and of its government. As a *sui generis* polity, the EU does not claim the type of legitimacy associated with sovereign nation-states, but it shares with its member-states the principle that a legitimate government must be democratic. Democracy is among the main sources of the NPE identity embraced by the EU.

As the EU has engaged in democracy promotion, the issue of its legitimacy is central to the ENP framework. Čmakalová and Rolenc (2012) connect the literature on actorness with the debates about the “democratic deficit” of the EU, arguing that, as a *sui generis* polity, the latter should not be held to account using the standards developed in the case of nation-states.

The EU strives to be a model for its neighbours (Harris 2017), which makes the ENP-EaP framework vulnerable to its internal crises. During the past 12 years, the EU experienced the Eurozone, migration and Brexit crises, while the rise of illiberal democracies within its ranks has emerged as another serious challenge (Meunier and Vachudova 2018).

The rise of Euroscepticism has also raised doubts over the EU's capacity to pursue its policies in the Eastern neighbourhood. This concept has emerged primarily as a reaction to the “deepening” dimension of European integration, but later penetrated the “widening” dimension, as well. Besides, the much commented “enlargement fatigue” could eventually evolve into a “Partnership fatigue”, as illustrated by the result of the Dutch referendum on the ratification of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, in April 2016 (Dîrdală 2016). While no other similar cases have emerged, the debates and controversies that led to the referendum have illustrated that the EU's cooperation with the Eastern neighbourhood can be affected, in principle, by Eurosceptic political action. This leads to a number of concerns regarding the technocratic character of the ENP and the support it enjoys among the European voters. A “return to politics” (van Middelaar 2016) that would bring ENP-EaP issues on the political agenda of the European citizen is a distant possibility, but a possibility nevertheless.

## 5 Conclusions

The EU's actorness has always been a much-debated concept when studying the Union's quest to assert itself in international affairs. Various theoretical approaches have significantly advanced our knowledge about the EU's actorness. Thus, one should not strive for clarity at the expense of diversity.

This theoretical interaction has been most obvious in the Eastern neighbourhood, where the EU seemed to have had limited means to develop suitable external instruments capable of answering the growing challenges from the region. Several factors ranging from complex intra-EU dynamics, to the enduring experience of the enlargement policy to the geopolitical confrontation with Russia have affected the EU's capacity of exercising actorness in the post-Soviet Eastern Europe. In the Eastern neighbourhood, the EU found itself in need of formulating policy answers, which has seriously tested the Union's actorness. Conceptually, the EU understood it had to alter its predominantly normative foreign policy this time by uploading power-based considerations, which had not been the predominant thinking during enlargement. The increasingly pragmatic move on behalf of the EU has, in turn, taken its toll over elements which constitute, in fact, the essence of the Union's actorness.

The EU could no longer seize the "opportunity" to wield influence and exercise power in the Eastern neighbourhood, since the EaP was from the outset in a precarious (geo)political, economic and societal situation, considerably different from the bulk of the Central and Eastern European countries. In fact, the EU's foreign policy instruments employed in the EaP region appeared reactive rather than proactive. Brussels' permanent preoccupation to keep all stakeholders involved in the bargaining process over the ENP—namely, EU member states, EU institutions and neighbouring countries—reasonably satisfied could offer a pertinent explanation for the modest ENP-EaP frameworks, which appeared as the lowest common denominator acceptable on the EU's future relations with the neighbouring states. In the absence of a proper environment where the EU could smoothly conduct its external actions, the Union's 'presence' has also been limited. Critical voices both from within and outside the



EU (particularly from the post-Soviet proximity) have often pointed out the lack of appeal and persuasiveness of the EU's neighbourhood design. Finally, the EU appeared unwilling to invest more "capabilities" in its external efforts, as the EU is currently "consumed" by internal convulsions (such as Brexit or growing illiberal Eurosceptic trends) and rising external threats. In addition, the lack of shared understanding between the EU and Russia over the future of the EaP region, together with the increasing "geopoliticisation" of the West-Russia relations, seemed to run counter to the EU's transformative ambitions.

Thus, there is an increasing perception that the EU will become hostage to policy inertia, which could mean less commitment and capabilities directed towards the Eastern partners. Even the EU's preoccupation with "resilience-building" in the EaP region looks merely as a defensive response and marks a radical scale-back at the level of its actorness operations, since now the EU appears to choose instead a much more prudent ("pragmatic") approach internationally. After the policy alterations put in place by the 2015 ENP Review and the 2016 EUGS, it remains to be seen if the ENP-EaP dyad could still advance the EU as a legitimate foreign policy actor. The question is whether the new focus on resilience would suffice to save or reinforce NPE, or it would ultimately succumb under the pressure of the geopolitical and systemic transformations which take place in the present global affairs.

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