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THE STRATEGIC TURN OF THE EU AND THE UKRAINIAN IMPULSE

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INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century, the existing international order faced numerous obstacles, which inevitably affected its major beneficiary – the EU, as well as its identity, and its purpose. Furthermore, shifting international gravity has caused the US to pivot to Asia, leaving Europe disillusioned about the security guarantees the United States had provided for a long time. Having previously been content with its normative and civilian character, the Union is now forced to reconcile its ideals with a new geopolitical reality. From this perspective, Ukraine's accession to the Union emerges as both a test and an impulse for the EU's evolving identity and purpose.

EU'S IDENTITY CRISIS

Being born from the ashes of two world wars, the European project was intended to become a remedy to power politics and war. Starting off as a peace project for war prevention, the European Economic Community, and later the European Union, evolved into a unique entity that sought to reinvent the notion of power altogether and define its international role through norms and rules rather than might and force. Indeed, the European Union is a unique entity which, according to Savorskaya (2015), has been given different names including 'quiet superpower', 'responsible power', 'ethical power', and 'pragmatic power'. Other thinkers, such as Ian Manners (2002), used the term 'normative power Europe', while François Duchêne (1972, 1973) introduced

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the EU as a ‘civilian power’. What unites all of these definitions is the fact that all to a similar extent emphasise the EU’s ability to project its influence without the use of military force, but rather through soft power which, in the case of the Union, refers to norms, conditionality, and appeal. The EU’s identity is fundamentally different from that of other actors on the international stage precisely because of its unique approach to power projection and value-centrism. According to Manners (2002, p. 241), the EU’s construction took place as an ‘elite-driven, treaty-based legal order’ process which placed norms and treaties at the core of the Union’s existence, defining how it governs itself and envisions its international position. These norms or core values include peace, liberty, democracy, the rule of law, human rights, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development, and good governance, which are deeply embedded in legal frameworks such as the UN Charter (1945), the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), the Rio Declaration (1992), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1968), among others (Manners, 2006, p. 171). The fact that these values are interlinked with a more extensive body of international law and are not fully autonomous further reinforces the EU’s position as a normative actor. Yet the EU does not simply collect and store these values in a bedside drawer; it actively seeks to project them onto its immediate neighbourhood and beyond its borders. In this respect, the ability to project and, as highlighted by Manners (2002, p. 239), to establish what is considered ‘normal’ constitutes the essence of the EU’s normative power. The EU’s position as a normative actor, and its own perception of itself as such, were both suitable and possible to uphold in an environment of relative stability and under the security umbrella provided by NATO and the US – a world characterised by faith in rules and institutions, a faith that Europe deeply shared. Interestingly, Julia Kristeva (Manners, 2006, p. 168) puts forward that the European project is an essential part of the international endeavour to harmonise human diversity in the setting of globalisation. Yet the environment in which the European Economic Community was established, and in which the EU has operated, has started to change, while the EU continued to operate within the comfortable yet detached confines of its pre-existing normative structure. This is not to say that this is inherently negative; rather, the EU’s ability to adapt might emerge as an important factor defining its international position in a newly emerging international order.

In the aftermath of World War II, the foundation of the liberal international order (LIO), which has remained in place until now, was laid as an attempt to organise global affairs through rules and institutions, and it was undeniably successful in achieving this goal. The LIO was built upon ‘free trade, democracy, the rule of law, norm-based relations, cooperative security, shared sovereignty, and progress’, and it is clearly under strain, which is not merely an academic buzzword – it is a reality (Silva, 2024). From the US–China trade war, the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol and the Statute of the International Court of Justice by the US, to Russia’s open disregard for international

law and principles, and the rise of alternative frameworks like BRICS, the LIO is being contested from different sides. The EU, founded on the LIO's core principles and having enjoyed its central position therein, is standing at the frontline of a conflict rooted deeply in axiology. It is undeniable that the EU was highly successful in dispersing its values through appeal, conditionality, and punitive measures; yet these instruments, powerful as they are, proved inadequate without being supplemented by credible enforcement. Much being said about the EU's normative power, it would be a mistake to claim that the EU is a toothless plant-eater in a world of carnivores; rather, the tools used by the EU, despite being civilian, carry a coercive capacity. The case in point is the EU's sanctions regime, which is the main tool in the EU's efforts to uphold the values it holds dear. These days, it is doubtful that many Europeans, if any, equate the EU with military defence, which is unsurprising, as matters of defence and security have been historically disconnected from other policy areas of the EU. Therefore, the debate about the EU's hard power has been ongoing ever since the establishment of its predecessor, dating back to the 1950s and the failed attempt to establish the European Defence Community, due to reasons that remain on the table of the present-day EU (2014, p. 67).¹ Paradoxically, the question of the Union's military capabilities has rarely been a military-related matter but rather a political one, simply because it was never developed to the operational point, being stalled at the political level. The rapidly changing international and regional environments of the last decade have exposed the tension between the EU's normative self-perception and its limited military capacity, with the former being questioned and the latter being practically non-existent – an issue that has become hard to ignore (Borkowski, 2024). Consequently, despite being normatively ambitious, the Union is strategically constrained in an environment of resurrected power politics and rising alternative normative structures.

Once a strategic choice of soft power over hard power, it has turned into a strategic vulnerability. For the first time, the call came during the Russo–Georgian war, which, as correctly stated by Jean-Dominique Giuliani and Michel Foucher (2008), 'involves Europe directly', as the peace it sought to maintain is being directly undermined. Interestingly, the authors repeatedly mentioned Ukraine, strongly suggesting that the EU should increase its presence in the region; by doing so, the EU would 'rid itself of [an] inferiority complex' vis-à-vis Russia and remind Russia that it has no right to impose its will on independent nations that seek to join the EU or NATO (Giuliani and Foucher, 2008). The authors' emphasis on Ukraine was prophetic, as in 2014 Russia began its aggressive policies towards Ukraine, once again exposing the EU's strategic vulnerability, with an armed conflict now literally on its doorstep. Yet even

¹ France, despite its central role in it, failed to ratify the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community in August 1954 (Dinan, 2014, p. 67).

the events of 2008 and 2014 were insufficient for the EU Member States to overcome internal divisions completely. Rather, it adopted a half-measure strategy due to five clear reasons – ‘EU’s security idiosyncrasies, nuclear policy choices, divergent political interests, energy dependency and ineffective sanctions policy on Russia’ (Vicente, 2022). Additionally, at least ten EU states exported weapons to Russia totalling EUR 356 million in the period from 2015 to 2020, to varying degrees funding Russia’s subsequent full-scale invasion in 2022 (Maggiore, Miñano and Schmidt, 2022). It is in part the EU’s hesitancy and attempts at pacification that culminated in Russia’s unjustified and miscalculated invasion, which seems oddly familiar. Undeniably, the position taken by the EU in 2022 is drastically different compared to 2008 and 2014, ranging from military assistance to granting candidate status to Ukraine in a record-short period of time; yet the invasion was a further stark reminder. Clearly, the circumstances are different, as the EU, deliberately or not, has planted a flag in the geopolitical confrontation with Russia by taking a definite position in the conflict. In order to withstand this confrontation, in the climate of the absence of security guarantees from the US and its shifting focus, as well as Russia’s assertiveness, the EU must try the European Defence Community, abandoned almost 70 years ago, again. Taking into account that numerous defence initiatives were introduced over this span of time, making European defence ‘an impenetrable jungle of acronyms and monikers’, the defence project is likely to take the shape of a European security pillar within NATO rather than a ‘single, clear, unified institution of the EU’ (Garton Ash, 2024). Apparently, an identity shift is under way, which is evident from the rhetoric of certain European leaders. For instance, the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, in his Second Sorbonne speech, emphasised the significance of the European pillar of NATO, the French nuclear deterrent, and the need to bring EU Member States strategically closer (Dziubińska, 2024). Similarly, Friedrich Merz, a longstanding Atlanticist, has supported European strategic autonomy from the US, reviving hopes for a repair of the Franco-German engine (Wintour, 2025). While EU leaders seem to be realising the precarious situation in which the Union has found itself, Russian drones violated Polish airspace on 9 September 2025, which can be regarded as Russia’s attempt to probe thresholds. On the other hand, Ukraine’s path towards accession, which accelerated considerably from 2022 onwards, is testing the Union in an entirely different way through transformation. By granting Ukraine candidacy, the EU, as mentioned above, joined a geopolitical confrontation with Russia and assumed an even greater moral and normative responsibility. In this context, both the decision to admit Ukraine and to withhold membership would carry significant implications, as Ukraine is a country with a large population, a battle-hardened army, a sizeable agricultural sector, and a strategic and inherently destabilising geopolitical location – factors that cannot go unnoticed in any scenario. Therefore, it is obvious that Ukraine’s accession would bring changes to the way the EU identifies itself. Ukraine

has gone through a long and bumpy period of evolution in its own regional perception, which eventually culminated in an unquestionable alignment with the West, and with the EU in particular. However, Ukraine's aspiration, more tangible than ever before, may clash with the EU's limitations generated by its crisis of identity.

EU'S PERCEPTION OF ACCESSION

The process of accession represents the fulfilment of criteria, institutional adaptation, and, importantly, mutual willingness: to embrace and be embraced by a multinational society of shared values, wealth, and solidarity. It is reasonable to claim that the EU's perception of Ukraine's membership appears crucial when considering what the Union constitutes and what it aspires to become. The candidacy of Ukraine signifies a seismic change in the geopolitical, economic, and normative environment of the EU, which is unavoidable with the accession of a sizeable, strategically exposed, and war-torn country. Accordingly, the approach adopted by the Union in relation to Ukraine's accession mirrors its broader self-perception: whether it is a moral community built upon norms, a system under strain, or an evolving project capable of reinterpreting and adapting its purpose.

EU as a moral community

The EU, being a moral community, would perceive Ukraine's accession as a moral obligation. With the outbreak of war in 2022, the EU's response to Ukraine's struggle for independence was founded on an unparalleled sense of moral solidarity and normative unity. An example of this can be found in the speech of Charles Michel, the President of the European Council, delivered in January 2023 at the Ukrainian Parliament, in which he said: 'My dear Ukrainian sisters and brothers, you have embraced freedom, democracy and the values we share as Europeans', adding that the futures of Ukraine and the EU are bound (*European Pravda*, 2023). Another example is Michel's speech in April 2022, when he argued that Ukraine's resistance is a defence of 'common European values' (European Council, 2022). These symbolic statements of affiliation and action had an immense motivating impact on Ukrainians, as they implied that the sacrifices Ukraine is making are acknowledged as part of a common European future. Yet this moral momentum, powerful as it was, eventually collided with political and institutional limitations. What initially appeared as a manifestation of a shared destiny has turned into a language of procedural caution. While some countries, commonly in East-Central Europe, supported fast-track accession, others have been cooler on the idea, which once again points to the insufficiency of mere moral unity, as it is not

long-lasting and fades over time. The matter is particularly acute for the EU, as there is a varying perception of Russia as an existential threat. To explain, the Baltic states and countries of Central Europe perceive Russia as a tangible danger, while this same issue is treated with political caution rather than fear in Western Europe. As the war enters its fourth year, the sense of urgency that prevailed at the beginning has started to fade and is now being replaced by political calculation and a realisation of what accession actually means for the EU – a great deal of reforms. Clearly, sympathy, though emotionally empowering, is proving inadequate to maintain commitment. Yet, importantly, this moral perception is not dominant in the European Union: if, even after almost four years of a terrible war, the EU has not fast-tracked Ukraine's accession, it is unlikely to do so in the near future. Therefore, this perception is present mostly in discourse rather than in decision-making, which points to the Union's internal struggle between its moral language and political reality – a struggle that harms both the EU and Ukraine.

EU as a system under strain

This perception can be viewed as a by-product of moral responsibility, which brought the EU face to face with what enlargement would mean and what the EU must do to make it work. Ukraine is not a small candidate; with its agricultural sector and battle-hardened army, it will change the EU's strategic orientation, which makes its cautious approach to reforms reasonable, as it has to ensure the functionality of the EU. However, it would be fair to highlight that a cautious approach and a rhetoric of 'reforms first' should not become an excuse for postponing accession, because the EU, though potentially avoiding some sensitive problems, would inevitably have to address others – such as qualified majority voting (QMV) in taxes and foreign policy – with or without enlargement. The EU as a system under strain is the result of its moral language. In other words, the EU expresses a strong willingness to accept new members, including Ukraine, but when Member States are faced with the need to lay internal groundwork to prepare for such enlargement, there is a lack of consensus. From this perspective, the EU risks appearing inconsistent at best, by insisting on reforms from candidate states while resisting comparable changes internally. Undeniably, the full-scale invasion has made the EU assume a stance it never adopted before, while also facing an energy crisis and internal divisions. The war united EU Member States as never before, but it also divided them, and the fault lines are far from new: countries in the West fear overextension, while countries in the East are concerned about losing sovereignty – paradoxically, to both Russia and the EU (Psalopoulos, 2025; Kopeček, 2019). The difficulty lies in the fact that all issues associated with accession are perceived as problems, rather than as a necessary part of institutional adaptation, which the Union had already undergone during the accession of Greece, Portugal, Spain,

and the 2004 enlargement. In doing so, the EU loses the opportunity to enhance its own functionality and set an example for candidate states, which may weaken the momentum for reform implementation among potential members. Globally, the EU's voice would remain divided at a time when unity is needed the most, its historically normative perception would be undermined, and it would find itself ill-equipped for a new international order. As correctly highlighted by Zorica Maric Djordjevic and Kateryna Kyrychenko (2025), the EU has to become willing again, as it was during previous waves of accession, and move from speculation to concrete political actions. Hence, the strain under which the EU has found itself is self-imposed, and its members are the only ones who can remove it.

EU in evolution

If the EU is to become a project in evolution, its perception of enlargement would change entirely, from a burden to an opportunity. Furthermore, the Union would rethink its *raison d'être* and its own self-perception, which could create a new form, departing from the 'peace project' it used to be. This would make evolution not only an institutional process but also an ontological one. In fact, the identity of the EU has been evolving following every accession, which should not be reduced to a new layer of complexity or a new identity within the EU. For instance, first there was a Union of core Europe for post-war reconciliation and interdependence; later, the Union that allowed a Northern liberal turn; further, the integrative Union capable of accommodating diverse states emerging from authoritarianism; and, finally, the re-unified Union that brought in the countries that for a long time existed behind the Iron Curtain, 'emerging with the argument "one of us"' (Hakverir Kutman, 2021). Similarly, Ukraine's accession could mark the next stage in the EU's evolution toward greater resilience, allowing it to defend the values it represents. From another perspective, one can perceive Ukraine as a new crisis in Monnet's understanding, and the solutions the Union finds to address that challenge would define what the EU is and what it is not.² The accession of Ukraine has the potential to make widening and deepening go hand in hand, not one at the expense of the other. As mentioned, a candidate such as Ukraine will trigger institutional, political, and military deepening. While the first two seem rather obvious, the military aspect might appear ambiguous, because the EU, as a project originally grounded in the pursuit of peace rather than military might, has repeatedly demonstrated hesitance in assuming a role in European

² Monnet placed crisis at the center of Europe's development, highlighting the interplay between external disruption and internal reform: 'Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises' (Monnet, 1976; Pohl, 2024).

defence (European Union, n.d.). However, peace has not been a natural state of affairs on the European continent since 2008 and, as time went on, matters only worsened, culminating in an unjustifiable violation of sovereignty in 2022. These days, the circumstances require the EU not merely to react to events but to shape them, turning it into a strategic actor which would become no less normative, but certainly more credible. Ukraine, whether viewed as a crisis or an opportunity, has a role to play in this process and, in fact, already does by resurrecting a debate on the Union's strategic autonomy and the accession process (European Council, 2023; European Parliament, 2022; Élysée, 2022). The evolution started the moment Ukraine was granted candidate status, and this process is likely to redefine the meaning of the EU in the 21st century, making it act like a union, not a committee. Accession is about the readiness of Ukraine and the capability of the EU, but while Ukraine is ready, is the EU capable? This is the essence of evolution – a move from narrative to strategy, as capability can only be forged through actions, not words, not actions of sympathy, but actions of willingness and ability.

What is apparent is that all three perceptions are present to a certain degree; they collide and overlap, which once again points to an identity crisis. It would be unduly reductionist to confine the EU to only one of the above-described perceptions, as they are clearly interlinked and, when viewed as parts of a whole, appear to be stages constituting a larger process of EU transformation. If this is the case, the process would proceed as follows: the EU realises that keeping Ukraine in the waiting phase becomes increasingly difficult due to moral pressure and the Ukraine's dedication and assertiveness, prompting the EU to commence the accession process (moral community); further, the EU is faced with the need to reform in order to accommodate Ukraine (strain); finally, if the members succeed in removing the strain, the EU would change politically, strategically, and institutionally, while simultaneously revisiting its self-perception. Predictably, many might argue that such an approach is overly politicised, which, as some European leaders have made clear, should not happen with Ukraine's accession. However, it *is* politicised and, surprisingly, the EU has greatly contributed to this politicisation. In particular, by granting Ukraine candidate status in record-short time, which occurred immediately after the full-scale invasion and after Ukraine proved capable of standing up to Russia. The candidacy was not given earlier, and Ukraine had been steadily proceeding with reforms with limited success before 2022, which points to politicisation and a profound impact of Russian aggression on the EU's strategic thinking. Previous accessions were not devoid of politicisation either; for instance, the accession of Central and Eastern European states marked a post-Cold War 'return to Europe'. Yet, in the case of Ukraine, efforts to prevent politicisation should not become an alibi for postponing accession and reforms.

US FACTOR AND EU'S AWAKENING

Visibly, the EU is being pressured on all fronts, externally and internally. Among the external and highly powerful levers is the US factor, which, ironically, has been looming over the EU for almost a decade now, ever since Trump came to power. Though present for a long time, it was during Trump's second term that it became evident that the grand strategy of the US had changed, making the EU question the US's credibility as a security guarantor (Nimark, 2025). This shift points to the US's reorientation from Europe to Asia, which has been ongoing since the Obama administration via the 'Pivot to Asia' strategy (deLisle, 2016). Not to mention Trump's continuous accusations of the EU for not investing enough in defence during both of his terms in the White House (The American Rhetoric, 2017; The White House, 2018; Cingari, 2025). However, the EU, having been faced with security matters ever since its establishment, developed a habit of outsourcing its security to Washington and NATO, which, once comfortable, has now turned into a strategic vulnerability. Paradoxically, neither can be considered credible security guarantors for Europe, as Article 5 leaves substantial room for interpretation, while the US's lack of interest in defending Europe, from the point of view of game theory, is unsurprising. As stated by Stephen Wertheim (2025), what is more important is that Europe is more interested in defending Europe than the US is. Even though Trump never openly declared an intention to abandon the European continent, Europe cannot afford to wait for stability to return, not in the present-day environment. A complete transatlantic rift is improbable, due to the economic and political costs it would incur – particularly for the US – yet the US is changing its global priorities. Nevertheless, the EU must consolidate from within, for an abrupt withdrawal of US support could expose the Union to internal fragmentation, as individual Member States might potentially move to ensure security unilaterally. In this respect, Ukraine's accession may emerge as a mechanism of spillover that would ignite a shift in the EU's strategic posture and its internal reformation. The Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 published by the European Commission is living proof of Ukraine's central role, as it highlights that 'Ukraine is a key part of Europe's readiness effort' (European Commission, 2025).

Firstly, Ukraine's accession would substantially boost the EU's military capabilities through its large, battle-hardened army with experience in conventional warfare, and would help resolve the matter of 'an independent European force' (Bendarzsevszkij, 2025). Secondly, accession has the potential to build a bridge between 'foreign' and 'security' policies which, with such a country as a Member State of the Union, would become increasingly intertwined. In fact, the EU's engagement with Ukraine, ranging from sanctions and military assistance to accession negotiations, showcases a blurring

between the two. Thirdly, by integrating Ukraine, the EU would gain the opportunity to shift the balance of power within NATO and reduce asymmetry. In particular, the EU would establish and consolidate a security pillar within NATO which would complement, rather than blindly follow, US leadership (Scazzieri, 2025). Needless to mention that growing independence from the US would allow for more flexibility in terms of assistance to Ukraine, the outcome of which has a direct impact on the EU. Especially with US assistance fluctuating and Trump's drive to end the war as fast as possible obscuring the line between peace and capitulation, the EU more than ever needs the means to affect the *status quo*, so as not to leave Ukraine's future and, indeed, its own in the hands of Trump's unstated grand strategy, which increasingly turns into improvisation. Further, Ukraine's integration, in addition to changing the Union internally, would increase its external influence in the neighbourhood. As pointed out by Panos Koutrakos, the EU could effectively leverage both civilian and military instruments to carry out its role as a peace supporter and defender as envisioned by the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) (Schmidt and Koutrakos, 2013). Moreover, the EU would be able to negotiate, respond to and deter emergencies in neighbouring states more effectively, as well as defend the principles it endorses, making the Neighbourhood Policy enforceable not only in normative terms but also strategically.

Therefore, the uncertainty of US commitment sets off the revisionist movement within the EU, compelling the latter to face the reality of its security reliance and move from dependence to agency. In this environment, Ukraine is not merely a beneficiary but a contributor and a catalyst for the EU's strategic awakening, prompting the Union to revise its foundations.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the EU's identity revealed a tension between what it was created as and what the present-day environment requires it to be. Founded as a peace project, the EU was highly reluctant to take on the role of a military union and operated successfully within an ever-evolving normative framework; yet this became more difficult in the post-LIO environment of alternative systems, power politics, and unilateralism. These days, the EU's normative authority persists, but without backing it is significantly constrained. Simultaneously, the threat of a US renunciation of its role as Europe's security guarantor, which it assumed almost 80 years ago, renders the matter of strategic autonomy imperative. In this environment, it is Ukraine's position that is likely to emerge as a necessary catalyst and a mechanism of spillover for the EU. The three overlapping perceptions of Ukraine's accession by the EU revealed the transformational potential of enlargement and the extent to which the EU is prepared to evolve into

an autonomous union. The bigger picture revealed that these three perceptions form a multi-stage process of the EU's adaptation to a changing environment, with Ukraine playing an important role in this transformation.

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THE STRATEGIC TURN OF THE EU AND THE UKRAINIAN IMPULSE

Abstract

The article examines the EU's historical self-identification and the obstacles it is faced with today, driving the Union into substantial internal revisionism and reconfiguration. It further explores how the EU perceives the accession of Ukraine: from the position of a moral community, a system under strain, or an evolving project. The article argues that accommodating Ukraine is likely to become a catalyst for the EU's strategic transformation in a rapidly changing international order.

Keywords: European Union, Ukraine, enlargement, EU integration, identity, normative power, strategic posture, Ukraine's accession, US-EU relations, international order

STRATEGICZNY ZWROT UE I IMPULS UKRAIŃSKI

Streszczenie

W artykule poddano analizie historyczną tożsamość UE oraz przeszkody, z jakimi obecnie się mierzy, zmuszające ją do znacznych zmian wewnętrznych i rekonfiguracji. Ponadto zbadano, jak Unia postrzega przystąpienie Ukrainy do UE: z perspektywy wspólnoty moralnej, systemu poddawanego presji czy projektu w trakcie ewolucji. W artykule dowodzi się, że przyjęcie Ukrainy może stać się katalizatorem strategicznej transformacji UE w szybko zmieniającym się międzynarodowym ładzie.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, Ukraina, rozszerzenie, integracja z UE, tożsamość, potęga normatywna, pozycja strategiczna, przystąpienie Ukrainy, stosunki USA-UE, międzynarodowy ład