ISSN 2081-5913
ONLINE ISSN
2545-0964

MYŚL EKONOMICZNA i POLITYCZNA

2(85)2025

Uczelnia Łazarskiego

Myśl Ekonomiczna i Polityczna

2(85) 2025

DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(85).2025

Kwartalnik Wydziału Ekonomii i Zarządzania Uczelni Łazarskiego
Warszawa 2025

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ISSN 2081-5913, online ISSN 2545-0964
https://mysl.lazarski.pl

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ARTICLES AND STUDIES

ARTYKUŁY I STUDIA

Yaroslav Snisarenko*

Genealogy of European Union – Tandem of German and French Philosophy from Perpetual Peace Sketches of Kant and Rousseau

DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(85).2025.08/y.snisarenko

Introduction

On 16 May 1949, Robert Schuman delivered a speech commemorating the establishment of the European Community system in accordance with Europe's post-war reconciliation policies. Schuman was a fervent proponent of policies and initiatives that would protect the continent and the world from ongoing devastation in the altered geopolitical landscape of the post-World War II era. He believed that the European spirit, characterised by both reason and experience, must be the ultimate driving force in its own preservation. However, the most interesting remarks were those dedicated to the individuals who, in Schuman's words, were responsible for this crucial moment of European unity. He declared that audacious minds such as Dante, Erasmus, Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Rousseau, Kant and Proudhon were integral parts of an already created framework designed to end wars and establish eternal peace among men. He stated that these abstract outlines were 'both ingenious and generous' (Robert Schuman European Center, 1999). While Dante, Erasmus and Proudhon were prominent figures in European cultural and intellectual heritage, Saint-Pierre, Rousseau and Kant were directly involved in the intellectual discourse regarding *Perpetual Peace* and its origins in the form of a European federation. Furthermore, the Duke of Sully and Leibniz were directly associated with the same intellectual tradition of the Enlightenment, which encompassed the three aforementioned thinkers. They all shared the idea of establishing

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a European federation (each using a unique title) to guarantee permanent peace among people. The ideological design and architecture of European integration after the First and Second World Wars were fundamentally influenced by the *Perpetual Peace* doctrine, which represented one of the earliest iterations of a distinctly continental strand of liberal theory. In the contemporary European Union, this philosophical tradition is not merely a secondary factor in the interpretation of policies, the encounter with geopolitical obstacles, or the pursuit of integration objectives. The primary objective of this work is to examine and evaluate the concept of *Perpetual Peace* from the perspective of its primary authors. Second, the work will illustrate the relevance of the doctrine's analysis in relation to the Franco-German political and intellectual tandem, as well as the EU's operation as a supranational entity.

Philosophical concept of *Perpetual Peace*

Historically, the European continent has frequently been depicted as a site of constant conflict and power struggle among nations, a form of competition that fostered their growth and ascension towards dominance over others. The tradition of war as a cultural horizon and its manifestation came into conflict with questions of intellectual righteousness and the scarcity of genuine providence in reason that accumulated during the period known as the Enlightenment. From this intellectual environment arose two prominent figures who dedicated themselves to the theoretical articulation of the idea of permanent peace between the nations of Europe – the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Despite this, the initial concept of a federal Europe as a single collective entity had been voiced by numerous intellectuals, including Maximilien de Béthune Sully, Gottfried Leibniz, and Charles Saint-Pierre (Roldan, 2011). However, it was not taken seriously until the theme was revived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who penned his abstract of Saint-Pierre's vision and accompanied it with his own critique, also known as the *Plan for Perpetual Peace* (1761). Soon after, influenced by Rousseau's vision of *Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant published his work *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* in 1795. Among other sketches, the work featured a complex structural design that, under Kant's theoretical consideration, could lead to the establishment of *Perpetual Peace*. Kant's work holds unique value because it culminated the vision of federalism through direct assertions in list form, very similar to how Marx arranged his preconditions of social revolution in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848).

It is essential to assume that the liberal school of thought, in its political character, was not originally a natural component of European culture but rather emerged from an internal breakdown and, over time, underwent a gradual transformation. This is

evident from the works of prominent French thinkers and politicians, such as Sully, who proposed a Christian union of monarchs under a general European council consisting of 70 delegates, and Saint-Pierre, who proposed a federal Europe without mentioning Christianity as a core component of unification (Terminski, 2011). After the Thirty Years' War, general attitudes towards the religious tenets of Christianity were dominated by deduction and logical pragmatism. The principal guidelines expressed by Rousseau and Kant were the first to be put forward as a scheme by which wars could be terminated. This contributed to the general assertion that reason is inherent in liberalism.

It is widely acknowledged that the concept of the state of nature was introduced into academic discourse by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his renowned work *Leviathan* (1651). Hobbes posited that a man in the state of nature is a bloodthirsty individual devoid of virtue, and that the only thing preventing him from perpetual chaos is a sense of fear. This fear forces him to make decisions about his own safety, which ultimately lead to socialisation and rule-following. Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed his disapproval of such a depiction in his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men* (1755), wherein he articulated a fundamentally divergent perspective. Rousseau believed that men, regardless of their nature and instincts, could be truly happy and free, despite all the brutality and savagery often attributed to them. According to Rousseau (1755, p. 35), a man who transcends the concepts of private property and the institutions designed to uphold them, and articulates his reasoning correctly, would therefore create proper faculties, virtues and laws. The primary notion introduced by Rousseau was that the classes, particularly the aristocracy, in the general social order were utterly disassociated from the populace, a theme that pervaded later French political thought during the revolution. Rousseau (1755, p. 4) stated that he would love to be born in a country where the people and the Sovereign have the same interests; otherwise, he preferred tempered democratic rule. This becomes evident when Rousseau wrote his critique of Saint-Pierre's *Project for Perpetual Peace*, where his primary motive may be evaluated as a moral maxim implying the abolition of the traditional aristocratic rule established over centuries in Europe as a prerequisite for establishing perpetual peace. In his essay *The State of War*, Rousseau (1917, p. 127) precisely claimed that 'As individuals, we live in the civil state, under the control of the Law; as nations, each is in the state of nature.' He was suggesting that genuine human consciousness is subverted by inaccurate institutions designed and supported by state regimes and the ruling class in the international political system for their own gain.

It is exceedingly challenging to present Immanuel Kant in a singular work, as he authored a substantial number of texts on the subject of human nature, ranging from anthropology to ethics, which differ according to the evolution of his philosophical beliefs. Notwithstanding this, Kant possessed a fundamental component of his philosophy: he derived his foundation from English empiricism, from which he adapted

the continental-deductive method that reflected his perceptions. His fundamental work, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), aimed to resolve the dispute between empiricists and rationalists, wherein Kant elucidated that the empiricists were correct in their hypothesis. Kant (2017, p. 4) himself stated that David Hume, the famous English empiricist, woke him from a dogmatic slumber. To obtain a better comprehension of the relation between English empiricism and the figure of Immanuel Kant, who is more closely associated with the continental philosophical tradition, it is worth considering Kant's position expressed in his essay *Idea for a History with a Cosmopolitan Intent* (1784). Immanuel Kant (1983, p. 30) asserts that reason is the sole force capable of transcending natural instincts to establish new laws and objectives. He assumes that nature will sow discord among men to direct them away from stagnation and everyday comfort through antagonism as a source of development, from which humans, because of their cleverness, will ultimately find a solution (1983, pp. 31–32). Kant, utilising the analogy of Thomas Hobbes, reaffirms that a human being, despite his inherent nature, will ultimately opt to establish a legal-based order. However, unlike Hobbes, who proclaimed that the outcome of this is human fear of death, for Kant the consequence is the manifestation of reason itself, which elevates humanity to a civil state owing to accrued experience and the demand for peace (Nakhimovsky, 2011, p. 43). Immanuel Kant used the same logic in his assumptions about relations between states and societies.

Therefore, it can be understood that *Erfahrungswelt* – or, in translation, experience – plays an imperative part in the derivatives from which the reflection of the conscious mind is developed, which will deductively create the conditions for establishing the laws upon which civil society will function. From his own epistemological analysis, the noted scholar of Neo-Kantianism and English empiricism, Andrew Seth, wrote that this experience, or *Erfahrungswelt*, comes from *vacuo* as it has no locus, and it continues in the evolution of human personality (Seth, 1893, p. 299). From the conversion of the human being into a civil state and the establishment of a state of peace, Kant proposes that the extent of one's experience reveals the level of rationality required for the establishment of a proper state of peace. Another specialist in liberal theory, Isaac Nakhimovsky (2011, p. 177), complements the above-mentioned assertions in the sphere of international relations (IR) between states, citing Kant's argument that the real 'guarantee of a new treaty system' will be the natural historical process.

Democratic Peace Theory and Non-Intervention Doctrine

Returning to the central theme of this work, which pertains to the written literature on *Perpetual Peace*, it is imperative to examine the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and emphasise the primary themes outlined by him in order to demonstrate the parallels

with Kant's remarks. As noted earlier, Rousseau showed interest in the imaginative potential of the *Perpetual Peace* project when he was requested to republish a completed version of the proposed project authored by Charles Saint-Pierre. In addition to the abstract, he also composed his critique of the project, which eventually attracted the attention of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant.

Following the end of the War of the Spanish Succession in 1713, Charles Saint--Pierre proposed the idea of a European federation, a union between the monarchs of Europe and their respective states intended to eliminate the endless conflicts across the European continent. Saint-Pierre believed that Europe and its nations should be united under the authority of uniform law, religion, commerce, government, and manners (Rousseau, 1761, p. 4).[1] He also expressed frustration that any treaty of peace did not directly lead to the end of conflict and was executed only by the rival parties; as Saint-Pierre claimed, they resembled 'transit truces rather than real peace', and Europe as a whole remained in a constant state of war. The same view was also shared by J.J. Rousseau (1761, p. 9). Both Saint-Pierre and Kant were among the pioneers who introduced the initial iteration of mutual interdependence theory, or neofunctionalism, as part of liberal discourse (Kauppi and Viotti, 2020, pp. 69–70). According to the definition provided by the liberal scholar Scott Burchill (Burchill *et al.*, 2013, p. 66), these theories are based on the premise that the greater the integration of member states in institutional, economic, and other systems, the greater the likelihood of establishing robust ties and preventing subsequent causes of conflict. As Charles Saint-Pierre argued, for a lasting federation of Europe and an equal distribution of power among states, they must be placed in such mutual dependence that no single party can overbear another, as derived from the 'Constitution of Europe' (Rousseau, 2005, p. 36).

Rousseau's response to the work of Abbé de Saint-Pierre was harsh yet empathetic. On the one hand, he criticised the fact that, had such a remarkable idea coincided with the desires of all the peoples of Europe, the sovereigns would have taken it into consideration at once; instead, the proposal was decisively ignored (Rousseau, 1917, p. 94). On the other hand, Rousseau did not deny the appeal of the idea and tended to believe that the main problem lay in Henry IV's pursuit of personal interests rather than the actual public interest (Rousseau, 1917, p. 107). As mentioned earlier, a form of resentment towards the ruling class based on the notion of wealth is present between the lines of Rousseau's philosophical reflections and is a central theme of his major works. His fundamental proposal for establishing lasting peace in Europe was a revolution

[1] The extracted passage was taken from the English version of the work of Abbe Saint-Pierre that was originally published in London by request of M. Cooper, as part of the work done by J.J. Rousseau, who presented the work of the French statesman with his own introduction and further polemics.

that would eliminate all aspects of the old social and political order (Rousseau, 1917, p. 112).

It is reasonable to argue that Kant's *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795), written thirty years after Rousseau's work, was the ultimate apotheosis that concluded the comprehensive debate surrounding the *Perpetual Peace* discourse. Unlike his counterparts, Immanuel Kant (1983, p. 109) put forward specific instructions to establish perpetual peace between peoples. Among them were calls for the annulment and end of debts between states (material or otherwise), as these would provoke further discord; non-interference in the affairs of other states and their constitutional order, suggesting that changes should occur from within; and the prevention of war from escalating to the point of total annihilation by one or all parties, thus paving the way for further mutual trust and the abolishment of standing armies. For Kant, it was fundamental that all institutional structuring be modelled on republicanism, thereby refraining from war, as every subject would eventually become a citizen with full rights granted by law. However, he also labelled democracy a despotic rule, as the execution of orders would fall upon the majority and the general will would contradict both itself and the maxim of freedom (Kant, 1983, pp. 113–114). In addition, Kant (1983, p. 125) proposed that commerce is the most reliable tool for making peace among all, both as a means of achieving this goal and as a deterrent that creates dependency between states. It is also possible to interpret that, for Kant, the first formulated iteration of democratic peace theory ought to possess a global and universal character, considering that for those who did not have a republican model of the state, such a system would be perceived by others as a potential threat to coexistence, as those states would remain in a state of nature (Kant, 1983, p. 112). In his work *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the German philosopher emphasised an important aspect of his philosophy: moral maxims, or in other words, subjective laws derived from obligation that can be tested morally by the *categorical imperative*, which itself arises from reason. Kant sought to establish a universal law among men, created from *supreme morality – maxims* that would serve as universal obligations and duties (Kant, 2019, p. 17). With such groundwork, Immanuel Kant (1983, p. 139) postulated that 'All maxims that require publicity (in order not to fail in their end) agree with both politics and morality.' His philosophical position regarding the general order is straightforward: morality serves as law when applied to states with public authority, and state conduct should obey obligations prescribed by morality rather than by purpose or interest (Kapossy *et al.*, 2018, p. 176; Franceschet, 2002, p. 12). Today's liberal IR theory primarily focuses on the examination of morality in law and government through liberalisation, decentralisation, and public action (Gismondi, 2008, p. 191).

Returning to *Perpetual Peace*, the German philosopher advocated that, in order to establish a lawful order with a despotic but republican form of government, it is

preferable to wait for better times, as there is a constant sense of threat among neighbouring states (Kant, 1983, p. 129). He also expressed one of the first iterations of the liberal doctrine of non-interference, extrapolated to sovereign states and later codified in the international legal order, including in the charters of the UN and the League of Nations (Wu, 2023). Nevertheless, as with Rousseau, the German philosopher stated explicitly that, in order to establish an internal *state of right* (another term for *civil state*), such an order would be established only by the use of force (Kant, 1983, p. 128). Notwithstanding this, the fear that peace might fail to be established among nations leads to the idea that, in order to refrain from the risks of war – which could lead to the eradication of everything – it is easier to sacrifice something while leaving a chance for the continuation of duty. Kant (1983, p. 128) considered this from the moral standpoint of a decision-making politician who is centred on his primary duty, even if it appears to be a full-fledged sacrifice.

From all the works written on *Perpetual Peace*, one may ask a fundamental question: is everything articulated within this strand of continental philosophy concerned solely with the European continent and the creation of a united European federation? When looking at the stances of Sully to Rousseau, the answer appears clear, as they offered their proposals for the unification of Europe precisely in a chain of responses from one author to another. Abbé Saint-Pierre himself began his work by proclaiming that there is nothing more delightful than peace among the nations of Europe, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2005, p. 27) echoed this sentiment in his critique. There is no doubt that Pierre and Rousseau spoke of the same objective – the scheme for a European federation – with the distinction that Pierre favoured forming a federation by securing peace between monarchs and aristocratic republics, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau preferred a federation of peoples. Regarding Immanuel Kant's response, although he reacted directly to the works of these two figures, he did not use titles such as 'European Federation', nor did he simply refer to Europe as a continent where peace had to be established. Instead, Kant named his supranational institution a 'League of Peace', whose task was to protect the freedoms of its members and to refrain from possessing any coercive power over them (1983, p. 117). This has been a point of debate among academics, as some have associated the 'League of Peace' with later institutions such as the League of Nations or the United Nations. In another work, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant employed a different term – the 'Kingdom of Ends' – with essentially the same reasoning as the one found in his *Perpetual Peace* sketch (2019, p. 46). This can also be interpreted through the fact that, from Kant's point of view, Europe – through France – had to undergo a revolution of change, after which the Germans would create a model for all mankind, which may explain Kant's political language and the terminology he used in his works. Another point is that many scholars do not accept the view that Kant wrote exclusively about the creation of unified

statehood, but rather that he was writing on how to end any war in any state (Salikov, 2015, p. 71). This view is rejected here, as noted previously; Kant specifically addressed the proposals for a unified federative union made by both Pierre and Rousseau, rather than merely creating entirely new foundations for discourse while focusing only on possible measures to end wars. It would be less logical to formulate outlines for future unification in the same text and cite both authors if his intention were limited solely to the latter.

Perpetual Peace discourse in modern politics

Following the comprehensive theoretical overview, it is vital to address the second inquiry: the degree to which the discourse regarding *Perpetual Peace* has left an imprint on the European political dimension, and the extent to which individuals involved in European integration processes genuinely rely on the frameworks established by Kant and Rousseau. There are several ways to substantiate this hypothesis. One of them is the fact that, throughout the history of European integration, numerous prominent political figures have publicly demonstrated their affection, devotion, and commitment to the concepts expressed by both political philosophers. Kantianism has long dominated political-philosophical discourse in Germany and has proved itself to be the main engine of continental liberalism, a trend that triumphed in the intellectual milieu after two devastating total wars. At the conclusion of the First World War, Paul Löbe, the future president of the Reichstag from the SPD, and the Austrian Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi exchanged thoughts on the future world order. They envisioned a European state model that corresponded to the idea of an absolute rule of law, repeatedly mentioning Kant throughout their discussion (European University Institute, 1926). Willy Brandt, in his lecture upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971, stated that the very practice of war should be eliminated, not merely limited, and further embraced Kant and his concept of *Perpetual Peace* in his speech (Brandt, 1971). Similarly, in 1990, Chancellor Helmut Kohl frequently quoted Kant during a CSCE summit anticipating the end of the Cold War (Taz, 1990). Even without considering the quantitative implications of direct quotes that mention the German philosopher and his *Perpetual Peace* notion, it is evident that Kant is far from being in the shadows when it comes to the liberal-intellectual foundations of modern Germany. From recent examples, particular attention has been drawn to the cases of Olaf Scholz, former Chancellor of Germany from the SPD, and Emmanuel Macron, the current president of France, both of whom devoted notable attention to Kant and Rousseau and their depiction of eternal European peace. Scholz delivered a lecture on the 300th birthday anniversary of Kant, stating that no matter how slim the volume of the sketch *Perpetual*

Peace is, he wished once more to highlight the ideal reflections that still provide orientation and confidence today. During the lecture, Scholz publicly criticised Vladimir Putin, president of the Russian Federation, for appropriating Kant's intellectual heritage and using his ideas as a justification for the conflict in Ukraine (Die Bundesregierung, 2024). At the early stage of the war in Ukraine in 2022, Emmanuel Macron visited Pope Francis on the occasion of promoting international peace. When exchanging gifts, Pope Francis presented his collection of works and a bronze medallion representing Saint Peter and the colonnade, while Macron offered him a French edition of Kant's *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) (Lubov, 2022). The visit can be understood as a dialogue between secular and Christian perspectives on peace in Europe at the outset of the war on its borders, unified by one concrete aim: ending the conflict. Another meeting of equal significance was the joint appearance of Macron and Scholz at the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Élysée Treaty between Germany and France. In his address, the German Chancellor emphasised the significance of the Franco-German tandem and the importance of security in European continent. He noted that the Peace Project of Europe began with reconciliation between France and Germany, and that one of the primary values of the friendship between the two countries is Kant's concept of the rule of law and Rousseau's notion that sovereignty is anchored in the people (Die Bundesregierung, 2023).

In this case, it can be understood that the figure of Kant is not merely an important part of liberal thinking, but in some sense represents the driving force of the Franco-German engine. Relying on Kant, Germany has, in the long term, strategically sought to return as a full-fledged player freed from the limitations of political conscience. In reality, such a turn not only compelled Germany in the 20th and 21st centuries to be one of the founding nations of European unification, but also granted it the right to participate in the first ranks of European integration dynamics. One indication of this belief may be found in an article by the well-known left-wing politician and economist Yanis Varoufakis. He posited that the 'Kantianisation' of Germany itself may have been the factor contributing to its moral behaviour at the onset of the Migrant Crisis in 2015, which contrasted markedly with the policies of other countries (Varoufakis, 2015). This phenomenon can be viewed as the converse of rhetoric asserting that any peace is more sacred than war. Scholz consistently exhibited reluctance to offer support for Ukraine's defence during the initial years of the conflict (Oltermann, 2022). He was among the first of the most notable opinion-makers in Europe to publicly emphasise his calls to Vladimir Putin, urging him to end the war and support peace enforcement (Hueske, 2024). The above demonstrates the transfer of an intellectual-based tandem into the empirical political realm of bilateral and multilateral engagements between the two states.

Following one question, another inevitably emerges: is there a modern discourse about *Perpetual Peace* in a practical sense, reflected in foreign policy outside

Germany – or, more broadly, outside the borders of the Franco-German tandem? The response is complex, as the European Union is not a mere union of Germany and France, but rather a community of 25 other small or medium-sized nations. Following the same methodology, several examples can be included. On 10 October 2022, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, delivered a speech at the annual EU Ambassadors' Conference. Borrell (Riet and Klaver, 2023, pp. 1523–1524) stated that 'Our fight is to try to explain that democracy, freedom, political freedom is not something that can be exchanged by economic prosperity or social cohesion. Both things have to go together. Otherwise, our model will perish, will not be able to survive in this world. We are too much Kantians and not enough Hobbesians.' These words can be interpreted to mean that the issue in understanding the largest conflict since the Second World War lies in the fact that, in recent decades, the EU has been organised around entirely different goals, purposes, and values. As a result, it finds itself torn between two sides when confronted with the conduct of war, and those governing the EU are not accustomed to the realities of violence and warfare. Another possible connotation touches on a dilemma at the very core of the European Union. If the EU is indeed a European federation built on a practical basis, envisioned abstractly by Pierre, Rousseau, and Kant, then the contemporary situation becomes more transparent.

Security and defence issues were raised repeatedly even before the war in Ukraine, beginning with the failure to create a separate European Defence Community (EDC) in 1952, following France's withdrawal and procedural obstacles in Italy. Despite approval of the EDC in Germany, more than half of SPD members rejected and criticised the idea of European forces (Kanter, 1970, pp. 221–222). The common view was that, for France, the main issues regarding the EDC concerned the abolishment of the French national army and the perceived threat of German militarisation (Goormaghtigh, 1956). The Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) also met a difficult fate. Despite their evolution from the second pillar of the Maastricht Treaty to the Treaty of Lisbon (TFEU), CFSP/CSDP do not fall under the general rule of EU competences outlined by Article 3 of the TFEU and remain highly intergovernmental and cautious in action (Wessel and Hertog, 2012). In this context, the implication of *Perpetual Peace* can be seen in the complex legal construction of the EU, particularly in the national–supranational management of the Union, which does not adequately define a delicate position concerning security and acts of war. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Josep Borrell advocated reforms within the CFSP to adapt the qualified majority voting (QMV) system as the basis for a single voice, a proposal regarded as controversial by representatives of several member states (Navarra and Jančová, 2023). Nevertheless, these reforms do not directly advance the concept of strong militarisation at the statehood level; however,

they may more effectively strengthen normative force as a tool – a dilemma that again traces back to Kantianism. Although these developments form part of the struggle for the federalisation of Europe, it cannot be dismissed that many of these political processes are also linked to the inherent possibility that the very idea of militarism and conflict is inorganic to the nature of the organisation upon whose ideas it is centred.

However, this methodology and the manner of establishing a hypothesis regarding the ascension of the EU and the projects of eternal peace have their weak spots and limitations. As noted earlier, aside from the Franco-German tandem and the European intellectual environment, or certain parts of the EU bureaucracy, very little can be directly associated with the figure of Kant, Rousseau, or even the naming of *Eternal Peace* in contemporary European Union affairs. Jan Zielonka (2025), for instance, posits that contemporary political figures in Europe who identify as centre-left or left no longer associate themselves with, nor refer to philosophers such as Kant, Rousseau, or Adam Smith because they did not develop practical instructions or countermeasures pertaining to resistance in the implementation of their expressed concepts. If the earliest steps of European integration were indeed supported by theorist–statesmen and idealists who likely believed in the sincerity of Kant's or Rousseau's words, today – as Jürgen Habermas assessed – the project of the European Union is no longer solely a matter for the elites, but increasingly lies in the hands of the public (Bonde, 2011, p. 161). It is also connected to the fact that the concept of *Perpetual Peace* does not reside solely in the state affairs of the countries that founded the discourse, nor only in its end product, the European Union (or European federation). Rather, it is a principle present at every political level and must undergo a much more comprehensive examination.

Perhaps the doctrines of democratic peace, the rule of law, and commerce are the most notable borrowed elements in the context of *Perpetual Peace* principles when analysing the nature of the European Union as a supranational political entity. As mentioned in the first part of the work, Kantian republicanism became one of the cornerstones of the theory of democratic peace. Immanuel Kant's selected criteria for securing peace through each state's institutional structure suggest that broader participation of the collective will eventually prevents private intentions from initiating warfare or acts harmful to citizens. One of the main pioneers of the theory of democratic peace, Michael Doyle, relied on Kant's interpretation of eternal peace when formulating his theory (Russett *et al.*, 1995, p. 180). Analysing the success of Western European countries in maintaining peace, Doyle confirmed Kant's claims regarding democratic systems and regimes with a republican form of government. He also deduced that the stability democratic regimes display towards each other in the international system encourages other countries to pursue mutual respect, fair competition, and consensus (Layne, 1994, p. 9). This has an apparent implication, as all 27 members of the European Union have democratic and republican systems of government, even though

some are constitutional monarchies or display democratic deficits, such as modern Hungary. Although Kant was an opponent of broad democracy, the same cannot be said of Rousseau, who essentially postulated a more egalitarian model of federation. The rule of law is another fundamental pillar of the EU.

All philosophers who engaged in the discussion of *Perpetual Peace*, from Sully to Kant, perceived a unified, strict federative rule of legalism as the foundation for a union of European states. Political scholars such as Habermas have examined how the constitutionalisation of law and the expansion of legal procedures, helped cosmopolitan entities such as the EU and the UN promote peace and stability, a development reflected in the evolution of EU legislative competences through the treaties (Staring, 2011, pp. 8–9). Examining the terminology and notions that Kant expressed in his project, it is evident that much of what he postulated about republican rule and the rule of law parallels contemporary EU structures (Salikov, 2015, p. 76). Western European countries have consistently recognised the parallelism of domestic law with signed conventions such as the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, despite the absence of universal institutions capable of restricting states' arbitrary resolution of legal cases. This parallelism was subsequently used as a foundation for developing the legal principles of the rule of law in the incorporation between the Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (Cuyvers, 2017, pp. 217–218).

Commerce, as the last aspect, is probably the main principle concerning the modern relevance of Kant's eternal peace model in relation to the EU, since Kant identified commerce and the market as the primary elements for initiating eternal peace. This is particularly significant in light of the initial conflicts that arose during the integration process between Konrad Adenauer and Jean Monnet. For instance, Karim Patel (2020, pp. 27–28) noted that Jean Monnet's initial desire was to create a basis for integration through Euratom rather than through the market, the model adopted by Konrad Adenauer. The formalisation of each of these aspects through the Copenhagen criteria and Article 49 of the Maastricht Treaty made all three elements even more fundamental and relevant. This proved significant in preparing for further enlargements, which formally became requirements for joining the broader European community and for democratic expansion (Grabbe, 2004, p. 74).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the *Perpetual Peace* discourse, founded on the theoretical correspondence between French and German philosophers of the Enlightenment, continues to be a primary source for understanding the European Union as a collective political entity that espouses the principles of democracy, the rule of law, and the free market. The

very idea of the *Perpetual Peace* project aligns with the European Union's established objectives and institutional framework, and the *Perpetual Peace* discourse is not only the intellectual heritage of the two nations but also the foundation of their bilateral relations, a source of reflection within their foreign policy, and a component of the engine that represents their initial and contemporary contributions to the foundations of European integration processes. Despite the abstract and utopian nature of the European Federation project, formulated by numerous intellectuals, it continues to serve as a model of hope for the unification of Europe into a single federal supranational entity, accessible to all who adhere to norms, freedoms, and peace. And even though the ideas written almost 300 years ago are, for many, no longer relevant or appear outdated, it is difficult to claim that anything in the academic literature reflects the reality of today's Europe in such a comprehensive manner. The intellectual perspective presented by both French and German elites as part of their ideological heritage remains directly relevant to the continued study of the relationship between *Perpetual Peace* and the EU and may further enrich the depth of reasoning regarding the parallels between theoretical ideas and hypothetical applied knowledge in the form of existing statehood models.

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Genealogy of European Union – Tandem of German and French Philosophy from Perpetual Peace Sketches of Kant and Rousseau

Abstract

The subject of this article centres on the theme of philosophical discourse regarding a possible European Federation reflected in the *Perpetual Peace* sketches of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant and the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Moving beyond the hypothetical possibilities and frameworks of eternal peace posed by Enlightenment theorists, the article develops into an analysis of the practical execution of these ideas, applying them to a supranational entity such as the European Union. Another crucial point of the work is attributed to the Franco-German engine, owing to the fact that the philosophical discourse was initiated and concluded by prominent intellectuals from these two nations. The spirit of this intellectual tandem is present on various levels as an integral component of both domestic and foreign policy, as well as a primary contributor to the processes of European integration, particularly in translating the theoretical implications of the idea of eternal peace into reality. This article extracts the primary principles of the theoretical foundations of *Perpetual Peace* and assesses their correspondence and relevance to the nature of the European Union by defining the intellectual tandem as a framework for further methodological approach.

Keywords: Perpetual Peace, European Federation, European Union, Franco-German engine, state of nature, rule of law, democratic peace, moral maxims, CFSP, CSDP

Genealogia Unii Europejskiej – tandem filozofii niemieckiej i francuskiej począwszy od „wieczystego pokoju" w szkicach Kanta i Rousseau

Streszczenie

Artykuł koncentruje się na dyskursie filozoficznym dotyczącym możliwej Federacji Europejskiej, odzwierciedlonym w szkicach Wiecznego pokoju autorstwa niemieckiego filozofa Immanuela Kanta oraz francuskiego filozofa Jeana-Jacques'a Rousseau. Wykraczając poza hipotetyczne możliwości i ramy wiecznego pokoju sformułowane

przez teoretyków Oświecenia, tekst rozwija się w analizę praktycznej realizacji tych idei, odnosząc je do podmiotu ponadnarodowego, jakim jest Unia Europejska. Istotnym punktem jest również tandem francusko-niemiecki, ponieważ to wybitni myśliciele z tych dwóch narodów zainicjowali i zwieńczyli omawiany dyskurs filozoficzny. Duch tej intelektualnej współpracy jest obecny na wielu poziomach jako integralny element polityki wewnętrznej i zagranicznej, a zarazem jako jeden z głównych czynników przyczyniających się do procesów integracji europejskiej, zwłaszcza w przekładaniu teoretycznych implikacji idei wiecznego pokoju na praktykę. Artykuł wyodrębnia podstawowe zasady leżące u podstaw teorii Wiecznego pokoju i ocenia ich zgodność oraz znaczenie dla natury Unii Europejskiej, definiując tandem intelektualny jako ramę metodologiczną dla przyszłej analizy.

Słowa kluczowe: wieczny pokój, Federacja Europejska, francusko-niemiecki motor integracji, stan natury, praworządność, pokój demokratyczny, maksymy moralne, WPZiB, WPBiO

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The Future of Normative Power Europe: Scenarios for the Transformation of the EU's International Identity

DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(85).2025.09/m.radosz

Introduction

The rules-based international order (RBIO) is slowly but surely crumbling. The planet is on fire – literally and figuratively. Not only are wildfires and droughts more frequent, but its leaders are increasingly less concerned with putting out said fire and more preoccupied with igniting new sparks. Populist and divisive politics from both right and left are on the rise; international institutions are losing influence; efforts to combat climate change are delayed owing to global leaders pivoting back to fossil fuels (Covatariu and Gamkrelidze, 2025); wars have re-emerged in Europe and the Middle East; and potential wars loom over East Asia. The European Union, as a peace project, is not particularly used to thriving in conditions like these, despite spending most of its early years as the European Community during the Cold War. The EU's *modus operandi* is based on constructive dialogue, multilateral problem-solving, strong adherence to international law, and reliance on international institutions. Such a framework is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain, as the biggest players on the board more often decide that none of the aforementioned aspects are important and instead favour transactionalism and interest-driven power politics. Can dialogue persuade someone who holds little regard for norms and understands only the language of coercion? As such, one may assume that the European Union, if it is to remain relevant in the emerging multipolar world, needs to adapt. Be it as it may, political scientists and

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scholars, despite lacking the vast amounts of data specialists from STEM fields possess, have the ability to observe and find patterns, and are able to make cautious predictions with a relative degree of certainty. As such, this article aims to make several predictions and outline scenarios in order to answer the question: what change will the European Union undergo if it is to survive the crumbling RBIO? How will its international identity change? Upon evaluation, it could be argued that the paths the EU could take are: one where the EU adapts and mixes normative power with hard power elements; one where it is unable to evolve and implodes; and one where the survival of the EU is ensured through a coalition of willing states.

Why the question of EU's future is important

It is important to explain why the future of the European Union should be analysed in this way at all. Certainly, one could pick any polity and hypothesise its future paths, but the case of the EU is different. As a hybrid polity and a *sui generis* organisation, the European Union has been observed to wield a specific type of power, one with 'the ability to define what passes for "normal" in world politics' (Manners, 2002, p. 236). Briefly put, this type of influence has been described by Ian Manners as normative power – power which 'shapes the conceptions of "normal"' (Manners, 2002, p. 240). Actors relying on normative power are characterised by their pursuit of solidifying international institutions without breaching existing legal and political norms; their 'ability to perpetuate, shape and implement international law and political norms in its relations with third parties' (Skolimowska, 2015, p. 37) is what makes actors relying on normative power distinct from others. That being said, not only does the European Union behave exactly as described, but even its foundations lie in norms; its conception is a result of, among other things, several state actors finding common ground through shared values and norms, such as peace or democracy (European Union, n.d.; Manners, 2006, p. 71). These norms are even codified in its treaties: Article 1a or 2.1 in the Treaty of Lisbon, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and numerous other legal acts which draw from shared European norms. This foundation translates into effective policy. The continuing enlargement of the European Union is perhaps the best testament to that, as with successive enlargements it went from six members to twenty-seven, even managing to integrate the post-Soviet sphere. It highlights its considerable success in spreading norms outside its borders via constructive engagement. But these norms also spread passively. Brazil and Japan, for instance, adopted their own versions of data protection laws thanks to the EU's role in advancing privacy laws (OneTrust DataGuidance, n.d., p. 5); the former even adopted a version that is a virtual 'legal transplant' of the General Data Protection Regulation (Sombra,

2020, p. 116). Beyond that, some international organisations, like the African Union, are imitating the EU in their institutional make-up (Manners, 2006, pp. 76–77). The African Union specifically claimed that it 'should not re-invent the wheel' (p. 77). Clearly, the EU is unique, as the influence it has over its surroundings is something that has not occurred in global politics before; this is why it warrants deeper analysis of its future.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to doubt the effectiveness of 'Normative Power Europe' if one observes contemporary events. The US–China trade war, in which the EU's own allies are trying to pressure it to take part (Slattery and Gray, 2025); the Russo-Ukrainian War; the Israel–Hamas conflict; Russian hybrid warfare (Chivvis, 2017, p. 1); and the weaponisation of migration by some countries (Miholjcic, 2022, p. 3), to name a few – these factors all contribute to the fall of the rules-based international order (RBIO) from which the EU derives its legitimacy (Manners, 2009, p. 2). Democracy, multilateral problem-solving, and international institutions are becoming increasingly less important. The European Union does not always have an answer to those problems; what is worse, it already struggles with many of them. Regarding migration, Member States frequently engage in illegal pushbacks (11.11.11 *et al.*, 2024, pp. 1, 11 and 15). It also struggles to apply its norms uniformly and consistently, harming its cohesion and geopolitical agency. Allowing a rogue Hungary to block aid to Ukraine through its exploitation of the unanimity rule in the Council of the EU, or selectively fast-tracking the membership of certain countries like Ukraine or Moldova while leaving the Western Balkans 'on the shelf' indefinitely, illustrates this issue. Even though the EU at times already breaks its own norms when it is not necessary, as in the case of pushbacks, in other cases resolving problems like the aforementioned ones is impossible without resorting to a certain degree of norm-breaking. Some believe Hungary deserves to have its membership frozen, but can the EU afford an internal crisis during such perilous times? Ukraine and Moldova's fast-tracking is an understandable and necessary political decision in the context of an emboldened Russia, but does it not expose the political (rather than the claimed technocratic and unbiased) and even hypocritical nature of enlargement policies when the Western Balkans are left behind? Clearly, there needs to be change in the European Union; other instruments of power need to be adopted if the EU is not to be crushed both from outside and inside by challenges it cannot face legitimately, or at all. Its international identity must evolve.

The future of the EU

Having said that, one can inquire as to how the EU will react to the changing political landscape; in other words, how it will assess whether the current model of politics is

feasible in an increasingly unstable, polarised world. In order to answer this question, certain scenarios outlining a potential path the European Union could take can be drawn up. It is important to underline that these scenarios assume that the decline of the RBIO will not stop in the future. During the course of research, several scenarios appeared, but some of them are unlikely enough to be dismissed as subjects of analysis. For example, the upholding of the *status quo* and uninterrupted reliance on normative power, or abandoning normative power altogether and transforming into a traditional geopolitical actor, is entirely unfeasible. The former is highly unlikely, as even the few selected challenges are already shaking the EU's normative foundation by forcing or pushing the EU into compromising its values and norms. The Union would surely collapse were it not to change its mode of operation. The latter path would also be virtually impossible, as there is no scenario in which the EU abandons its normative foundation and relies on traditional forms of power. The changes required to make this a reality are inherently contradictory; given the political landscape, it would require, at the highest political level, a fusion of two opposing political forces: the Eurosceptic one, in order to adopt a purely geopolitical outlook; and the traditional pro-EU elites, who are the driving force behind the integration of the Union, to preserve and enhance the power of such an EU at a global level. It would also mean the abandonment of more than seventy years of building a normative foundation; it would be immensely challenging to abandon it, and the attempt itself would most likely significantly weaken the EU, further underlining the contradiction. As such, three distinct scenarios have emerged as the most feasible: the Hybrid Model, the Zombie European Union, and the Coalition of the Willing.

The Hybrid Model

The Hybrid Model assumes that the European Union will retain its normative power by preserving its normative elements and tools, but will adopt hard-power elements out of necessity. Strict adherence to core values of the EU, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, is retained, and the formulation of policy continues to be informed by these principles. Aspects such as enlargement based on conditionality, and strong advocacy of multilateralism and international cooperation as means of solving problems, are still at the core of EU actions whenever applicable. At the same time, the EU in this scenario fully commits to boosting defence capabilities – industry, enhanced military cooperation, or even the creation of a European army; becomes more flexible on trade norms, not being afraid to utilise protectionism to defend its interests and to reduce dependence on third countries for critical resources; and its foreign policy becomes significantly more effective and unified, overcoming deadlocks created by bad-faith actors within.

Such a model would require several crucial changes. Firstly, Qualified Majority Voting in the Council on matters of foreign, defence, and security policy would have to be introduced, replacing the old unanimity rule. If the EU is to act more effectively in the face of crises, it cannot afford to be blocked by singular rogue actors.[1] This also means that procedures like Article 7 would have to be used more decisively; merely ignoring the rogue actor is not enough, as allowing Member States that violate the EU's norms to participate in the foreign policy formulation process ultimately puts the normative nature of said foreign policy in question. Thus, legitimacy suffers. Secondly, it would be imperative for a Hybrid Model EU to be energy independent. In an increasingly turbulent world order, strategic dependencies – especially in areas such as energy – are at near-permanent risk of being used as leverage against the EU. Needless to say, agency and legitimacy are severely limited once the energy supplier goes rogue, as in the case of Russia. The hypocritical and tragic situation where normative politics cannot be fulfilled because the whole continent relies on supplies from abroad simply to function would severely handicap the EU. Even today, the process of decoupling from Russia is lengthy and complex. As such, it could be argued that a push for nuclear and renewable sources of energy, such as biomethane (European Commission, 2022) or wind power, for which the EU already has manufacturing capacity (Janipour, n.d.), is imperative for a Hybrid Model scenario to succeed. Lastly, the political aspect should not be underestimated; all aforementioned reforms are generally more in line with pro--European environments, which means such parties would have to remain consistently stronger than Eurosceptic ones, or even increase their advantage.

The effects of such a scenario materialising would be multiple. It would allow the European Union to navigate persistent challenges without necessarily sacrificing its core values and norms. It is entirely feasible for such a European Union, for instance, to practise free trade based on World Trade Organization norms with some countries while utilising defensive, protectionist policies toward actors that attempt to exploit it, such as China with BEVs. Furthermore, it could be argued that the legitimacy of the EU would increase. Not only would it remain faithful to the values that bind it together, as it would be able to address problems more effectively without necessarily resorting to drastic norm violations, but its legitimacy would be enhanced precisely because of this increased ability to address problems. Consider the following example: increased agency in providing aid to Ukraine, resulting from abolishing unanimity in foreign, security, and defence policy, would not only reiterate the EU's commitment to safeguarding democracy, the rule of law, and liberty, but would also significantly help Ukraine deal

[1] It is necessary to acknowledge that a rogue actor is not a Member State that is simply in disagreement with the majority; it is a Member State which deliberately obstructs the political process while being in severe violation of multiple norms and laws themselves. Hungary would fit this description.

with the invader; by extension, it would weaken the EU's primary geopolitical threat – Russia. However, the risk of a more independent EU with increased agency is that it would inevitably add fuel to rising multipolarity; in other words, another player would actually appear on the arena – a player with a set of interests that, in today's geopolitical landscape, are bound to collide with those of others at some point.

Given the changes that would have to be introduced, the probability of this scenario could be estimated at around 40%. Signs of movement in this direction are already visible; the previously mentioned Macron's strategic autonomy (Maślanka, 2024) and von der Leyen's references to a 'geopolitical commission' as early as 2019 (von der Leyen, 2019) are positive indicators. Following the escalation of the Russo–Ukrainian War in 2022, the topics of accelerating defence cooperation and spending have risen in prominence, as indicated by the announced ReArm Europe Plan (European Commission, 2025) or the European Parliament's white paper on European defence (European Parliament, 2025). Moreover, the matter of streamlining the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is reported to be viewed positively by some Member States (Gubalova *et al.*, 2022, p. 55), indicating existing support for changes required for a Hybrid Model to be made a reality. There is also momentum from citizens; the public has overwhelmingly supported integration in areas of defence and security for over twenty years (European Commission, 2024, p. 48). If people demand such reforms from the EU, bottom-up political pressure could rise in the future, prompting leaders to take more decisive action. Of course, one can never be too optimistic; while it is true that CFSP and CSDP reforms are viewed positively by some, the lack of certainty about which instruments to use for such reforms is not insignificant, nor is the lack of political will from the leadership, not to mention countries that, put simply, have prioritised different organisations and mechanisms (Gubalova *et al.*, 2022, p. 55).

The Zombie European Union

In this scenario, the European Union essentially scales down and significantly diminishes its influence, both domestically and internationally. It is a European Union that, colloquially speaking, stops trying. No coherent foreign policy emerges, and trade policy is handled case by case, with no clear underlying motive or normative foundation. The EU still relies on external actors for security, with occasional outliers among Member States that choose to boost their defence capabilities. There is no significant action taken to prevent democratic backsliding, with Eurosceptic and populist right, as well as left, scoring more victories across the European Union. Internal relations between Member States are reduced mostly to economically driven partnership rather than political,

value-driven cooperation. There is no political end goal in sight, only an economic union. The EU, in this scenario, becomes a glorified trading bloc.

For such a Union to materialise, populist, Eurosceptic political forces would have to secure victories in more and more European elections. The nation-centric narrative characteristic of such movements and parties inherently shifts focus away from international cooperation and supranationalism in favour of national politics; consequently, a divergence of interests is virtually guaranteed, and it is hard to conceive of any meaningful integration attempts beyond efforts to uphold the economic union. What would also be a significant driver of such change would be the decision of mainstream political parties not only to cooperate with Eurosceptic parties, but also to perceive undermining the European Union as the optimal way to conduct politics in their own countries. Further, a continued lack of vision and drive from pro-integration political forces in the EU on issues such as defence or foreign policy consolidation, combined with the inability to reach consensus, could result in a gradual fading of the EU's importance, especially if combined with the previous condition; no action, or rather counter-reaction, to a rising Eurosceptic vision will lead to a politically inept European Union.

Consequences of such a scenario would guarantee a gradual decline of the EU and its eventual fade into obscurity and irrelevance. Of course, there is potential for continued economic prosperity among European states, but there are obstacles; incoherent stances on key issues not only delegitimise the EU as a political entity, but even as an economic bloc. The trustworthiness and credibility of an actor that is unable to enforce norms in its own territory and does not speak with one voice are severely undermined. The survival of the EU would also be at stake. Should the normative link be lost, and not accounting for geopolitical circumstances, there would be little incentive to continue cooperating extensively except in the economic sphere. Should that incentive be lost – and it is feasible in a would-be EU of politically incompatible members – the EU would likely cease to exist at some point. In other words, there is a significant risk of collapse in this scenario.

Whether it is probable or not depends on a few variables. Firstly, whether Eurosceptic forces such as Alternative für Deutschland or Rassemblement National continue gaining support from the public. Recent results in, for example, the German parliamentary elections (*Politico*, 2025a), the Dutch parliamentary elections in 2023 (*Politico*, 2025b), and the second round of the Polish 2025 presidential elections (*Politico*, 2025c) do not suggest a retreat of populist movements; on the contrary, they seem to be getting stronger. Political will to, for example, reform treaties to push for integration is also not particularly high among Member States (Gubalova *et al.*, 2022, p. 51). These factors significantly increase the probability of this outcome. Yet, as mentioned in the Hybrid Model scenario, signs of a desire to

change and integrate are present. It could even be argued that citizens' attachment to the European Union is still high; they trust EU institutions more than their national ones, the general image seems more positive or neutral than negative, and they feel optimistic about the EU's future (European Commission, 2024, pp. 11, 15 and 17), which means it will not be easy to push the EU into obscurity. Moreover, the complete victory of Eurosceptic parties across, for example, up to 8–10 Member States is not especially likely; it is far more probable that it would occur in three states at most. Partisan cooperation with Eurosceptics is also unlikely; one such coalition government recently collapsed in the Netherlands (Meijer and van den Berg, 2025). As such, the probability of the Zombie Scenario could be estimated at around 20%.

Coalition of the Willing

In the Coalition of the Willing scenario, a few motivated Member States decide to cooperate closely on matters related to common foreign policy, defence, and security, creating structures parallel to the European Union. It would not be a multi-speed Europe *per se*, as the scope of cooperation would be significantly narrower, but the logic behind such action would be similar. If the Hybrid Model is a scenario where the EU combines normative and geopolitical identities, and the Zombie EU is one where it fails to do so and collapses inwards, then this scenario is one in which the former fails, but not severely enough for the latter to play out. In other words, in a situation where hard-power building proves too difficult for any reason – ranging from simple constraints to fears of centralisation or outright opposition to enhanced cooperation – it provides European states, and by extension the EU, with tools to tackle at least part of their problems.

Restarting the Franco-German engine would be of paramount importance to this scenario's success; it is beyond doubt that France's atomic arsenal combined with Germany's financial resources and potential is absolutely essential. Arguably, Poland's and Italy's participation would also help significantly. Poland, as a country that has grown in importance since the Russo-Ukrainian War owing to its strategic position on the eastern flank and its sizeable army, is a crucial asset for such a coalition; Italy's significance, meanwhile, lies in its influence in the Mediterranean Sea. The United Kingdom, if convinced, would also be a valuable asset due to its economic, naval, and atomic capabilities, but given its geopolitical shifts following Brexit, one can argue it is valuable but not absolutely necessary. The issue of framing and narrative is also crucial here; if such structures were to be established, they cannot function as an exclusive club, as this would threaten the Union's cohesion. Other states need to be aware that, should they express interest, they are welcome to participate.

The Coalition of the Willing's success would mean the survival of the EU in an environment where some states are unwilling to integrate further. It should be stressed, however, that such a coalition would not be able to solve all of the EU's problems. It would, however, bring sufficient results to address one key problem, namely the lack of cohesion and agency in geopolitical issues, giving the EU a slight boost to its legitimacy. It would not resolve the core issue of what the EU's international identity is or should be, but it would be sufficient to keep it from collapsing under pressure.

It could be argued that this scenario is not unlikely, as precedent for such structures to emerge already exists. For instance, it happened with the European Stability Mechanism, where eurozone countries, feeling the need for reform following the European sovereign debt crisis, decided to found a new treaty parallel to the structures of the EU; changes to existing treaties, which would have been required had these reforms been conducted internally, were considered too difficult following past struggles with treaty ratification. In essence, a problem common to some states was identified and resolved swiftly with a completely new treaty. Another example would be the Schengen Agreement, which later evolved into the Schengen Area; at first, it was a treaty functioning outside the European Economic Community and later the European Union, only subsequently being incorporated into EU law. When it comes to the political impetus needed, Friedrich Merz's chancellorship could be an opportunity, as already in his first days in power he visited the French president Emmanuel Macron and declared a plan to establish a Franco-German defence and security council, deepening defence cooperation (Ruitenberg, 2025; Khatsenkova, 2025). This alone signifies potential vitality in the Franco-German partnership; the amendment of the 'debt brake' in Germany to allow borrowing for defence spending (Zespół Niemiec i Europy Wschodniej OSW, 2025) is also a very positive signal. The question of Polish involvement is uncertain; it needs to be underlined that Poland has always seen the United States as a key ally and often prioritised relations with them above pursuing EU integration. Although the current government is EU-aligned, the recent victory of Karol Nawrocki in the 2025 presidential elections, along with the continuing strength of the Law and Justice party, suggests that Polish involvement is not fully certain, even after Donald Trump's attempts to reorient the US geopolitically away from Europe to Asia. Italy appears equally ambiguous; despite a rather Eurosceptic government under Giorgia Meloni, it has remained fully aligned on, for example, the issue of Ukraine. The possibility of a transactional arrangement in the form of, e.g. joining and supporting such a coalition in exchange for help with migration issues cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict. As such, the probability of this scenario could be estimated at 40%, similarly to the Hybrid Model.

Conclusion

To conclude, the European Union, upon analysis, is most likely to take one of three outlined paths. The first is the Hybrid Model, in which the EU evolves, retains its normative power, but adopts elements of hard power in order to better answer contemporary challenges. Despite requiring extensive changes, such as the adoption of Qualified Majority Voting in the Council or the push for complete energy independence, it is highly likely to unfold due to European leaders' readily apparent willingness to consider these prerequisites. The second, the Zombie European Union scenario, suggests that, through the rise of Eurosceptic forces and lack of political will from pro-EU politicians, the EU will implode and fade into obscurity. In spite of the rising popularity of anti-EU parties, it is only 20% likely due to citizens playing a key role thanks to their continued support and faith in the Union; the low likelihood of a complete Eurosceptic takeover; and the low probability of pro-EU–Eurosceptic partisan cooperation. The final scenario, the Coalition of the Willing, describes a future where a few motivated Member States establish structures parallel to the European Union and band together to tackle issues of defence. It would not solve all problems the EU faces, but it would solve enough for the EU to survive in a turbulent world. Existing precedent in, for example, the European Stability Mechanism or the Schengen Area existing outside EU law at their conception makes this scenario 40% likely to play out. Political science may not be physics or chemistry capable of making highly accurate predictions about future events; we simply lack the data to do so. Yet, in spite of imperfect datasets, it is incredibly important to think and to hypothesise. Arguably, the European Union represents not only a significant shift in how politics is conducted, but perhaps even a civilisational leap in how human beings attempt to organise public life. If the slow but approaching fall of the RBIO is ignored by leaders and citizens alike, the Union could fade into obscurity as quickly as it was built. And the measure of a good leader is to make perfect decisions based on imperfect information; perhaps the best course of action is to help them make that information a little less imperfect.

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The Future of Normative Power Europe: Scenarios for the Transformation of the EU's International Identity

Abstract

The European Union, described by numerous scholars as a normative power, has traditionally relied on multilateral dialogue and problem-solving, as well as on strengthening and promoting international law and institutions. It faces an existential threat today, as the rules-based international order is crumbling; its traditional reliance on normative power is insufficient in the face of both internal and external challenges such as migration, wars, populism, and opportunistic politics, which threaten its legitimacy, international agency, and even existence. As such, its international identity necessarily needs to evolve. This article possible trajectories of such evolution. Three scenarios for the future of the European Union are outlined and thoroughly analysed, describing prerequisites and consequences of their unfolding: the Hybrid Model, in which the EU evolves, retains its normative power, but adopts elements of hard power; the Zombie European Union scenario, which suggests that, through the rise of Eurosceptic forces and the lack of political will among pro-EU politicians, the EU will implode and fade into obscurity; and the Coalition of the Willing, which describes a future where a few motivated Member States establish structures parallel to the European Union and band together to tackle defence issues.

Keywords: European Union, normative power, scenario, rules-based international order

Przyszłość Europy jako potęgi normatywnej: scenariusze transformacji tożsamości międzynarodowej Unii Europejskiej

Streszczenie

Unia Europejska, definiowana przez wielu badaczy jako potęga normatywna, w zakresie stosunków międzynarodowych skupiała się multilateralizmie i wzmacnianiu prawa oraz instytucji międzynarodowych. Ponieważ porządek międzynarodowy oparty na zasadach ulega rozpadowi tworzy jej skupienie na oddziaływaniu za pomocą norm tworzy wyzwanie, które może przerodzić się w kryzys i charakterze egzystencjalnym. Zjawiska takich jak takich jak imigracje, wojny, populizm czy oportunizm polityczny, dziś coraz powszechniejsze, zagrażają jej legitymizacji, sprawczości, a być może nawet kwestionują sens jej dalszego istnienia. Konieczna zatem jest adaptacja i świadoma ewolucja tożsamości międzynarodowej Unii Europejskiej. Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na jej możliwych trajektoriach. Nakreślono i szczegółowo przeanalizowano trzy scenariusze dla przyszłości Unii Europejskiej, opisując przesłanki oraz konsekwencje ich realizacji. Pierwszy scenariusz to Model Hybrydowy, w którym UE ewoluuje, zachowując swoją potęgę normatywną, ale przyjmuje elementy siły twardej. Drugi scenariusz to Unia Europejska Zombie, w którym UE imploduje przez wzrost sił Eurosceptycznych i brak woli politycznej polityków proeuropejskich. W trzecim scenariuszu opisana jest Koalicja Chętnych, gdzie nieliczna grupa państw członkowskich ustanawia struktury równoległe do Unii Europejskiej i jednoczy się, aby sprostać wyzwaniom w zakresie obronności.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, potęga normatywna, scenariusze, porządek międzynarodowy oparty na zasadach

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Beyond Realism and Liberalism: *Ressentiment* as an Alternative Lens in Understanding the New Axis of Evil

DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(85).2025.10/t.donetskyi

Introduction

Despite the significant role that negative emotions play in shaping human existence and social interactions, the influence of feelings such as anger, envy, and collective hatred within political contexts remains relatively underexplored in academic circles. In an era where political manipulation increasingly relies on appealing to the emotional and sentimental dimensions of human nature, the issues addressed in this work are particularly relevant – not only for understanding social processes and transformations but also for navigating and countering the manipulative narratives that shape our rapidly changing reality. This article will explore the role these emotions, particularly when radically embodied in the form of *ressentiment*, play in various political contexts and cultures, with a specific focus on the foreign aspect of state policy.

Ressentiment is a philosophical term first introduced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *On the genealogy of morality* (1887), where he famously writes: 'Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying "yes" to itself, slave morality says "no" on principle to everything that is "outside", "other", "non-self": and this "no" is its creative deed' (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 20). This powerful statement on slave morality, which further translates into a worldview characterised by an 'us versus them' mentality, will serve as a fundamental tool for understanding the conclusions drawn later in this work.

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Ressentiment, being an 'affective catch-all concept, covering a wide range of sentiments', as claimed by Koen Abts and Sharon Baute (Abts and Baute, 2022, p. 40), encompasses various aspects of human and social nature, and the importance of its study lies precisely in recognising these vulnerabilities and preventing the development of deeply destructive feelings that hamper social interaction. In today's political environment, *ressentiment* remains an extremely widespread yet often overlooked interdisciplinary phenomenon affecting various aspects of political discourse. As the research question, this work aims to explain the connection between the traditional vision of *ressentiment* and its contemporary manifestations within global politics, particularly in the context of alliance formation and international security. By adopting a comparative approach and introducing the 'New Axis of Evil' geopolitical alliance – consisting of the Russian Federation, North Korea, and Iran – I aim to disclose the role of emotions and shared sentiments in contemporary international politics and security studies.

Philosophical foundations

Despite their considerable influence on contemporary political discourse, the links between emotions and politics remain a relatively under-researched topic among authors and scholars. Nevertheless, it is still possible to trace fundamental philosophical works that laid the conceptual foundations for understanding *ressentiment* as a complex notion.

For an initial understanding of the phenomenon of *ressentiment*, it is necessary to refer to the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, who first explored this concept in depth in his seminal work *On the genealogy of morality* (1887). As a pioneer in the field, Nietzsche does not provide a specific definition of *ressentiment*, nor does he depart from the French spelling of the word. Nevertheless, it is possible to define *ressentiment* through the key concepts outlined by the author. According to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is classified as an intensely reactive emotion, having a significant impact on the formation of the subject's value system. This system seeks to shift responsibility for one's failures onto a perceived source – whether an individual, a social class, or society as a whole. Such an explanation allows Nietzsche to present his vision of the so-called 'man of *ressentiment*', who is essentially a slave to his own emotions, primarily deep hatred. Nietzsche famously writes:

> 'The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying "yes" to itself, slave morality says

> "no" on principle to everything that is "outside", "other", "non-self": and *this* "no" is its creative deed' (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 20).

For the purpose of this work, it is also important to highlight the concepts of alienation, rejection of progress, and psychological entrapment motivated by perceived injustices, as they are key to understanding the role of *ressentiment* in shaping value systems, which, in Nietzsche's view, glorify weakness and condemn moral strength. While this paper does not aim to critique the Christian aspect of morality, Nietzsche quite rightly observes how, historically, the doctrines of the priesthood labelled qualities such as strength, ambition, and dominance as sinful, reinforcing moral systems built on *ressentiment*. Nietzsche believes that these moral structures develop as a coping strategy for people who cannot wield power, allowing them to justify their oppression and portray their oppressors as fundamentally evil.

When reading:

> 'The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge' (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 20),

it becomes apparent that, according to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* implies a certain passivity and an inability to act openly. On the surface, this casts doubt on the theory's applicability to political science, as it contradicts the key idea of active political participation. However, *ressentiment*-driven mentality ultimately creates new value systems and ideologies, which may later lead to a redefinition of ethical and political frameworks, thereby profoundly affecting power dynamics in ways that extend beyond mere individual passivity. Nietzsche's critique is not limited to individual psychology; it highlights how emerging moral systems can destabilise social and political structures, influencing broader ideological struggle.

The work of another German philosopher, Max Scheler, literally entitled *Ressentiment* (1912), continues to develop the ideas laid down by Friedrich Nietzsche. However, unlike his counterpart, Scheler pays more attention to the sociological and political manifestations of the phenomenon, which is more relevant to the issue discussed in this work. He classifies *ressentiment* as a perverted and unnatural feeling, which has 'a tendency to degrade or reduce genuine values and their bearers', as noted by William H. Werkmeister (Werkmeister, 1974, p. 132). Most important from the point of view of further analysis is the clear distinction between *ressentiment* itself – which Scheler defines as a 'lasting mental attitude, caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which, as such, are normal components

of human nature' (Scheler, 1976, p. 4) – and its accompanying emotions, including envy, spite, and resentment. The key factor that allows us to speak seriously about the development of *ressentiment* lies precisely in the systematic suppression of these emotions due to helplessness and the lack of an individual's coping mechanisms. When compared to Nietzsche, Scheler elevates the notion of *ressentiment* to a much broader social context, stating that this 'socio-historical emotion is by no means based on a spontaneous and original affirmation of a positive value, but on a protest, a counter-impulse against ruling minorities that are known to be in the possession of positive values' (Scheler, 1976, p. 55).

Furthermore, Scheler introduces the idea of *ressentiment* as not only a reaction of the powerless, but also an effective tool of those in power, writing that:

> 'Every change of government, every parliamentary change of party domination leaves a remnant of absolute opposition against the values of the new ruling group. This opposition is spent in *ressentiment* the more the losing group feels unable to return to power. The "retired official" with his followers is a typical *ressentiment* figure' (Scheler, 1976, p. 17).

It is particularly this instrumentalisation of *ressentiment*, associated with the public construction of a victimhood image and its subsequent transformation into a tool for achieving political goals, that highlights the significance of this phenomenon in contemporary political contexts.

Finally, further expanding on these abstract concepts and bridging the gap between the classical notion of *ressentiment* and factual politics, French philosopher Michel Foucault suggests a distinct yet equally valuable perspective through which to analyse *ressentiment*. While Nietzsche and Scheler emphasise the psychological impulse behind its development, Foucault adopts a broader perspective, focusing on power structures, societal discourse, and historical narratives. His approach provides a mechanism for understanding how *ressentiment* operates on the institutional level, making it a recurring theme across his works, with such essays as *Society must be defended* (1976) and 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history' (1971) directly addressing the role of collective hatred and the formation of value systems. In 'Nietzsche, genealogy, history', Foucault argues that historical narratives are not neutral but are shaped by those in power to justify their dominance, stating that 'The successes of history belong to those who are capable of seizing these rules, to replace those who had used them, to disguise themselves so as to pervert them, invert their meaning, and redirect them against those who had initially imposed them' (Foucault, 1971, p. 151). Thus, manipulating historical grievances can fuel *ressentiment*, transforming it into a tool for political mobilisation and legitimisation of conflicts among nations. In *Society must be defended*, Foucault further elaborates

on the mechanisms of power and its exploitation, exploring how political entities contribute to constructing the image of enemies and justifying oppression through discourses of self-defence. He argues that modern states often present themselves as being under threat, using narratives of historical grievances to reinforce power and suppress opposition. In this framework, *ressentiment* is a key mechanism for shaping societal discourse, establishing clear 'us versus them' divisions that make complex political and historical narratives more accessible and emotionally compelling for the general audience. As Foucault explains, 'If you want to live, you must take lives, you must be able to kill' (Foucault, 1976, p. 255), illustrating how political elites frame certain groups as existential threats to society, thereby justifying exclusion, discrimination, and ultimately violence. It is precisely this weaponisation of *ressentiment* that allows ruling elites to gain public support by channelling collective grievances against perceived enemies, thus maintaining their legitimacy.

Ressentiment as a driving force of international relations

Despite the fact that the abuse of *ressentiment* is widely recognised as a powerful instrument for legitimising authority in domestic political struggle, it is not traditionally viewed as a complementary aspect of international political interaction. Yet, on the global stage, states frequently invoke past injustices, collective traumas, and nostalgic visions of a lost golden age to justify current foreign policy decisions and diplomatic stances. Such appeals to historical emotion allow governments to reframe geopolitical ambitions as moral imperatives, presenting revisionist or defensive actions as acts of historical correction. Together, these aspects reveal the dual-edged nature of *ressentiment*, being capable not only of galvanising national pride and resistance but also of fostering aggressive revanchist policies and enduring geopolitical and regional divisions.

Crucially, the effectiveness of *ressentiment*-driven narratives in foreign policy discourse does not necessarily depend on the genuine belief of political leaders in their historical claims. In many cases, what is expressed in domestic discourse – the rhetoric of moral superiority, collective suffering, and national rebirth – diverges significantly from pragmatic foreign policy objectives. The strategic use of sentiments enables political elites to mobilise domestic support and maintain nationwide legitimacy, even though in most cases their external conduct is guided by realist and pragmatic considerations. Consequently, it may be argued that the invocation of history functions not as a reflection of genuine conviction but as a calculated political performance that bridges domestic politics and international strategies.

The construction of a national myth plays a central role in this process. While many of these myths celebrate heroic moments of collective triumph, others emphasise

past injustices, territorial losses, and perceived betrayals. Such inverted myth-making transforms past humiliations into inexhaustible and unifying moral resources, channelling *ressentiment* into a coherent worldview that defines both the nation's sense and its perceived enemies. This instrumentalisation of history is particularly evident in states that have experienced colonisation, occupation, or forced political transitions. However, it is equally prevalent in former empires whose elites and populations have not yet reconciled with the loss of their imperial status.

The strategic use of history is closely linked to another concept – memory laws – which, as described by Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, 'commemorate the victims of past atrocities as well as heroic individuals or events emblematic of national and social movements' (Belavusau and Gliszczyńska-Grabias, 2017, p. 1). A striking example of such *ressentiment*-driven narratives can be observed in the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin. By invoking pseudo-historical claims, Putin has repeatedly threatened countries that were once part of the Russian Empire and later the USSR, infamously calling its collapse 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century', as quoted by *NBC News* (*NBC News*, 2005). This tendency became particularly evident in his 2021 essay, published shortly before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, where he presented his revisionist interpretation of history. In it, Putin argued that 'The name "Ukraine" was used more often in the meaning of the Old Russian word "okraina" (periphery)' and insisted 'that Russians and Ukrainians are one people – a single whole' (Putin, 2021). By emphasising historical grievances and spreading false narratives, political leaders such as Putin justify hostile and aggressive policies to reclaim past power, resist external interference, or demand reparations and recognition – thus attempting to enhance national prestige and achieve long-term strategic goals.

As a driving factor in shaping worldviews and ideological values, it is worth considering that *ressentiment* also plays a profound role in the formation of strategic military alliances. While scholars differ in their assessments of why states seek alliances – ranging from the realist security assumption that 'states facing a common geostrategic external threat will form a military alliance to secure themselves, survive, and remain independent', as claimed by Nikoloz G. Esitashvili and Félix E. Martin (Esitashvili and Martin, 2020, p. 17), to liberal institutionalists' conviction that 'states are concerned with absolute gains and mutual gain outcomes are possible from collective problem-solving endeavours', as noted by Andre Byrne (Byrne, 2013, p. 7) – the emotional and ideological aspects of this process are often overlooked. Therefore, I argue that *ressentiment* should be viewed as an alternative, complementary aspect to security theory, not limited to traditional schools of international relations. Alliances built on common grievances, perceived humiliations, and dissatisfaction with the existing global order bring together states that, at first glance, do not share immediate geopolitical threats

or economic interests. Instead, their cooperation is driven by ideological narratives of resisting an external oppressor, regaining past influence, and reshaping the international system according to their leaders' worldview.

A large number of precedents for such alliances can be found in history. For instance, the anti-Western bloc formed under the leadership of the USSR in the aftermath of the Second World War was primarily based on opposition to Western capitalist ideology. In *The tragedy of great power politics*, Mearsheimer notes that the Cold War 'was driven mainly by strategic considerations related to the balance of power, which were reinforced by the stark ideological differences between the superpowers' (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 460). However, in this case, *ressentiment* functioned only as a subsidiary factor, complementing the broader picture of the post-Yalta geopolitical divide. While the Soviet Union's alliance policy was largely based on seeking partners united by common anti-Western and anti-imperialist sentiments, significant ideological contradictions among member states prevent the Warsaw Pact from being wholly defined by *ressentiment*.

Case studies

In contrast, in today's geopolitical environment, the concept of *ressentiment* as a driving force in alliance formation is particularly evident in the emergence of a bloc often controversially referred to as the 'New Axis of Evil', consisting of the Russian Federation, Iran, and North Korea. While the emerging bloc cannot be classified as a formalised alliance in the traditional sense of the term – being instead a loose ideological coalition in which each state operates within its own distinct political and economic context – they share a common strong emphasis on anti-Western sentiments, reinforced through state policies and widely supported within national societies. Although the origins of their grievances are rooted in historical and socio-economic factors that differ for each country, it is precisely the ideological alignment that brings them together in a highly heterogeneous but strategically cooperative alliance.

Among the three states, the Russian Federation has played the most active role in shaping this alliance. Shortly after the collapse of the USSR and the beginning of Fukuyama's 'end of history', Russia, under Boris Yeltsin, faced a critical choice regarding its new national identity. Initially, the West viewed Russia as a potential ally, particularly given its willingness to enter global markets and provide cheap energy resources. However, within a few years, the nature of the new Russian state diverged significantly from those expectations. A turning point in Russian–Western relations came with Vladimir Putin's infamous 2007 Munich Security Conference speech, where he 'sharply criticised [the] George W. Bush administration for maintaining a "unipolar" view of

the world and relying too much on force in international relations', as summarised by Godfrey Hodgson (Hodgson, 2007, p. 33). This speech, along with Russia's subsequent invasion of Georgia in 2008, demonstrated a clear shift away from Western integration.

Under Putin's leadership, Russia's initial goal of joining NATO and engaging with the West was gradually abandoned in favour of positioning itself as a champion of multipolarity and a challenger to American hegemony. Over the past two decades, Russia has been framing its foreign policy through the lens of perceived Western betrayal, particularly regarding the eastward expansion of NATO, while placing strong emphasis on 'family values', traditionalism, and patriotism – pervertedly manifesting in the established notion of *pobedobesie*, which can be roughly translated as 'victory frenzy', with such slogans as 'we can do it again' in contrast to the widely accepted 'never again', becoming state-endorsed narratives of the Russian government's societal engineering. The positioning of the Russian Federation as an 'anti-America' culminated in 2014, when, following the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and the escape of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych, 'the Kremlin accused the United States and the European Union of supporting the protests that led to this political shift', as observed by Nicole Fernandez (Fernandez, 2024, p. 74). From that moment, Russia's foreign policy became extensively defined by *ressentiment*. The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the proxy war in the east of Ukraine, and the full-scale invasion of 2022 were not simply territorial conflicts but well-thought-out attempts to reshape the international order, aimed at undermining the legitimacy of the Western-led system of international relations.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as a second major actor in the emerging alliance, provides another example of a state constructing its identity around an 'us versus them' narrative. The roots of Iranian *ressentiment* can be traced back to the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup, as, according to Mostafa T. Zahrani, 'to many Iranians, the United States betrayed its own values by covertly joining with Britain to depose an elected leader, and then abetting the imperial ambitions of Shah Mohammed Pahlevi' (Zahrani, 2002, p. 93). Additionally, Zahrani points out that 'for Americans, the unintended result was the rise of political Islam, leading to the 1979 revolution and the present continuous impasse in Iranian–US relations'. The establishment of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini further solidified these sentiments, transforming Iran's political identity into that of a self-proclaimed champion of the Islamic world and an adversary of US hegemony, with the United States frequently referred to as the 'Great Satan'.

Since then, Iranian *ressentiment* has been institutionalised both through rhetoric and specific policy decisions. The incorporation of the *Velayat-e Faqih*, a religious doctrine which 'transfers all political and religious authority to the Shia clergy and makes all of the state's key decisions subject to approval by a supreme clerical leader', as explained by Kasra Aarabi (Aarabi, 2019), into the state's legal framework justified the absolute authority granted to the religious leaders of the country, further strengthening Iran's

role in the Islamic world. At the same time, Iranian political leaders have consistently reinforced anti-Western narratives in their public addresses. Ján Dančo identifies the dominant themes of these speeches, including the following claims: '[The] West is responsible for spreading anti-Iran propaganda; the West exploits the entire Muslim world through global imperialism; Western countries deliberately spread instability in the region and support terrorist organisations operating in the Middle East; and the Western concept of liberal democracy is characterised by moral decay' (Dančo, 2023, p. 7). Western policies, including the decision to support Saddam Hussein during the First Gulf War, as well as the subsequent economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, further reinforced Iran's perception of being a victim of Western aggression. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly referred to as the Iran nuclear deal, was intended to ease tensions between Iran and Western powers. However, Donald Trump's unilateral decision to withdraw from the initiative in 2018 confirmed Iran's suspicion of Western inconsistency, reinforcing the common belief that confrontation remains a higher priority than diplomacy. Consequently, the *ressentiment*-based nature of Iranian foreign policy can be viewed as a response to the occasionally cynical posture of the West in international relations.

Crucially, contrary to the earlier observations made in this article regarding *ressentiment* serving as a calculated political performance, Iran represents a notable exception. While scholars agree on the fact that the initial stages of Russian aggression towards Ukraine were primarily caused by geopolitical factors – as former US adviser Zbigniew Brzeziński famously claimed, 'It cannot be stressed strongly enough that without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be an empire, but with Ukraine suborned and then subordinated, Russia automatically becomes an empire' (Brzeziński, 1994, p. 80) – the Iranian leadership often appears to genuinely believe in the narratives it promotes, even when these convictions come at significant strategic cost. As a rule, this ideological commitment leads to counter-pragmatic behaviour that undermines Iran's own long-term interests. For instance, rather than capitalising on Russia's war in Ukraine as an opportunity to normalise relations with the United States and the European Union – which would theoretically allow it to shed the burden of sanctions damaging the country's economy – Tehran chooses to provide Moscow with direct military assistance, further deepening its international isolation. Decisions like this exemplify the observation that, in Iran, *ressentiment* functions not merely as a political tool but as a deeply internalised and institutionalised component of national identity and foreign policy – where belief and rhetoric overlap.

Finally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) presents a unique case of *ressentiment*-driven foreign policy. Unlike Iran and Russia, whose geopolitical influence extends beyond national borders, North Korea remains largely isolated from the international community. However, this isolation does not prevent the DPRK

government from conducting domestic and foreign policy through a deep-seated sense of grievance – particularly toward the West and the United States. Similar to the cases described earlier, the origins of North Korean *ressentiment* can be traced back to a significant societal upheaval: the Korean War of 1950–1953, which devastated the peninsula and triggered a prolonged political crisis. Kim Il Sung, the first General Secretary of the Workers' Party of Korea, constructed a post-war narrative rooted in national victimhood and the role of foreign powers in the conflict. This narrative was institutionalised through the state ideology of *Juche*, centred on the self-reliance of the state and resistance to external influence. As Charles K. Armstrong observes, 'Kim Il Sung regularly pointed to "US imperialism" as the main enemy of the Third World peoples, and advocated *Juche* as the very embodiment of anti-imperialism' (Armstrong, 2009, p. 5). In contemporary DPRK, anti-Western propaganda is reinforced through regime-sponsored cultural initiatives – ranging from literature and cinema to compulsory educational sessions – that portray the United States as an existential threat to national survival. The construction of a national myth around the idea of reclaiming territory unjustly lost during the Korean War, with direct blame placed on Western forces, serves as an evident example of Nietzschean *ressentiment*.

Summarising the intermediate result, it can be observed that, despite the distinct reasons that led to the development of *ressentiment* in the national consciousness of the selected states, all of them were caused by a common catalyst – profound social upheavals, whether the collapse of the state, religious revolution, or military conflict. In contrast to traditional security alliances, which are typically based on mutual defence paradigms or pragmatic economic cooperation, the emerging 'New Axis of Evil' is bound by what can be characterised as a form of 'strategic desperation'. International isolation has pushed these states to seek alternative allies not out of shared values or interests, but as a response to their collective exclusion from the international order. In this case, *ressentiment* serves as both a cause and a consequence of their isolation, supported by internal narratives and the attribution of blame for domestic political issues.

At present, cooperation between Russia, Iran, and North Korea within the framework of this alliance remains primarily limited to the provision of Iranian striking drones to Russia and the involvement of Korean troops on the battlefields of Ukraine. However, their increasingly coordinated diplomatic actions pose a significant threat to global security – especially considering the nuclear capabilities of Russia and Korea, as well as Iran's growing potential to develop its non-conventional weapons. Their shared *ressentiment*-driven worldview prioritises ideological confrontation over pragmatic diplomacy, challenging traditional deterrence strategies and calling for new mechanisms to address emerging centres of power.

It is also important to clarify that this analysis purposefully omits the role of the People's Republic of China in the emerging 'New Axis of Evil'. Although elements of

ressentiment are undoubtedly present in contemporary Chinese political discourse – especially in narratives surrounding the so-called 'Century of Humiliation' and the subsequent restoration of national greatness – the phenomenon of Chinese nationalism operates through complex historical, ideological, and cultural dimensions, which require specific expertise and a separate analytical framework. Furthermore, while certain scholars tend to align China within the broader anti-Western coalition, its pragmatic foreign policy – particularly visible in its economic interdependence with Western states – makes its inclusion in this study problematic. Therefore, the issue of Chinese *ressentiment* requires a dedicated and more thoughtful investigation that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the 'New Axis of Evil', rooted in historical humiliation, striking doctrinal differences, and systematic exclusion from the Western-dominated global order, reflects not merely pragmatic cooperation but a shared *ressentiment* towards the 'collective West'. While the motivations of each state differ, their convergence emphasises the need to view *ressentiment* as a powerful complement to traditional materialist and institutional theories of international relations – particularly when analysing alliance formation. It should also be noted that such cooperation significantly threatens established international norms, forcing states to seek new security mechanisms. While the scope of this cooperation between the actors of the 'Axis of Evil' remains limited when compared to more traditional alliances such as NATO, it is plausible to suggest that initiatives of this kind will attract more actors who feel marginalised within the established world order dominated by Western powers. Therefore, I consider the observations made with regard to the formation of alliances based on *ressentiment* of great value and interest in terms of further contributions to political science, as the international community will inevitably be forced to seek new responses to the growing threats posed by political entities such as the 'New Axis of Evil'. Recognising the political function of *ressentiment* is therefore crucial for understanding the persistence of ideological conflict and the emotional underpinnings of global politics in the twenty-first century.

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Beyond Realism and Liberalism: *Ressentiment* as an Alternative Lens in Understanding the New Axis of Evil

Abstract

This article explores the concept of *ressentiment* as a powerful yet often overlooked phenomenon shaping both domestic and international political dynamics. Traditionally examined within the context of internal political struggle and legitimacy-building, *ressentiment* also functions as a key driver of states' foreign policy decisions and alliance formation. By invoking collective memories of past injustices, territorial losses, or imperial decline, political leaders construct powerful sentiments that justify aggressive and revisionist behaviour in global affairs. Through analysing a formation of alliance described as a 'New Axis of Evil' – an ideological coalition of the Russian Federation, the People's Republic of China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, united not solely by strategic or economic interests but by shared grievances and anti-Western narratives – this article demonstrates how *ressentiment* operates as both an ideological 'glue' and a foreign policy catalyst. It further highlights that while some leaders deliberately manipulate historical narratives, using them as a calculated political tool, others genuinely internalise them, often at the expense of pragmatic long-term national interests. Ultimately, this paper concludes that *ressentiment*-driven politics represent a pressing force in the reconfiguration of the contemporary international order.

Keywords: *ressentiment*, memory politics, New Axis of Evil, national identity, strategic alliances

Poza realizmem i liberalizmem: resentyment jako kategoria wyjaśniania nowej osi zła

Streszczenie

W artykule poddano analizie koncepcję „resentymentu" jako istotnego, lecz często pomijanego zjawiska, które kształtuje zarówno politykę wewnętrzną, jak i stosunki międzynarodowe. Chociaż zjawisko resentymentu tradycyjnie kojarzone jest z wewnętrzną rywalizacją o władzę, może ono także wywierać znaczny wpływ na politykę zagraniczną państwa poprzez odwoływanie się do pamięci o przeszłych niesprawiedliwościach, utraconych terytoriach czy do przekonania o upadku imperium. Rozpoznaniu problemu służy analiza tzw. nowej osi zła – koalicji Federacji Rosyjskiej, ChRL i Korei Północnej, opartej nie tylko na interesach ekonomicznych, ale także wspólnym sentymencie antyzachodnim. Resentyment pełni rolę spoiwa ideologicznego i katalizatora dla działań z zakresu polityki zagranicznej. Autor wskazuje, że chociaż niektórzy przywódcy celowo manipulują narracjami historycznymi, świadomie wykorzystując je jako narzędzie polityczne, inni rzeczywiście je internalizują, nierzadko kosztem długoterminowych interesów państwa. Autor ostatecznie dochodzi do wniosku, że polityka kształtowana przez resentyment stanowi jeden z najistotniejszych czynników w procesie transformacji współczesnego ładu międzynarodowego.

Słowa kluczowe: *resentyment*, polityka historyczna, polityka pamięci, tożsamość narodowa, oś zła

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The Communist Legacy as a Factor Shaping Belarusian Political Culture and National Identity

DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(85).2025.11/v.niamkovich

Introduction

At the beginning of the 1990s, post-communist Belarus, like other newly independent states that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, faced the question of building a national state – the Republic of Belarus. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was both a geopolitical and ideological collapse of global historical significance and marked the beginning of a new post-Soviet era for the vast region. Belarus is described as 'post--Soviet', which, however, does not necessarily mean 'non-Soviet'. Among the European countries of the post-Soviet region that appeared on the map, Belarus already in the 1990s exhibited reverse tendencies: when Lukashenko came to power, the suppression of national culture and the strengthening of authoritarian governance across all spheres of social life began. The new authoritarian regime became the heir to the Soviet system: totalitarian institutions, historical myths, cultural stereotypes, and the absence of transitional justice. Alongside these features, the situation is further complicated by challenges in defining a national identity distinct from the Soviet one.

This ambivalent situation revealed the limitations of the dominant model for interpreting post-Soviet transformations within the paradigm of transition and imitation of Western liberal democracies, indicating the need to replace the orientation toward the Western model by focusing on the complex interaction of local political and cultural-historical factors.

The definition of 'legacy' used in this research is the one proposed by Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin in *Historical legacies of communism in Russia and Eastern*

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Europe (2014). They argue that legacy is a relationship between earlier institutions and practices and those of the present rather than a mere correlation or similarity. This means that legacies are not identical to the past phenomena to which they are related but constitute specific patterns that always involve something new, combining past with present or applying the past differently, for example to new spheres of activity. This assumption is used throughout the analysis in the present thesis. Furthermore, five key forms of legacy proposed by the authors (Beissinger and Kotkin, 2014) are explored and analysed herein:

1. Fragmentation: mostly unchanged institutions or practices, characterised by preserved core personnel and organisational inertia.
2. Translation: old practices are utilised for new purposes but still resemble, in the modes of action involved or the meanings attached, the earlier practice.
3. Bricolage: old elements are intermixed with the present to form hybrid institutions or identities that still bear the imprint of the past.
4. Parameter setting: constraints in how individuals think and behave, inherited from the past, resulting in institutional inertia or prevailing norms.
5. Cultural schemata: deeply embedded ways of thinking and behaving, shaped by earlier experiences, that persist across generations.

My research questions are as follows:

1. How has the post-communist legacy influenced Belarus's governance and institutional development?
2. How does the post-communist legacy shape Belarusian national identity?

The research questions were developed to address the main facets of Belarus's post-communist legacy: government, national identity, and public sentiment. They were selected because they exemplify the most significant aspects of the Soviet legacy's effects. They aim to explore the extent to which historical legacies continue to shape contemporary policies and public attitudes.

Thus, my hypotheses are as follows:

1. The post-communist legacy has entrenched authoritarian governance in Belarus, limiting institutional democratisation and maintaining centralised power structures.
2. The post-communist legacy has fostered a dual national identity, with nostalgia for Soviet stability coexisting with growing nationalism based on the non-Soviet history of Belarus.

The initial observations and patterns found in the existing literature on the subject served as the foundation for the hypotheses. Belarus's authoritarianism draws directly from its post-communist legacy, since centralised power structures have remained intact,

with no significant institutional reforms after gaining independence. In many ways, it still resembles the Soviet era.

A contradiction in national identity can be seen in Belarusian society: nostalgia for Soviet stability coexists with a growing yearning for greater independence from Russian influence and a revival of national identity. The complex nature of Belarusian identity in negotiating its Soviet heritage and current political realities is reflected in this hypothesis.

Therefore, there is continued interest in discovering why models originating from the Soviet era remain prevalent in the state's internal policies and continue to influence national identity. In order to properly assess and provide a comprehensive analysis of the current situation, determine its causes, and draw conclusions, the research aims to integrate knowledge from political science, history, and international relations. The research questions and hypotheses were chosen to integrate all aspects of the examined subject and address gaps in the existing body of literature.

The historical and ideological context of communism in Belarus

This part examines seven decades of Soviet rule in Belarus, setting the stage for further discussion of the country's policies and sense of identity after 1991. The first section, 'Soviet state-building and political control in the Belarusian SSR', explores the duration and intent of Soviet rule in Belarus, focusing on Moscow's top-down control of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic and its aims for this western border region. The next section analyses Communist ideology and its effects on Belarusian culture and national consciousness, while the last section discusses the transition from Communism to independence, highlighting how Soviet-era leaders and institutions remained and shaped the new state.

Soviet state-building and political control in the Belarusian SSR

The creation of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic (BSSR) in January 1919 marked a new phase in the process of forming Belarusian statehood, which lasted until 1991. It was driven not by popular will but by the strategic calculations of the Bolsheviks and, later, Stalinist consolidation. According to Hélène Carrère d'Encausse (1992, p. 87), it was the Bolsheviks – not the Belarusians themselves – who advocated Belarusian independence in 1919. Their objective was not national liberation but rather the containment of separatist tendencies and the curbing of Polish influence. Terry Martin (2001) similarly noted that the majority of the Belarusian peasantry resisted the establishment

of the BSSR, believing that Belarusians could not be considered a self-sustaining nation. Hence, Soviet regimes lasted uninterrupted in Belarus for almost seventy years, with the exception of the Nazi regime during World War II. The BSSR was nominally an independent Soviet republic, but its political authority was subordinated to Moscow's central command, and it operated as a tool of Moscow's geopolitical and ideological ambitions: a reliable buffer zone between the USSR and Western Europe and a symbol of the global advance of socialism, respectively.

Moscow's intent in Soviet Belarus was to consolidate communist power and to manage the non-Russian nationality through a controlled form of nationhood. Firstly, the BSSR was pragmatically used as a geopolitical tool by the Soviet regime, undermining the coherence of the nation, as seen in its brief merger with Lithuania (LitBel) and in the post-World War II incorporation of Western Belarus. As Wilson (2012, p. 91) points out, '(…) no other Soviet republic changed its shape and size as frequently and fundamentally as did the Belarusian Republic between 1918 and 1945'.

Secondly, the Soviet regime used policies of collectivisation and industrialisation to reinforce political loyalty and deepen the republic's integration into the Soviet system. Collectivisation in the late 1920s and 1930s destroyed private farming and created state-controlled agricultural enterprises (*kolkhozy*). In Belarus, the majority of the population was rural and highly reliant on farming, so this transformation was especially disruptive. Peasants who resisted were labelled *kulaks* and deported in large numbers: David Marples (2012, p. 31) estimates that around 34,000 people were forcibly removed. Thus, collectivisation also served strategic ideological functions: to suppress rural conservatism and ensure ideological conformity (Marples, 2012, pp. 30–33). Industrialisation followed in the 1930s and intensified after World War II. Belarus lacked both resources and technical expertise, and Moscow invested heavily in urban infrastructure, energy, and production. Industrialisation underscored Belarus's structural dependency on Moscow, since decision-making remained firmly centralised and the republic was integrated into a Soviet-wide production chain. This reliance continued after independence. Valer Bulhakau (2002, p. 57) explains that major industrial branches of the Belarusian economy established under Soviet rule have never undergone serious reforms and remain concentrated mainly on the Russian market.

Moreover, the BSSR remained a top-down administrative project, since all key decisions came from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The local Communist Party of Belarus had little autonomy, and its role was reduced to implementation rather than policymaking. In 1921, it had only 1,500 members, rising modestly to 6,600 by 1926, and just 11% of party leadership were ethnic Belarusians (Shybeka, 2003, p. 242). Marples (2012, p. 50) stresses that 'In the Soviet period, the Communist Party apparatus in Minsk was among the most powerful and deeply entrenched in the

USSR.' The regime sought to ensure that Belarusian identity remained separate from any real political empowerment.

At the same time, political loyalty was ensured by Stalin's regime through brutal purges and reinforced by World War II. The Great Terror was especially transformative and traumatic. As Per Anders Rudling (2010, p. 3) notes, 'The purges of the BSSR elites were more thorough than in any other republic, leading to the demise of 90 per cent of the Belarusian intelligentsia.' David Marples (2012) similarly emphasises that almost every leader of the Communist Party of Belarus was eliminated, effectively silencing any dissent or independent political and cultural leadership. Moreover, according to Timothy Snyder (2010, p. 251), 'By the end of the war, half the population of Belarus had been either killed or moved. This cannot be said of any other European country.' The political loyalty of Belarus was affirmed through the glorification of the partisan movement, one of the largest during the war, which became central to Soviet Belarusian identity and will be discussed in detail in the following section.

Communist ideology and its cultural imprint

Soviet control in Belarus went beyond the administration of territory and fundamentally reshaped the country's culture and identity. The goal of Marxist-Leninist ideology was to replace local identity with a new Soviet consciousness. This had a lasting imprint on how Belarusians view themselves and their past. The region had a long history of rule by external powers, weak national elites and institutions, and a largely rural population. All this gave the Soviet regime a unique opportunity to build a new, Sovietised Belarusian identity from the top down (Hirsch, 2005; Rudling, 2010), an identity characterised by conformity and survival.

In the 1920s, the Belarusisation policy temporarily expanded Belarusian-language use in education and administration as part of the *korenizatsiya* programme, the policy of promoting national languages and elites, which was always subordinate to broader ideological goals. Terry Martin (2001, p. 12) argues that the policy was intended to address the negative psychological anxiety associated with the perception of foreign rule: 'The non-Russian masses would see that Soviet power and her organs are the affair of their own efforts, the embodiment of their desires.' As Stalin famously declared, Soviet culture was to be 'national in form, socialist in content' (Bassin and Kelly, 2012, p. 4). The Soviet regime aimed to integrate diverse nationalities into the Soviet system and reduce resistance by allowing limited expression of national languages and elites. Institutions such as the Institute of Belarusian Culture and the Belarusian State University were established to help frame Belarusian national culture within a socialist framework (Shybeka, 2003, pp. 240–250). Yet this was a tactical decision to make Soviet rule appear indigenous and responsive to local needs. Thus, the broader

Soviet nationalities policy aimed at controlling identity to legitimise Soviet rule, not at granting real autonomy (Martin, 2001; Bassin and Kelly, 2012). By the 1930s, as Stalin tightened central control, Belarus lost most of its cultural independence (Bekus, 2019). Russian culture and language were set as the model to follow under the doctrine of the 'Friendship of the Peoples'. Belarus retained its own state symbols, but Belarusian identity was allowed to exist only within tightly controlled ideological limits. In this model, the Soviet system did not see Belarus as a genuinely separate culture but as an integrated and loyal region within a Soviet, Russian-focused civilisation.

Marxism-Leninism pushed for total political loyalty and the subordination of the individual to the state. These values were embedded into society through every sphere of life: in schools, at work, and even in art and film. All cultural production had to conform to socialist realism, which depicted idealised Soviet life. The state ensured that public discourse remained tightly aligned with Soviet doctrine through media censorship. Moreover, internalised self-censorship developed as a result of repression. Trade unions, youth organisations, and Party structures were embedded to ensure that labour was not only economically productive but also aligned with Communist Party goals. As a result, this propaganda produced a political conformism that contributed to Belarus's postwar reputation as one of the most ideologically loyal republics.

Moreover, Soviet rule left a deep imprint on popular historical memory and identity narratives. Soviet-era mythology became Belarus's own. The most fundamental narrative is the enormous place of the Great Patriotic War (World War II) in Belarusian identity. Soviet Belarus was lauded as a 'partisan republic' for its fierce resistance to Nazi occupation, and this narrative of wartime heroism and sacrifice became central to the republic's culture (Sierakowski, 2020; Wilson, 2012). Andrey Dynko (2002, p. 7) underlines that 'The Soviet regime in Belarus set itself the task of completely annihilating the previous cultural tradition, with all its forms and content, in order to replace it entirely with a culture of new, socialist content.' History was rewritten to emphasise Soviet triumphs and to downplay or erase Belarus's pre-Soviet past, including the Belarusian People's Republic (BNR). As Kłysiński and Konończuk (2020) note, the Belarusian state under Lukashenko would later reassert the narrative that the BSSR, not the BNR, was the legitimate foundation of Belarusian statehood.

Crucially, the result of these dynamics is a split identity in post-Soviet Belarus, as described by Nelly Bekus (2010). The consequences of the imposed identity would be long-lasting, as the passivity and depoliticisation of the Soviet period laid the foundation for the remarkable stability and compliance that came to define Belarusian political culture. However, one paradox of Soviet policy was that it simultaneously promoted a form of Belarusian national consciousness and stifled genuine cultural development (Bekus, 2019). 'It was the communist regime which deliberately set out to create ethno-linguistic territorial "national administrative units", i.e. "nations" in the modern

sense, where none had previously existed or been thought of (among them were also Byelorussians)' (Hobsbawm, 1990, p. 166). The very existence of a Belarusian republic with its own literature and state symbols helped create a national imaginary, even if the nation was shaped and constrained by the ideological imperatives of the regime. In other words, while early Soviet rule gave a short-lived boost to Belarusian nationhood, the subsequent decades of communist rule severely weakened Belarusian-language use and national consciousness. By the 1970s–1980s, most urban Belarusians were Russian-speaking and heavily integrated into Soviet culture, with only a muted sense of a separate Belarusian identity.

The transition from communism to independence

Belarus had long been among the most Sovietised republics in the USSR and, as Kłysiński and Konończuk (2020) note, by the 1970s the BSSR was viewed as one of the most ideologically reliable and politically stable republics in the union. A popular expression from the early 1990s, 'Independence fell on Belarusians' heads like a ripe fruit', captures the public's lack of enthusiasm. In March 1991, just months before the Soviet collapse, 83% of Belarusians voted against breaking away from the USSR, preferring to remain within the Soviet Union, if possible (Sierakowski, 2020). According to a 1993 opinion poll, 51% of Belarusians favoured reinstating the USSR, while only 22% opposed this idea (Śleszyński, 2018, p. 288). This absence of mass mobilisation for national independence, even during the reformist waves of the 1980s, as Wilson argues, was a direct outcome of decades of state-enforced depoliticisation (Wilson, 2012). Thus, unlike in Ukraine and the Baltic states, the establishment of a sovereign Republic of Belarus was not based on strong national sentiment or mass mobilisation. Instead, independence was 'imposed' on Belarus from above (Sierakowski, 2020). As a result, in contrast to many post-Soviet states, Belarus's transition from communism to independence was marked by political, economic, and cultural continuity.

Firstly, institutional and personnel continuity between the BSSR and the newly declared Republic of Belarus further blurred the meaning of independence. The Supreme Soviet of the BSSR declared independence on 25 August 1991 by upgrading the 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty to constitutional law (Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020), which meant that it was largely the same communist-era legislature operating in new circumstances. Vyacheslav Kebic, who had served as head of the BSSR Council of Ministers, became the first prime minister of independent Belarus, and many other officials also remained in place. Stanislau Shushkevich, another Soviet-era figure, served as the Parliament chairman in 1991–1994, though he had been a reform-minded communist academic. According to Lavinia Stan, Belarus lacked any substantial process of 'elite renewal' or lustration, defined as the vetting and removal of former regime

officials, making it one of the clearest examples of continuity with the Soviet system in the post-communist space (Stan, 2008). The influence of opposition groups, such as the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), also remained limited. Thus, Soviet-era officials who retained their posts continued to shape policy through centralised mechanisms.

The continuity was further strengthened by the lack of transitional justice to address communist-era abuses, since post-communist justice stood almost still in Belarus. For example, the late 1980s discovery of mass graves in Kurapaty brought attention to crimes committed by the Soviet Union but did not lead to any attempts at national reconciliation or accountability. The Belarusian security apparatus even retained the notorious Soviet-style 'KGB' name and its methods. The state did not acknowledge the abuses of the Soviet era; instead, it focused on the BSSR's stability and industrial achievements. Bekus (2010) points out that Sovietness' was not rejected; it was reshaped as something to be proud of, a foundation for stability.

Moreover, public attitudes reflected support for the continuation of Soviet models. Surveys showed that most Belarusians cared more about economic security than about democratic reforms or reviving national culture (Kłysiński and Konończuk, 2020, p. 6). That is very different from what happened in post-Soviet Georgia and the Baltic states, where people pushed for a break with the past and a new national identity. Wilson (2012) argues that Aleksandr Lukashenko, elected as President in 1994, 'instinctively understood' that many Belarusians preferred the familiar guarantees of the Soviet system to the uncertainties of national reinvention. He promised to 'restore the Soviet Union in Belarus', a message that fell on fertile ground in a society that had been 'a grand redoubt of belief in the old order' (Sierakowski, 2020). His government adopted a neo--Soviet approach, keeping Soviet-era symbols, narratives, and ways of governing alive, even after independence.

Thus, Belarus's transition after communism kept the same institutions and leaders in place and avoided economic reforms. This stands out when compared to countries like Poland or even Russia, which made major changes. Stability mattered most to the public, and the leadership avoided severe reforms. Independence was declared, but real change was minimal. These patterns shaped the country's politics, institutions, and national identity for the future.

Soviet legacies in domestic politics and society in Belarus after 1991

As established in the previous part, despite gaining independence in 1991, Belarus experienced only a partial rupture from the communist past. This part builds on that foundation and examines the legacies of the Soviet period and the way they shape

post-1994 domestic political and social development. Section 'Political continuity and authoritarianism' investigates how institutional weaknesses facilitated the consolidation of presidential power. Section 'Institutional continuity and symbolic politics' explores institutional continuity and the revival of Soviet symbols, while the last section in this part, 'Nation-building and societal perspectives', analyses generational divides, national identity, and language policy. Together, these sections reveal how the past continues to impact the political present in Belarus, not merely through continuity, but through active recontextualisation and adaptation of Soviet frameworks.

Political continuity and authoritarianism

The communist legacy in Belarus can be most acutely seen in the country's political trajectory, which is marked by the consolidation of power by President Alexander Lukashenko after he won the first presidential elections in the newly independent Republic of Belarus in 1994. Even though Belarus was the last former Soviet republic to establish the institution of the presidency, which could have allowed for political and social pluralism and prevented the concentration of power, the 1994 elections marked not a democratic transition but the beginning of an increasingly centralised and authoritarian regime (Silitski, 2005, p. 86). This consolidation exemplifies what academics refer to as a fragmentation legacy, in which the functional core of former Soviet structures was preserved despite nominal changes.

First of all, the weakness of governance institutions is central to understanding the durability of authoritarianism in Belarus. From an institutionalist perspective, Belarus lacked a strong legacy of nationally autonomous institutions prior to the establishment of the BSSR. That helps to explain the weakness of a democratic political culture and limited civic participation. Moreover, after gaining independence, the 1994 constitution of Belarus was only a few months old, and the ability of institutions to act as checks and balances against one another was untested (Frear, 2019, p. 40).

Following the 1996 constitutional referendum, the democratic principle of separation of powers was effectively dismantled (Pieczewski and Sidarava, 2022, p. 178). The referendum introduced vital changes: decrees issued by the President were given the status of law, and the prerogative of appointing members of the Constitutional Court and the Central Election Commission (CEC) was transferred from parliament to the presidency (Silitski, 2005). As a result, Lukashenko transformed the political system of Belarus in a highly centralised manner, subordinating the legislature, executive, and judiciary to presidential authority (Danilovich, 2001, p. 13). From that moment onward, the president ruled largely by decree.

The judicial system, whose inherent role was to oversee the legislative and executive branches, became subservient to the executive, lacking independence. Alexei Trochev

(2014, p. 153) argues that courts in Belarus are an example of a fragmentation legacy: although institutional names and appearances have changed, their essential role – to support the position of the government in court cases and reinforce executive dominance – has remained largely unchanged since Soviet times. The government has continued to abuse the legal system to suppress all forms of dissent, including lawyers, human rights advocates, and political opponents (Amnesty International, 2024, p. 95). Trials are mostly held 'behind closed doors', and verdicts are preordained. This pattern resembles the Soviet regime's use of the judiciary as a mechanism of political control – a legacy that persists in a modified form under Lukashenko's regime.

Moreover, electoral processes similarly exist in form but lack their intended democratic function. The members of the CEC are appointed by and remain loyal to the president, ensuring that elections are entirely controlled by the regime. Elections in Belarus are systematically undermined by manipulation, unfair media access, and harassment of the opposition (Minchuk and Burger, 2006, pp. 35–36). McAllister and White (2014, p. 83) propose the term 'competitive authoritarianism' for a system where some electoral competition exists but authoritarianism still dominates. Electoral voting serves a symbolic rather than democratic function, maintaining a democratic *façade* (Morse, 2012). In reality, elections are utilised by the regime to legitimise its power. This resembles the Soviet electoral system, where elections were nominally held but functioned only to reaffirm the ruling party's dominance. Thus, the manipulation of elections in Belarus constitutes an example of translation legacy: Soviet-style electoral rituals are adapted to legitimise authoritarianism while emulating democracy in a new historical context.

Institutional continuity and symbolic politics

Political continuity in Belarus is underpinned by the preservation of both formal and informal institutions that have adapted Soviet-era principles. One of the core institutions, the security service – the KGB – retained its name and role, suggesting not reform but continuity (Taylor, 2014). 'Rather than being asked to observe the law and being placed under parliamentary oversight, secret services have been used by the government against the political opposition and the independent journalists. Instead of becoming democratic agencies, security services have retained most of the functions, operations and personnel of the KGB' (Stan, 2008, p. 266). Similarly, pro-regime youth organisations such as the Belarusian Republican Youth Union (BRYU) resemble in their functions the Soviet-era Komsomol, spreading the government's discourse and enforcing loyalty (Chulickaja, 2008, p. 122). Young people are pressured to attend BRYU events that glorify the President, often under threat of penalties or with the promise of incentives. This illustrates institutional

bricolage – the recombination of old and new elements to sustain authoritarian rule in the post-Soviet environment.

In parallel, informal institutions based on political patronage and elite loyalty reinforce authoritarian governance. As Lavinia Stan (2008, p. 254) notes, the political elite under Lukashenko is largely composed of individuals whose careers originated in the Soviet *nomenklatura* or security services, and who have no incentive to support reforms that might undermine their authority. Lukashenko consistently rewards trusted officials with administrative positions and impunity, creating a self-reinforcing elite whose future is tied entirely to the regime's survival. Such a pattern represents a translation legacy: the *nomenklatura* logic was adapted to serve today's authoritarian Belarus.

Furthermore, a process of translating Soviet practices into a new political reality is particularly evident in the widespread use of Soviet-style propaganda methods and rhetoric aimed at legitimising Lukashenko's rule. State propaganda has evolved into 'political technology', borrowing tactics from Soviet *agitprop* while adapting them to the modern context. As Andrew Wilson (2005, pp. 1–32) notes, both communist and post-communist regimes rely on manipulative language, disinformation, and so-called 'active measures' to undermine opposition. However, in Belarus today these practices serve personalised rather than ideological goals, supporting Lukashenko's authority.

One particularly enduring rhetorical device used against opposition figures is depicting them as heirs of World War II Nazi collaborators. This narrative was first deployed during the May 1995 parliamentary elections (Silitski, 2005) and remains a vital element of regime discourse because of its emotional power. The regime's strategy is fundamentally rooted in the consistent deployment of Great Patriotic War narratives and the perception of the Soviet Union as a stable and prosperous era (Klumbytė and Sharafutdinova, 2013, pp. 3–5). As a result, Soviet rhetorical symbols have been efficiently recontextualised to legitimise Lukashenko's rule and depict it as a stabilising force.

The Lukashenko regime has seized on this nostalgia: official discourse often treats the Soviet period as part of Belarus's nation-building and reuses Soviet imagery and socialist ideals (collectivism, social equality) to craft a positive 'Belarusianness' inseparable from 'Sovietness' (Bekus, 2010, p. 280). The state actively promotes Soviet-era symbols and narratives while downplaying independent Belarusian traditions. Alternatives to Soviet-era symbols of national identity are either eliminated from public discourse or labelled extremist. For example, the historical white-red-white flag, used by the Belarusian Democratic Republic in 1918 and now considered a symbol of democratic resistance, was officially designated an extremist symbol, and any public display of it is punishable by a prison term. This underlines how the regime explicitly utilises the cultural schemata form of legacy, embedded in the older generation, and fosters Soviet-era pride to mobilise its support.

Finally, the process of symbolic translation was institutionalised in 1995, when the referendum granted Russian the status of an official language and replaced post-independence national symbols with Soviet-era ones – issues that mobilised voters who felt nostalgic about communist rule and saw it as a 'golden age' (Silitski, 2005, p. 85; Marples, 2012). 'In fact, today there is no clear dividing line between Soviet Belarus (BSSR) and the Republic of Belarus in the form it attained by 1995, following the referendum that changed the state's symbols and national flag' (Marples and Padhol, 2008, pp. 165–166). These changes were instrumental in consolidating Lukashenko's early political base. Thus, Soviet legacies were selectively reactivated and adapted to serve the regime's strategic aims to consolidate power and win electoral appeal under post-Soviet conditions.

Nation-building and societal perspectives

The post-communist legacy in Belarus extends deeply into the social sphere, particularly regarding how people think about democracy and national identity. Soviet-era values continue to influence political culture, especially among older generations. At the same time, a sense of civic awareness has begun to develop among younger Belarusians, especially those who are politically active. Nelly Bekus (2010, p. 163) points out that there are two distinct ideas of what it means to be Belarusian, and these shape both the political landscape and the endurance of authoritarianism. On one side, supporters of the current regime adhere to a version of Soviet-Belarusian 'nationalism', promoted by official discourse. On the other, the Belarusian nationalist movement draws from an alternative identity, which forms the backbone of its political ideology.

Firstly, in post-independence Belarus, many older citizens retain a strong sense of nostalgia for the Soviet era. Analysts note that Belarusians are 'more nostalgic for the Soviet Union than people in other European republics of the former Soviet Union', with many older citizens associating the opposition's calls for change with the upheaval and uncertainty of the early 1990s (Kaminski, 2008, p. 9). Moreover, recent surveys identify a large 'Soviet' identity segment (approx. 37% of respondents), heavily weighted toward older, retired Belarusians (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 11). This group values Soviet symbols and rituals; state parades on 3 July and 9 May, for example, hold significant meaning for them, and loyalty to the Soviet past remains significant (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 16).

Secondly, quantitative studies show that younger Belarusians are much more oriented toward global identities and multiculturalism (32%), and some view Belarusians as a unique nation in Europe with its own history and culture (13%) (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 11). According to scholars, many have benefitted from travel, digital access, and new educational opportunities, and they no longer embrace Soviet traditions or values (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2021). Instead, they connect with

the Belarusian language, pre-Soviet heritage, and national symbols (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 16). Younger generations are inclined to question the state-framed version of history, especially its focus on Soviet times, and they seek more critical, pluralistic perspectives on the Belarusian past.

Furthermore, the disaffection of the younger generation with the Lukashenko regime has been observed over time. This discontent was particularly visible in youth-led mobilisations, from the 15,000-person tent camp in Minsk in 2006 to the large-scale uprisings in 2020. Those 2020 demonstrations marked a genuine turning point, not only in how Belarusians expressed national identity but also in their demands for democratic change. Nelly Bekus (2021, p. 1) argues that 'The protests of 2020 in Belarus have often been described as a new 1989', suggesting that these events were interpreted as a moment of 'synchronization' of the nation's development with the post-1989 democratic revolutions that swept through Central and Eastern Europe.

One of the defining features of the 2020 movement was its inventive use of symbols. Pre-Soviet national symbols, such as the white-red-white flag, the hymn *Mahutny Boža*, and the coat of arms *Pahonia*, were utilised to assert a version of 'Belarusianness' that stood in contrast to the Soviet-infused official discourse. That became a way to 'bring into existence a new realm of national being' (Bekus, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, protestors recontextualised the state-sponsored memory of the Great Patriotic War to articulate their dissent. For instance, a mass rally on 16 August 2020 surrounded the Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War, filling its Soviet-era forecourt with white-red-white flags as an act to emancipate the Belarusian people from the spell of a positive perception of the Soviet past (Bekus, 2021, pp. 8–9).

The 2020 protests highlighted the need for a break from Soviet-era narratives and pan-Soviet identity, and a reconsideration of the Belarusian past among the younger generation. They have even been characterised as a social awakening that caused Belarusians to 'break with the very foundations of their cherished stability for the sake of dignity' (Petrova and Korosteleva, 2021, p. 128). The protests blurred the boundaries between official and alternative identities. Cultural symbols and historical references associated with the official ideology were used by protestors to challenge Lukashenko's rule alongside nationalist revivalist symbols (Kazharski, 2020).

Finally, the linguistic landscape in Belarus is marked by deep asymmetry and cultural schemata. While both Belarusian and Russian hold official status, Russian overwhelmingly dominates everyday communication, media, and administration. According to recent data, 92% of Belarusians report speaking Russian most often, while only 7% do so in Belarusian, even though 56% still consider Belarusian their native language (Bikanau and Nesterovich, 2023, p. 19). This pattern stems from a long history of Russification and the Soviet push for 'one nation – one language'. Unlike other post-Soviet states, Belarus granted Russian official status (Bekus, 2023, p. 101), whereas others classified

it as a foreign language. Since then, Belarusian has largely been preserved as a cultural symbol rather than a language of daily use. However, there is a trend among the younger generation to use Belarusian rather than Russian, as they make efforts to revive pre-Soviet national culture. For example, the 2020 protests became essentially bilingual, with multiple slogans in both Russian and Belarusian used during the marches (Bekus, 2023, p. 110).

Conclusions

This research attempted to investigate how the post-communist legacy has shaped Belarus's domestic policy trajectories and national identity formation by formulating two central research questions. Historical, political, and sociological materials were employed in the study in order to evaluate the extent to which institutional continuity and public attitudes in Belarus reflect continuing legacies of the Soviet past.

In order to achieve this aim, the historical background of Belarus's Soviet past was established in the first part of the article. The analytical framework provided by Mark Beissinger and Stephen Kotkin was applied in the second part, investigating the patterns of fragmentation, translation, bricolage, parameter setting, and cultural schemata. This analysis revealed the persistence of Soviet legacies in Belarusian political culture and Soviet influence on national identity.

To conduct the research, two research questions were posed:

1. How has the post-communist legacy influenced Belarus' governance and institutional development?

The results of this research confirm the hypothesis that the communist legacy has entrenched authoritarian governance structures in Belarus. The political landscape after 1991 was marked by a significant degree of institutional continuity, as key political elites, administrative practices, and state ideologies were inherited from the Soviet era. Instead of undergoing profound democratisation or reform, Belarus preserved a centralised, top-down system of governance, resulting from the absence of a tradition of institutional independence and an underdeveloped political culture. This has limited the development of pluralist institutions, undermined the rule of law, and preserved executive dominance, particularly under the presidency of Alexander Lukashenko. However, as the study found, the public's strong feelings toward the USSR were apparent both immediately after its disintegration and even a decade later. Society began to change in the 2010s and experienced a degree of 'mental democratisation'. Therefore, one could say that Lukashenko's administration consolidated power by taking advantage of society's fascination with the Soviet Union, but at present it merely attempts to hold onto power using Soviet-style tactics that are no longer true Soviet legacies.

2. How does the post-communist legacy shape Belarusian national identity and public attitudes toward communism and external influences?

The findings confirm that the identity of post-communist Belarus is characterised by duality: on the one hand, there is a nostalgic attraction to the stability and social guarantees of the Soviet period, while on the other, there is an increasing aspiration for self-determination as Belarusians not reliant on the Soviet past. This tension has been particularly visible in the aftermath of the 2020 protests and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Although official rhetoric continues to be devoted to Soviet symbolism and discourse, younger segments of civil society have increasingly adopted the sentiments of democratic ideals and revivalist perspectives. This illustrates both a generational and ideological shift that challenges the endurance of Soviet paradigms.

In summary, this research illustrates that the post-communist legacy in Belarus is complex and fluid rather than uniform or static. While it remains a significant force shaping governance and national identity, it is also increasingly challenged by bottom--up movements. This dynamic is important for understanding both the resilience of authoritarianism in Belarus and the potential for transformative change toward democratisation and the establishment of a more homogeneous national identity.

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The Communist Legacy as a Factor Shaping Belarusian Political Culture and National Identity

Abstract

This research investigates how the post-communist legacy has shaped political culture and national identity in Belarus. It examines the extent to which institutions, societal norms, and strategic paradigms of the Soviet era have influenced governance practices and attempts at nation-building in Belarusian policies. Drawing on scholarly literature, policy analyses, and contemporary political developments, two interconnected dimensions are analysed: the persistence of authoritarianism and centralised state authority, as well as societal nostalgia. Ultimately, this paper concludes that post-communist legacies serve as a powerful explanatory framework for Belarus's domestic stagnation and dual national identity.

Keywords: authoritarianism, Belarus, communist legacy, national identity, path-dependence, political culture

Dziedzictwo komunizmu jako czynnik kształtujący kulturę polityczną i tożsamość narodową Białorusi

W niniejszym artykule zbadano, w jaki sposób dziedzictwo postkomunistyczne ukształtowało kulturę polityczną oraz tożsamość narodową na Białorusi. Przedmiotem analizy jest zakres, w jakim instytucje, normy społeczne oraz paradygmaty strategiczne epoki radzieckiej wpłynęły na praktyki sprawowania władzy i próby budowania narodu w polityce białoruskiej. W oparciu o literaturę naukową, analizy strategii publicznych oraz współczesne wydarzenia polityczne oceniono dwa wzajemnie powiązane wymiary: trwałość autorytaryzmu i scentralizowanej władzy państwowej, a także społeczną nostalgię. W artykule wskazano, że dziedzictwo postkomunistyczne stanowi istotną podstawę wewnętrznej stagnacji Białorusi oraz jej podwójnej tożsamości narodowej.

Słowa kluczowe: autorytaryzm, Białoruś, dziedzictwo komunizmu, tożsamość narodowa, zależność od ścieżki, kultura polityczna

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The Strategic Turn of the EU and the Ukrainian Impulse

DOI: 10.26399/meip.2(85).2025.12/s.bratyshchenko

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 (Psaropoulos, 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

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Editor-in-chief
dr hab. Paweł Borkowski

Uczelnia Łazarskiego rozpoczęła działalność 1 października 1993 r. Dziś jest to jedna z najbardziej prestiżowych niepublicznych uczelni w Polsce. Prowadzi studia na siedmiu kierunkach: prawo, administracja, stosunki międzynarodowe, ekonomia, finanse i rachunkowość, zarządzanie oraz kierunek lekarski.

W 2006 r. Uczelnia uzyskała uprawnienia do nadawania stopnia naukowego doktora nauk prawnych, w 2016 r. uprawnienia do nadawania stopnia doktora habilitowanego nauk prawnych, a obecnie czyni starania o uzyskanie uprawnień do nadawania stopnia naukowego doktora nauk ekonomicznych i w dziedzinie nauk społecznych w zakresie nauk o polityce. Od 2012 r. na kierunku stosunków międzynarodowych działa Centrum Naukowe Uczelni Łazarskiego i Instytutu Studiów Politycznych PAN. Kierunek ten w 2016 r. uzyskał ocenę wyróżniającą Polskiej Komisji Akredytacyjnej.

Uczelnię Łazarskiego wyróżnia wysoki stopień umiędzynarodowienia; prowadzi w języku angielskim studia I i II stopnia w trybie stacjonarnym na trzech kierunkach: ekonomia, stosunki międzynarodowe i zarządzanie. Cztery programy studiów otrzymały akredytację Coventry University z Wielkiej Brytanii – ich absolwenci otrzymują dwa dyplomy: polski i angielski. Uczelnia prowadzi też współpracę z prestiżowymi uniwersytetami amerykańskimi: Georgetown University w Waszyngtonie, University of Kentucky w Lexington i University of Wisconsin w La Crosse.

Nasza Uczelnia zajmuje trzecie miejsce w rankingach uczelni niepublicznych, a Wydział Prawa i Administracji od wielu lat jest liderem w rankingach wydziałów prawa uczelni niepublicznych. Realizowane u nas programy nauczania są współtworzone z wybitnymi praktykami i odpowiadają oczekiwaniom pracodawców. Dzięki temu 96% naszych absolwentów znajduje pracę w trakcie lub zaraz po studiach.

W ramach Uczelni działa również Centrum Kształcenia Podyplomowego, oferujące wysokiej jakości usługi z zakresu kształcenia podyplomowego, szkoleń i doradztwa dla firm, instytucji oraz jednostek administracji państwowej i samorządowej. Absolwentom studiów prawniczych oferujemy anglojęzyczne studia LLM (odpowiednik MBA), umożliwiające zdobycie międzynarodowego dyplomu prawniczego.

Wykładowcy Uczelni to znani w kraju i za granicą dydaktycy, którzy łączą pracę naukową z doświadczeniem zdobytym w renomowanych i cenionych na rynku firmach i instytucjach. To również znakomici profesorowie z Wielkiej Brytanii, Niemiec i ze Stanów Zjednoczonych.

Uczelnia Łazarskiego posiada certyfikaty „Wiarygodna Szkoła", „Uczelnia walcząca z plagiatami", „Dobra Uczelnia, Dobra Praca" oraz „Uczelnia Liderów".