Russia's invasion of Ukraine signals new beginnings and new conflicts for the European Union

The EU's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine was unprecedented both in its speed and its scope. **Floris de Witte** *writes that by acting decisively, EU leaders have set a new course for the integration process.*

It is difficult to overstate how much the EU owes Ukraine and its president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Their heroic defence and determination in the face of Russia's invasion, and their commitment to values that have long been seen as central to the EU's mission, have given the EU the motivation and courage to stand up.

They have both highlighted the necessity and increased the willingness of the EU to defend its own values and interests. The actions by the EU in the past weeks have been applauded by many as uncharacteristically swift, ambitious and effective. They also, however, foreshadow much more fundamental and long-term changes to the EU's self-understanding and its institutional and political structures, and hint at the emergence of controversial choices to be made.

The EU is not new to crisis. The last 15 years has seen a succession of existential challenges for the EU that are well documented. The refrain from these crises is by now well-rehearsed: the EU is slow to react, its response characterised first by internal disagreement and only at the point of emergency by – more or less successful – creative legal and political solutions.

This is especially so in external affairs, where the EU is hamstrung by the requirement of unanimity and the wide variety of member state interests allowing internal and external actors to play member states off against each other. There's even a Twitter handle @isEUconcerned that collects the standard response to crisis that the EU *is* good at delivering: a well-balanced statement indicating the level (very, deeply, strongly, seriously, gravely, extremely) of concern. However, the EU's response in the first weekend after the Russian invasion, on 26-27 February, was different. In the words of @isEUconcerned: 'For the first time in eight years I don't have anything to tweet'.

During that weekend in February the EU recast itself: it shed its self-understanding and image as a reluctant global actor that focuses on diplomacy and normative power; and instead emerged as an actor that can swiftly and effectively protect its strategic short and long-term interests. This new geopolitical role for the EU, however, comes with a number of implications that will – indisputably and irreversibly – change the EU in the long term.

An unprecedented response

This transformation of the EU into a geopolitical actor, able to reflect and act on its strategic interests at home and abroad, did obviously not happen overnight. It has a longer trajectory, and will take decades to lead to its logical conclusion. But that weekend in February, and the weeks that followed it, have spectacularly accelerated the process.

Calls for the EU to become a stronger geopolitical actor, or to strengthen its 'strategic autonomy' or 'sovereignty' have been around for a few years. Luuk van Middelaar's piece in 2021 for *Groupe d'études géopolitiques*, for example, highlights the deep transformation that a turn towards a geopolitical EU would require, aptly defining such a move as 'painful yet liberating'.

French President Emmanuel Macron has for years highlighted the need to ensure the EU's ability to act in the absence of support from its traditional partner across the Atlantic, a call reiterated whenever the EU finds itself dependent on external actors for access to vital products – be it high-tech goods, fossil fuels, vaccines or protective personal equipment. And the EU has started to act in this space, with initiatives ranging from a massive fund to kickstart microchip production, and a temporary export ban on vaccines, to a €300 billion investment in Africa through the Global Gateway programme.

It is in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, that we have seen a speed and ambition of EU action hitherto unknown. Within days, decades' worth of taboos were overcome both within member states and in the context of the EU's external action. The decisions are well-known: an expulsion from SWIFT for seven Russian banks, limits on the Russian Central Bank, sanctions on a number of oligarchs and politicians linked to Putin, the blocking of state-sponsored Russian media channels, a €450 million disbursement of the European Peace Facility to offer lethal weapons for Ukraine (on top of member state commitments in this space), a commitment to lower Russian gas dependency by 75% by the end of 2022, the invocation of the Temporary Protection Directive, and the outlines of a Ukraine recovery plan.

High-level discussions, likewise, hint at a new ambitious energy transition programme (called RePower EU), which is rumoured to include debt mutualisation to the tune of €200 billion that serves to ensure the EU's strategic autonomy in military and energy matters. There is also talk of changes to the bloc's debt rules and state aid norms to facilitate this transition towards the building of EU military capacity and the decrease of the EU's dependence on external oil and gas.

New beginnings

What does this mean for the EU of today and in the longer term? Arguably, the EU's response to the Russian invasion foreshadows some fundamental changes to its nature. A first change sees to the EU's purpose. For a decade there has been lots of soul-searching about the 'point' of the EU. Whereas its mission of 'peace and prosperity' was certainty able to galvanise elite and citizen support in the first four decades of integration, it is no longer credible. War between member states or continent-wide poverty is unimaginable: surely partially thanks to the EU, but, ironically, no longer dependent on its existence.

What, then, is the 'point' of the EU? Why would member states and citizens bear with the (perceived and real) costs of integration in the decades to come? We now have a new answer to that fundamental question: the point of the EU is that it protects the strategic geopolitical interests of its member states and its citizens – whether within the context of climate change, or in its relationships with other global powers, including protection from military threats. It can be expected that the EU will make much of this in the coming years: the creation of a new *raison d'être* that fosters its legitimacy, shapes its internal structures, and allows its member states and citizens to rally around the blue flag with its yellow stars.

But such a new *raison d'être* also, inevitably, comes with institutional reforms. If the EU wants to be a strategically astute geopolitical actor, its internal machinations must be tweaked. Already we can see the first steps in this direction – a second way in which the geopolitical turn of the EU is changing it. Emmanuel Macron has successfully positioned himself as the strategic political brain of the European Union, both due to his role as an interlocutor with Putin and Zelenskyy, but mainly because his geopolitical vision of Europe has been fully vindicated by Putin's actions. The fact that Russia's invasion coincided with the French presidency of the Council, including a high-profile European Council in Versailles, only further enhanced Macron's profile.

Beyond Macron, it must be said that the Commission has excelled in the wake of Russia's invasion: its policy initiatives have been ambitious and innovative, Ursula von der Leyen's public role – if not always prudent – has been evident, and, most important, it has once again used a crisis to think ahead strategically. Just as in the context of the Next Generation EU package, the mooted RePower EU package manages to make available an eye-watering amount of cash for the Commission's strategic projects.

In the Next Generation EU package, the €750 billion available for economic recovery after Covid-19 can be used only for the greening or digitalisation of the member states' economies. The proposed RePower EU package, likewise, offers massive carrots for *transnational* projects that either green the EU (and in doing so make it less dependent on external oil and gas) or enhance its military capacity. The Commission, here, both dispenses the funds *and* sets the conditions for their use. In doing so, it has managed to mainstream the most painful economic transition that the EU might ever encounter – towards a sustainable economy – in the EU's response to Covid-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

What this suggests, among other things, is the Commission's ability and willingness to think strategically and long-term about the direction of, and challenges for, the European integration project. With the increase in visibility for Macron and the Commission comes a decrease in power for other institutional actors, including Charles Michel (the President of the European Council) and the European Parliament, whose role in most external questions is limited, and which has been relegated into a very visible but mainly symbolic actor rather than an institution heavily involved in making the decisions.

A third way in which Russia's invasion has sped up changes to the EU's internal functioning is that is signals the increased importance of money (as opposed to law) as a way of getting European integration 'done'. We teach our students that the EU is, above all else, a legal order: the objectives of European integration are achieved by making them legally enforceable within national constitutional systems, binding the member states to their commitments made in the Treaties. However, over the past years, we have seen a rapid increase in the use of money to enforce the EU's objectives – ranging from conditionality requirements in its budget, the introduction of substantive objectives such as greening in the Next Generation EU fund, and an increase in the number of different funds available to solve the EU's problems – whether in the context of migration, energy, or microchip production.

This is a fundamental change for the integration project, leading to complaints of economic blackmail and neo-colonialism but also to praise for a diversification of its enforcement toolkit and for its creativity in defending its purposes. Whichever view one takes, one aspect is clear: the EU has realised that while some of its ambitions – the internal market is the obvious example – can be achieved through law; others – refugee management, rule of law issues, strategic autonomy – require another approach.

This role of money in enforcing the EU's objectives (or, more cynically, in buying compliance) is of course not new (the Common Agricultural Policy budget stands at €55 billion per year). What is new is that the most important challenges and projects of the EU in the coming decades – its Green Deal and its geopolitical strategy – will not be accomplished through law but through *money.* This will inevitably impact on the EU's self-understanding and our understanding of the role of law in the process of integration.

What we can expect on the European level is a period of consolidation and slow institutionalisation of these seismic shifts that Russia's invasion has unleashed in the EU. The changes alluded to above will not happen overnight, but they appear inevitable. Equally inevitable are other changes that can be anticipated to cater for the EU's new geopolitical role: an increased use of conditionality both internally and externally; a decrease in veto powers of the member states in certain aspects of external affairs; and the use of (temporary and capped) debt mutualisation to both respond to crisis and leverage systemic change within the societies and economies of member states and third countries alike.

New conflicts

The birth of the EU as a geopolitical actor, however, also comes with its challenges. Chief among these challenges is the fact that it forces the EU to engage with controversial questions and choices that it has preferred to avoid for decades. In fact, the EU's strategy of expressing concern and focusing on diplomacy in its external action is a result of a deep unease in the EU and its member states about the use and language of power, a commitment to avoid military action, and a reluctance to engage in global conflicts. A geopolitically astute EU can no longer afford this position, which brings back existential questions whose answers are political dynamite and have the potential to create large division between member states and citizens.

The first of such questions relates to the militarisation of the EU. Chancellor Scholz' commitment of €100 billion for the German army, the use of EU funds to distribute lethal weapons in military conflict, and the calls for military autonomy, including a possible European army that combines member state resources makes geopolitical sense: it strengthens the leverage of the EU externally and – in case necessary – its potential to defend itself.

But this also brings with it deeply problematic questions of the appropriate context for use of force, the conditions of army deployment, the mutual obligations between the member states, and, fundamentally, presumes a willingness to *kill* – literally – for the strategic interests of the EU. It brings the EU, in one fell swoop, into global dynamics that are volatile, unpredictable and will *foster* political conflict – both externally, but, perhaps more problematically, internal to the EU. The militarisation of the EU, in other words, is a vital component of its geopolitical stance but might undermine its internal cohesion.

The second difficult question that the EU must face relates to its energy transition. The political momentum appears to take us to a place that requires a fast and complete detox from Russian gas and oil, which will presumably (and hopefully) carry over into a detox from other countries with questionable domestic politics. While the Green Deal foresees a massive investment in sustainable and renewable energy, this does not appear a strategy that can sustain the EU's transition in the short and medium-term.

Instead, what is likely to happen is a growing reliance on the EU's own resources, including polluting coal plants, shale gas, and nuclear energy. Already commentators have highlighted that lobby groups are calling for a reversal of the EU's rules on biodiversity and emission targets in return for 'strategic autonomy' in energy and food production. A geopolitical EU – which wants to be as independent from outside actors as possible to protect its scope for manoeuvre – will likely come, at least in the short and medium term, at a cost for its climate ambitions. This is but one example of a wider trade-off, wherein geopolitical strategy will tend to clash with internal objectives of the EU, potentially leading to difficult and intractable conflict within the EU.

A third problematic question that emerges from the EU's geopolitical move is more existential. It is difficult to have an external strategy without first understanding what the EU's *internal* identity is: what are its challenges, objectives, needs and aspirations? What is the EU strategically *protecting*? As highlighted by Loïc Azoulai, we can trace a tension between two very different visions of what the EU is trying to protect through its geopolitical role.

One vision is parochial and exclusionary, focusing on an elusive 'European way of life', an imagery and language increasingly used to excuse or mask xenophobic and provincial intuitions, often a product of the rapid changes – in economic, social, cultural terms – that European integration has contributed to. This almost autarkic view of the EU's identity sees its geopolitical emergence as a defensive instrument: something that will allow it to more forcefully patrol the border between 'us' and 'them'.

A second vision of the EU's identity is more cosmopolitan, and sees the EU's geopolitics as an instrument that defends certain democratic values, a certain outlook on what constitutes a decent society, to be protected where possible in cooperation with like-minded partners. While this second vision of the EU is clearly in Zelenskyy's mind when calling upon the EU to step up efforts to assist Ukraine, and on von der Leyen's lips when she argues that 'the force of law will trump the force of weapons', it is a tension that will inevitably resurface in the coming years. Especially, of course, once the external challenge facing the EU is not as barbaric as Putin's actions, which neither leave space for internal member state polarisation nor for a fracturing of the public support for decisive action.

This existential question about *what* the EU is protecting, after all, reveals the emergence on the European level of a tension that has dominated domestic politics throughout the EU (and indeed the world) for a number of years, whose settlement and resolution requires strong and democratic institutions as well as a support cast consisting of an engaged civil society and a sophisticated public sphere, all of which are – at the moment – incipient at best on the European level. The EU's geopolitical turn, then, risks inflaming existing and existential tensions within European societies.

Arguably, we will look back at the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a turning point in the EU's story: the moment in which it has turned itself outwards, and transformed itself into an actor that can effectively protect its strategic interests in different domains, with the use of a wide arsenal of regulatory, political, economic and military means. This represents a shift in the EU's nature that cannot be underestimated, and brings with it many opportunities, necessitating a range of important institutional reconfigurations, but also, inevitably, bringing to the fore controversial questions that the EU has (perhaps wisely) taken care to avoid in the past.

For more coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war, please see our compilation of responses by LSE authors here

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