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## The Ukraine crisis is forcing the EU to abandon normative power and act more strategically in its eastern neighbourhood

Guardian Comment Network



*The EU has often been conceived of as a 'normative power' in the sense that it exerts influence by promoting values and norms through technocratic cooperation and diplomacy. Cristian Nitoiu writes that the net effect of the crisis in Ukraine has been to encourage the EU to adopt a more geostrategic approach to its eastern neighbourhood, particularly in its relations with Russia.*

The crisis in Ukraine has deeply affected the EU's understating of its role in international relations. Diplomats in Brussels, Berlin or London seem to have finally embraced the idea that the EU must have a more strategic approach to the politics of the Eastern neighbourhood.

To a great deal of academics and analysts this shift should have occurred much sooner. Over the years, the EU has received its fair share of criticism for not being willing and able to have a grand strategy or to even start thinking strategically in its foreign policy. During the last decade the EU's engagement with the post-Soviet space largely involved promoting 'European values' through low politics and technocratic cooperation with the states in the region.

This approach has originated from the broad understanding shared within European institutions that the EU's success story lies in its ability to

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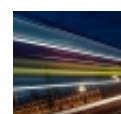
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promote change through slow and sometimes cumbersome technocratic processes. Moreover, solving issues on the international agenda through high level politics or strategic



Angela Merkel and Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko, Credit: EPP (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

thinking has never been considered to be within the EU's reach as it simply does not have the capabilities to develop such a foreign policy.

Even though the EU's discourse has become slightly more assertive since the start of the year, and diplomats have started recognising the need for thinking in strategic terms, the EU's capabilities, tools or mechanisms for acting in the post-Soviet space have not been significantly upgraded. As a consequence, the prospects for a more strategic and geopolitical foreign policy to be effective are rather slim. If the member states are not ready to significantly enhance the EU's foreign policy instruments, reconstructing Ukraine or even keeping countries like Moldova on their European path will prove to be extremely difficult in the long run.

### **Strategic thinking in EU foreign policy and the Ukraine crisis**

The shift toward a strategic approach has undoubtedly been welcomed by the flurry of analysts who have long argued that the EU should deal more with geopolitics and less with the realm of technocratic politics. In their view, the EU has been naïve in thinking that it could promote its norms and values by focusing solely on cooperation in areas of low politics and avoiding almost at all costs engaging with security issues.

On the other hand, an opposing group of scholars and analysts have gathered around the idea that the EU is a distinct international actor, a normative power, which acts altruistically in international relations. This

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view became influential during the period when the EU was developing the European Neighborhood Policy, around a decade ago.

EU bureaucrats for the most part embraced the idea that they were working for a normative power. This provided them with an even more suitable justification for pursuing a largely technocratic approach to foreign policy. It was also a source of pride as the EU was thought to be actively changing the dynamics of international relations by putting values in front of interests. The normative power argument thus became the primary underlying rationale for the EU's foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.

In practice, the normative approach meant that in its relations with both the post-Soviet states and Russia the EU has focused on sectorial cooperation in areas such as the economy, energy, human rights and democracy. The EU's track record in promoting its values in these areas has varied from moderate success in countries like Moldova and Georgia, to almost complete failure in Belarus and Armenia.

The latter and Russia have often criticised the EU for acting as if it had the moral high ground, and for being consistently uncompromising in demanding that other states adopt its set of norms and values, or its economic model. For Russia (and possibly for most states) security concerns have priority over the promotion of its economic interests or values. On the other hand, the normative and technocratic approach of the EU has emphasised the need to maintain the moral high ground while guiding other states toward development, democracy or stability.

The EU thus sought to establish 'teacher-student' models of interaction with other states. This mode of engagement has been rejected by Belarus and Azerbaijan, who have been more attuned with the view shared by Russia, that cooperation in areas of economy or energy should not be politicised and conditioned by other international actors. It is the dichotomy between the EU's teacher-student approach and Russia's approach based on absolute sovereignty in relations with other states that was at the root of then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich's decision to postpone the Association Agreement with the EU, which ultimately led to the crisis. The EU was unable to perceive these tensions and provide Ukraine at the time with a solution that would suit both worlds.

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## The EU's misreading of Russia

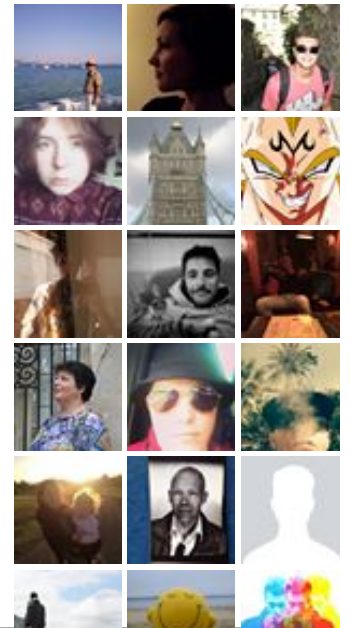
In its naïve normative and technocratic approach the EU made another crucial mistake in failing to realise that Russia viewed Europe as its own weak and indecisive student. During his first two terms, Putin was very keen to support a stronger international presence for the EU that would counterbalance the US or the rise of China. However, Putin favoured a stronger EU only on Russian terms.

The EU's push for more European integration in Ukraine and its support for the Maidan revolution were seen by Moscow as unilateral actions which threatened to change the dynamic of EU-Russia relations. Russia's assertive actions which followed the fall of Yanukovich can be seen as a clear message to the West that the country will not allow the EU to take the initiative in the post-Soviet space and change unilaterally the nature of EU-Russia relations.

European diplomats now seem to have understood that Putin has always seen the EU as an inferior and indecisive entity in comparison to Russia. By focusing on strategic thinking or geopolitics the EU is not necessarily shifting its approach in foreign policy from technocratic politics to high politics. This would be very difficult given the level of embeddedness of the former approach in the EU's institutions. This move should instead be understood as a direct response to the message sent by Russia. The EU is now trying to show Russia that it has the potential and the willingness to back up the promotion of its values and norms with strategic actions.

Nonetheless, European diplomats' vision of strategic thinking or geopolitics in foreign policy differs from traditional notions. For them, strategic thinking primarily entails being clear about the EU's interests and how they are pursued in the post-Soviet space and in its relations with Russia. Talks of a European military presence in eastern Ukraine are off the table, but many member states are aiming to bolster their intelligence gathering expertise on Russia. The technocratic approach of the EU's institutions is now supplemented by high-level diplomacy led by Germany, in what is now considered to be a two-track approach toward Russia.

Strategic thinking also broadly means that the EU will pay more attention to the geopolitics of the region before devising new integration initiatives. For example, there are indications that the EU is ready to accept a partial



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defeat in Ukraine which would in effect see Russia trapped there for many years. This stems from the EU's recognition that while the region is not particularly important on a strategic level for the West, it is crucial for Russian foreign policy. The EU has stopped short of fully applying the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement signed with Ukraine, somewhat leaving the door open for the country (or at least eastern regions) to have some type of integration in the Eurasian Union. Evidence of this is also found in the criticism of some of Ukraine's ill-conceived military actions during the conflict.

Discourse in Brussels and in other EU capitals has certainly become more decisive and assertive, but the EU's tools for materialising this message have not changed. Sanctions are still the only significant mechanisms at the disposal of the EU that could coerce Russia. In the absence of new and improved foreign policy instruments for dealing with Russia and the post-Soviet space, it remains doubtful that the EU's new adoption of strategic thinking will have any clear impact on the ground. The review of the European Neighbourhood Policy planned for May will be an indicator of the extent to which the EU is willing to invest in creating new foreign policy instruments for dealing with its eastern neighbours.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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## About the author



### Cristian Nitoiu – LSE IDEAS

Dr Cristian Nitoiu is a Postdoctoral Fellow in EU-Russia relations at LSE IDEAS. Before this he held research positions at Trinity College Dublin and the College of Europe (Natolin campus, ENP Chair). His book on 'EU

*Foreign Policy Analysis: Democratic Legitimacy, Media, and Climate Change* will be published in June by Palgrave.

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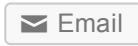
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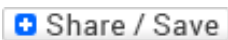
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