# The EU's chair was missing at the Ukraine table

## Jolyon Howorth

### Abstract
The crisis in Ukraine has highlighted the weaknesses of the EU as an international actor. Although the EU is an economic, commercial and regulatory giant, it has not succeeded in emerging as a significant military or security actor—despite having announced a 'common foreign and security policy' 30 years ago. In particular, it is deeply divided over policy towards Russia. Moreover, attempts to devise an overall policy for its neighbourhood, and in particular an 'Eastern Partnership' focused on the borderline states between the Union and Russia, have been widely judged as failures. In the showdown between Russia and the West over Ukraine, the EU per se has been marginalised by both Moscow and Washington. Various EU member states have embraced different preferences with respect to the potential resolution of the Ukraine crisis. In the context of potential discussions, demanded by Vladimir Putin, on a 'new security order' for Eurasia, the EU's absence is tragic.

## Introduction

Each country has the history of its geography. This insight, attributed to the eminent French geostrategist Paul Vidal de la Blache (1889), sheds much light on Europe's disparate responses to the crisis in Ukraine.

As Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, remarked on his first visit to Eastern Ukraine on 5 January 2022, 'It is clear that

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any discussion on European security must include the European Union and Ukraine' (Luhanska 2022). Borrell was lamenting the fact that, as the Ukraine crisis had mounted through the autumn of 2021, discussions had been dominated by bilateral exchanges between the US and Russia. Although the US has, in fact, gone to extraordinary lengths to keep all European states informed and consulted during the largely bilateral negotiations, the EU's role has been that of a bystander. This has mainly been the result of its own disarray in relating to its neighbourhood (Aslund 2022).

As has been widely noted, Russian President Vladimir Putin has a clear idea of his overall objectives in this crisis. His aim is to call into question the entirety of the post–Cold War security arrangements for the Eurasian space (Hill 2022; Shevtsova 2022). The West, on the other hand, has remained ambivalent about its precise intentions with respect to the future status of the borderland states—those between Russia and the EU (Garton Ash 2022). The US, the EU and NATO have succeeded in mounting a strong, discursive united front in opposition to the Russian threat to Ukraine. This includes broad agreement on the Western implementation of potentially crippling sanctions. But there is little agreement within the West over a long-term strategy for Eurasian security.

This article will assess the geographical and historical reasons for the EU's inability to reach agreement on a security order for Eurasia that meets the minimum security requirements of all parties. This being the case, it concludes that decisions about any such order will essentially continue to be driven from Washington. Such an outcome would be as unsatisfactory for Brussels as it would for Moscow.

## The evolution of the EU's Eastern neighbourhood strategy

In 2004, the European Neighbourhood Policy was devised by the EU with the object of creating a 'ring of friends' around the Union's periphery from the Baltic to the Black Sea and from the Bosporus to the Atlantic (Whitman and Wolff 2012). Moscow's reaction to this EU initiative was 'muted or barely noticeable' (Trenin 2014). The EU was only just emerging as an aspiring foreign-policy actor and the world's focus was on Afghanistan and Iraq. The European Neighbourhood Policy was in no way perceived by Moscow as a threat.

Before the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, there were three distinct EU member state approaches to Russia (Nitoiu 2014). Those states in close proximity to their former hegemon, particularly the Baltics and Poland, took a very hard line with Moscow. Some states, often with little historical or geographical connection to Russia, prioritised industrial and commercial interests. A handful of EU states attempted to marry principles with pragmatism.

With the invasion of Georgia, however, EU member states began to converge on the third position. The 'hard-liners' realised that their tough rhetoric had achieved little. The 'trading states' began to realise that Russia remained a threat. Nevertheless, the three distinct positions were never entirely reconciled and the states in each group retained the essence of their distinct approaches to Moscow. As for Moscow's approach to the EU, Russian diplomats are trained to understand individual European states—few know what

to make of Brussels. The exception that proves the rule is Vladimir Chizhov, who has been Russian Permanent Representative to the EU since 2005, having spent his entire career specialising in European affairs. In general, though, the Kremlin has never really understood the EU or taken its proclaimed 'common foreign policy' seriously.

In 2009 the EU embarked on its Eastern Partnership (EaP) programme—an attempt to offer the six states situated in Russia's 'near abroad'[1] some degree of European embrace (Korosteleva 2014). The policy was conducted by the European Commission, largely along the lines of its then-recent enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe. From the outset, EU member states were divided over the EaP. Romania and Bulgaria were concerned that their activities in the existing Black Sea Cooperation Forum could be diverted or diluted. Poland hoped the project would lead to EU membership for the Partnership states. France and Germany were firmly opposed to precisely such an outcome, an opposition that de facto ruled out membership. Russia was ignored.

For states that were keen to accede to the EU, such as Ukraine and Georgia, this approach spelled endless frustration. For states with no interest in accession, the EU's insistence on conditionality consigned the policy to virtual irrelevance. In any case, conditionality was applied selectively: Belarus, which had little to offer the EU, was severely sanctioned for its authoritarianism, while Azerbaijan, which was equally undemocratic but supplies the EU with energy resources, received virtually a free pass (Lehne 2014). The third flaw, and arguably the most serious, was that the 'policy' was entirely stripped of any geopolitical considerations, with the EU member states having no collective strategic approach (Keukeleire 2015). The US, for its part, being seriously bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, was content to allow the EU to take the lead in Western overtures to the borderland states.

By 2012 it had become clear to Russia that the EaP risked drawing these states into the EU's commercial and economic network (Cadier 2014). The Euromaidan crisis of 2013–14, which saw the ousting of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych and the installation in Kyiv of a 'pro-Western' government, led directly to the Russian annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. Scholars are deeply divided over the EU's responsibility for sparking this crisis, as well as over the effectiveness of its subsequent policies towards the region (Cross and Karolewski 2017).

These events were also triggered by NATO's ambivalent policy towards Ukraine and Georgia. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, the US and the UK pushed strongly to offer the two countries a Membership Action Plan. France and Germany were equally strongly opposed, with the remaining EU member states split between these positions. The final Bucharest Declaration stated that 'We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO' (NATO 2008). If there is one dominant root cause of today's stand-off over Ukraine, it is arguably this key issue (Larsen 2021).

Yet, the 'open door' policy for NATO membership that Russia so strongly objects to is in fact highly conditional. NATO's Article X reads (NATO 1949): 'The Parties may, by *unanimous agreement*, invite any other European State in a position to further the principles of this Treaty and to *contribute to the security of the North Atlantic area* to accede

to this Treaty' (my italics). Thus, membership is theoretically only possible if it would enhance regional security and if every NATO member state voted in favour. During the 40 years of the Cold War, when regional security was tightly defined in terms of deterrence of Russia, only 4 new members were admitted. In the 30 years since the end of the Cold War, when criteria for membership have been unrelated to deterrence, a further 14 members have been admitted (O'Hanlon and Van Everra 2022). The prospect of Ukraine actually joining NATO is close to zero for the foreseeable future.

To repeat, the current crisis is about much more than Ukraine. It involves a Russian attempt to call into question the US-driven security order underwritten by NATO's constant enlargement towards and beyond the borders of the former USSR. While in the 1990s Russia was obliged, through its own weakness, to acquiesce in that emerging order, it is now determined, from a position of relative strength, to challenge it (Sarotte 2021). With the military invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, the challenge has become one which will define the future of security arrangements in the Eurasian space.

This has thrown a spotlight on the weaknesses of the EU as a regional security actor. Moscow considers that, despite its formidable role as an international economic, commercial and regulatory giant, the EU has never succeeded in forging a credible role as a military or defence actor. In February 2021, Josep Borrell made an ill-advised visit to Moscow in an attempt to shore up the EU's credentials as a foreign-policy actor. He was publicly humiliated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, unintentionally underscoring the extent to which Moscow refuses to consider the EU a serious player (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi 2021). The 'demands' that Russia formulated on 17 December 2021 were addressed on the one hand to the US and on the other to NATO. None of them concerned the EU as such.

## The approaches of EU member states

As a body, the EU is nevertheless deeply involved in Ukraine. The many different activities that take place in the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area involve thousands of different individuals, companies and agencies in constant interaction with Kyiv (European Commission 2022). A one-billion-euro aid package is being prepared and there are high-level discussions about how to connect Ukraine to the European electricity grid. However, at the end of the day, it is not the activities associated with the European Commission or the European Council that determine the overall impact of Europe in this crisis; it is the position of the member states.

One seasoned analyst noted that the EU member states have long been divided between a 'Helsinki' group, which puts democracy and human rights first and foremost, and a 'Yalta' group, which is prepared to negotiate the subcontinent's geostrategic line-up with the master of the Kremlin (Garton Ash 2022). This is an anachronistic assessment. The historical circumstances behind both Helsinki and Yalta are quite different from those of today. However, there is no doubt that the EU27 are split in terms of the priority they accord to confrontation and cooperation with Moscow. The split is largely dictated by history and geography.

Poland and the Baltic states have been pushing hard to send military equipment to Ukraine. Poland is supplying various military assets, including the Piorun man-portable anti-aircraft missile system and ammunition. Since the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, Warsaw and Moscow have competed energetically for influence in Ukraine. Poland strives to promote a stable democracy and a free-market economy in Ukraine as a means of securing the Polish–Ukrainian border. Russia wants, at all costs, to avoid precisely such an outcome. However, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, it is clear that Ukrainian public opinion has been moving away from Moscow, even though it may not be aligning with Warsaw (Szeptycki 2021).

The Baltic states have been authorised by Washington to send US-made anti-tank weapons to Ukraine. Estonia has supplied Javelin anti-armour missiles, while Lithuania and Latvia have sent Stinger anti-aircraft missiles which pose a serious threat to Russian helicopters. Latvia has also provided ready-to-eat military meals for Ukrainian troops. The Scandinavian countries have limited their support for Kyiv to political and diplomatic statements, with the Nordic Defence Cooperation group (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) not having pledged any concrete military support at the time of writing (Mehta 2022). Latvia and Estonia had attempted to dispatch to Kyiv a number of German-made howitzer guns that had previously been stationed in Germany, but the shipment was vetoed by Berlin (Milne 2022b). Several NATO states have sent troop reinforcements to the Baltic states, which fear, above all, cyber-attacks and migratory flows (Milne 2022a).

Germany, which, *pace* de la Blache, tends to have the geography of its history, takes a very different line from Poland and the Baltic states. Berlin refuses to contemplate the prospect of German weapons killing Russian soldiers. This is in part driven by guilt about the Nazi invasion of Russia during the Second World War and in part by the legacy of Ostpolitik. One leading young German defence expert wrote: 'I believe that German millennials have a hard time adjusting to the world we are living in now. We struggle to think in terms of interests, we struggle with the concept of geopolitical power, and we struggle with military power being an element of geopolitical power' (Franke 2021). The new German leadership has struggled to accept any linkage between the situation with the Nordstream 2 gas pipeline and Russian policy towards Ukraine. It has questioned the wisdom or feasibility of a sanctions policy that excludes Russia from the SWIFT financial transfer system (Chazan and Seddon 2022).

The roots of Germany's ambivalence over providing military assistance to Ukraine are many and complex. At the most fundamental level, they are perhaps best expressed in terms of a multigenerational rejection of military force as an instrument of policy. The dominant German mindset holds that 'military force is not just evil, it's also useless. It has caused the greatest tragedies of the 20th century and a whole lot of needless suffering during the Cold War. Since then, it has only created more chaos and death in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Libya' (Dirsus 2022). Vice Admiral Kay-Achim Schönbach, the head of the German navy, created a major strain within NATO when he declared that Vladimir Putin deserved 'respect' and that Crimea would never be returned to Ukraine (Benhold 2022). However, when, after

the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the issue became that of sanctions, Germany proved to be ahead of the EU itself in stopping the certification of Nordstream 2 (Eddy 2022).

Bulgaria and Romania, as NATO states sharing a border with Ukraine, have been actively seeking to bolster their own national defences. Romania in particular, with its 600 km land border with Ukraine, is concerned about refugee flows in the event of war. France has offered to send 1,000 troops to Romania. Spain and the Netherlands have dispatched fighter jets to Bulgaria, and Madrid has also deployed a frigate to the Black Sea.

Hungary, however, is arguably the European state with the closest ties to Russia. During a controversial visit to Moscow in late January 2022, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán pledged continuing cooperation with Russia and stood by Vladimir Putin's side while the Russian president lambasted NATO during a joint press conference (Chicolas 2022). The Hungarian Foreign Minister, Peter Szijjarto, has stated that Budapest is committed to Russia and wary of Ukraine. He contrasted Russia's generous supply of COVID-19 vaccines and cheap gas, and Moscow's assistance in evacuating Hungarian citizens from Kazakhstan, with Kyiv's alleged mistreatment of 100,000 ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine. Hungary has made it very clear that it will veto Ukrainian membership of either NATO or the EU (Dunai and Shotter 2022).

France is the one EU country that has attempted to take a lead in handling the Ukraine crisis. Again, geography lies at the heart of the centuries-old relations between the two powers that book-end Europe (Yakemtchouk 2011). President Macron, in a speech to the European Parliament on 19 January 2022, spoke boldly of his vision: 'In the coming weeks, we need to bring to being a European proposal to build a new security and stability order. We need to build it between Europeans, then share it with our allies in the NATO framework. And then, we need to propose it to Russia for negotiation' (Macron 2022). These words were seriously misrepresented in foreign media coverage, some of which claimed the French president was aiming to engage in bilateral negotiations with Moscow—which is not what he said (De Weck 2022). However, the spirit behind the words clearly implied the need for a transcendence of the current post–Cold War order and a quest for new security arrangements that would be acceptable to all parties, including Russia. Macron's challenge in thinking through that transcendence and in persuading the other players of its wisdom is positively Herculean.

That challenge was the driving force behind Macron's high-profile (and high-risk) visit to Moscow on 7 February 2022, in which he engaged in five hours of discussions with Vladimir Putin. The French president, who is concurrently holding the Presidency of the EU and was wearing both hats, believes that the world is at a 'tipping point in history' (Cohen 2022) and that dialogue is crucial. Macron was careful to choreograph his trip with prior consultations with all the key players in the Western camp, including Poland and the Baltic states. He stuck rigidly to the Western playbook by making it clear to Putin both that the West was solidly united and that any aggression against Ukraine would come at a terrible cost to Moscow. The Russian president has stated that Macron is the one European statesman with whom he can have a serious conversation.

It is widely assumed that the two presidents discussed the 'Normandy format' for negotiations over Ukraine which, since 2014, have brought together France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine. These talks, which were intended to implement the Minsk Agreements on the status of the Russian-backed separatist regions of Eastern Ukraine, had been stalled since 2019 (Atland 2020). Since the talks began, the military situation on the ground had shifted in favour of Kyiv, as it had received massive support from the West. Yet strict implementation of the Minsk agreements would have given the political edge to the Russian-backed separatists. What Putin presumably hoped from Paris and Berlin was that they would send a strong diplomatic message to Kyiv that progress on Minsk had become a Russian ultimatum (Dubost 2022). But Putin was no longer prepared to pursue diplomatic channels. War is now upon us.

## Conclusion

The crisis over Ukraine goes right back to 1991, when Kyiv became the key player in the disintegration of the former Soviet Union (Sarotte 2021, 121–34). The overwhelming priority for the George H. W. Bush administration was to secure Ukraine's nuclear arsenal. In that context, the prospect of NATO membership was already dangled as an incentive to Kyiv's new leaders to conform to US preferences. And as NATO enlargement became a progressive reality during the 1990s, it became increasingly difficult for US leaders to accept that a new dividing line should be drawn across Europe to the west of Ukraine. Yet full membership risked infuriating Russia. That dilemma has never been resolved.

In the now aborted diplomatic negotiations between the West and Russia, the EU, because of both geography and history, should logically have been in a position to help forge an agreement that would meet the minimum security requirements of all sides. But because Moscow saw its demands as only being answerable in Washington, the EU's leverage was reduced to the imposition of 'massive and targeted sanctions' on Russia (Von der Leyen 2022). The threat of such sanctions did not deter Putin. Whether their imposition as punishment will change his behaviour is an open question (Leonhardt 2022)

The likelihood, therefore, is that the US will continue to call the shots on security in the Eurasian space. This is an undesirable strategic diversion for Washington. It is politically unsatisfactory for Brussels. And it is historically unacceptable for Russia. The Ukraine crisis is not about to be resolved to the satisfaction of the major players. Sadly, the EU as such is not even among them.

## Note

1.    Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

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