

Change and continuity in the EU’s “state building-security nexus” in Ukraine. A historical institutional perspective

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Abstract: While the 2014 Annexation of Crimea has been presented by the scholarly literature as leading only to an incremental change in the state-building and foreign policy practices of the EU towards Ukraine, the 2022 invasion of the Russian Federation has been assessed as a critical juncture that has finally turned the EU into a geopolitical actor. The research question that my presentation seeks to answer to is whether the dynamic of the EU’s ‘state-building security nexus’ in Ukraine could be looked at with a different conceptualization of institutional change, one that goes beyond the already traditional dichotomy between incremental change triggered by endogenous factors and the radical change that could be caused by a critical juncture like the 2022 War in Ukraine. By relying on historical institutionalism – an approach that still tries to find its place in an academic field that is clearly dominated by either rational institutionalism or constructivist institutionalism -, I trace two aspects of institutional change, i.e., speed and depth, that the EU’s ‘state building – security nexus’ has undergone since 2014. Specifically, I bring under scrutiny three types of evolutions related to the EU’s ‘state-building security nexus’ in Ukraine: strategic thinking, state building practices, and foreign policy actions. As I am interested in the evolution of the abovementioned aspects in the long run, my presentation also seeks to trace their dynamic after 2022. To this end, I employ process tracing as a research method, while the data that I use come from both primary sources, i.e., official documents of the EU, and secondary sources, that is, scholarly literature.

Keywords: geopoliticization process, security-development nexus, historical institutionalism, comprehensive action, integrated action

Introduction

In an article titled “Europe’s Geopolitical Confusion”, Hans Kundnani notes the “consensus” (Kundnani, 2023) according to which the European Union needs to “become more geopolitical” (Kundnani, 2023) in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is difficult to assess precisely whether such consensus has ever occurred. This notwithstanding, Ursula von der Leyen promised a more “geopolitical commission” in 2017 when she took over the presidency of the

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European Commission, while the EU's *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (SCSD) that was issued shortly after the start of the 2022 War in Ukraine comprises geopolitically-driven terms, such as “the EU's geopolitical awakening” or the “geopolitical posture” of the EU. Moreover, Chancellor Scholz mentioned in 2022 a *Zeitenwende*, that is, “a historical turning point” (Ash, 2023, p. 74), in the aftermath of which Germany committed to a significant increase in defense spending, while in the 2024 *Annual Progress Report of the Implementation* of the SCSD, Mr. Josep Borrell argues that the EU needs to “learn the language of power”. Also, answering to Hans Kundnani, Zaki Laïdi holds that “<Geopolitical Europe> (GE) is certainly not a theory (...) but a condition for Europe's survival” (Laïdi, 2023).

In my view, “Geopolitical Europe” is first of all a theory. True, a “security theory” (Mearsheimer and Rosato, 2023), as any great power's grand strategy is both theoretically- and practically-driven. To Kundnani, however, the trouble with the EU's newly acquired geopolitical profile lies in the fact that, conceptually speaking, geopolitics continues to be an empty-signifier that could have at least five meanings: “straightforward synonym for international relations, the role of geography in international politics, the strategic use of military tools, synonym for <power politics>” or, finally, “to capture a shift away from economic liberalism or the pursuit of economic objectives” (Kundnani, 2023). Yet geopolitics could still be employed successfully as long as it deals with the impact that geographical conditions, understood as “a set of opportunities and constraints”, “general patterns for long-term processes”, and also “causal mechanisms” (Scholvin, 2016, p. 6), could have on strategic behaviours. This text has no intention to delve into the meaning of geopolitics nor into a fuzzy concept such as “Geopolitical Europe”. Moreover, I argue that it is still too soon to assess whether the 2022 invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation has already turned into a *Zeitenwende*. That is, a “critical juncture” (Collier & Munck, 2022) in the aftermath of which a “Geopolitical Europe” may have emerged. Normally, historical institutionalists who support the theory of radical institutional change caused by exogenous shocks need more time to assess whether a process of sweeping institutional change has really occurred. Instead, by employing historical institutionalism in the field of international relations (Rixen et al., 2016), this text investigates whether the European Union, understood as “structural power” (Strange, 1987) has been undergoing a “geopoliticization” (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019) process since the 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. This text poses three research questions. In terms of security theory, has the alleged “geopoliticization” process made the EU's strategic thinking “more ambitious, more political” (Tardy, 2017, p. 3) in the last decade? In terms of security practice, has the “geopoliticization” process led to a transition in EU's state building policies in Ukraine from a comprehensive to an integrated approach? Could one notice a convergence between EU's security theory and security practice in Ukraine after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea?

The article is divided into four parts. The first section is theoretical and methodological and addresses the main concepts, that is, structural power and the "geopoliticization" process, and also the overall approach that the article is premised on, that is, historical institutionalism in international relations. The second section seeks to explain the "state building-security nexus" in Ukraine and whether this stands for a gradual transformation of the already classical security-development nexus that the EU used in dealing with crises in its neighbourhood. The following two sections are empirical and are based on data that come from either EU's strategic documents or scholarly literature. While the third section addresses the incremental change that has been taking place in the EU's strategic thinking since 2014, the fourth section looks at the strategic practices that the EU has employed since 2014, with a focus on the "state-building security nexus" in Ukraine.

1. Clarifying the main concepts and the method of research

The scope of this section is to unpack the main concepts that this text relies on, that is, structural power and the process of "geopoliticization". Also, the method that I have employed to gather the empirical data will be addressed in this section. But before I delve into the main concepts of the text, I bring into discussion Keukeleire and Delreux's approach of the EU as a structural power. What sets a structural power apart from other powers is the former's interest in shaping "*structures* in a given space (i.e. country, society, region or global level)" (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2015, p. 44) and also "to produce sustainable effects" (ibidem). These sustainable effects emerge when structures have set in, even when the support of the structural power has been withdrawn and disrupting conditions occur. Structures consist in "relatively permanent organizing principles, institutions and norms that shape and order in a given space the various interrelated sectors (such as the political, legal, economic, social or security sector)" (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2015, p. 44). Keukeleire and Delreux argue that EU's structural practices have largely failed to achieve their objectives in both the Eastern and Southern neighbourhood, due to the fact that EU's neighbourhood policy "reflected more the EU's internal policy agenda than it resonated with the specific demands, priorities and sensitivities of the regions concerned" (2015, p. 46). It is beyond the scope of this article to assess whether the EU's state building policies in Ukraine have reached the expected effects between 2014 and 2024. Rather, what it of interest for this article is to investigate whether the EU has undergone a "geopoliticization" process both in terms of strategic thinking and state building policies in Ukraine. In other words, this "geopoliticization" process traces, first, the incremental changes – if any – that may have occurred in the EU's strategic thinking in the aftermath of the 2014 Russian annexation of Ukraine. And, second, whether the EU has made the transition from a comprehensive to an integrated approach in dealing with the conflict in Ukraine. The approach that I have employed in order to investigate the above is a particular type

of historical institutionalism, that is, historical institutionalism in the realm of international relations.

There are a couple of reasons for which I have employed historical institutionalism as the main approach of this text. First of all, the article pays heed to the “geopoliticization” process of the European Union after the 2014 annexation of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. In short, the article is interested in scrutinizing a long-term process that spans 2014 to 2024. To this end, historical institutionalism is a suitable approach (Peters, 2019). Second of all, the article brings under scrutiny the changes – which at face value seem to be gradual rather than radical – in both the strategic thinking and strategic practice of the European Union in the course of the last decade. Last but not least, historical institutionalism and the second wave of historical sociology that emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s in the United States have looked into the process of state building in different social and political settings. Broadly speaking, historical institutionalism seeks to unravel institutional change and concerns itself with either radical change, that could emerge in the aftermath of a critical juncture, or gradual institutional change. The premise that the article is built on is that, at least to date, the “geopoliticization” process of the European Union did not start in the aftermath of the 2022 Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, no critical juncture has occurred so far in this regard. Rather, the “geopoliticization” process of the EU, which may consist in a gradual convergence between the EU’s strategic theory and strategic practice, started in the aftermath of the 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. Instead of focusing on already classical types of incremental institutional change, such as layering, drift, displacement and conversion (Peters, 2019, p. 92), the article is interested in scrutinizing the *speed* and *depth* of change in the EU’s strategic thinking and strategic practice between 2014 and 2024. Speed and depth are dimensions of institutional change according to those authors who have brought historical institutionalism in the realm of international relations. Thus, “*speed* refers to the rate of change. Speed can be understood as the extent of change divided by the time it takes to occur” (Rixen et al., 2016, p. 19). Depth of change refers to what happens with certain attributes of an institution while this is facing significant change. By coping with change, do these attributes strengthen and, therefore, the institution under scrutiny becomes more robust? Or, on the contrary, these attributes tend to weaken and, thus, a particular institution ends up displaying lack of resilience when faced with a crisis situation?

The concept of structural power comes from the field of international political economy, was coined by Susan Strange in the late 1980s and, theoretically, could strike the right balance between a too liberal or too realist understanding of the European Union. Moreover, with its emphasis on both direct and indirect influence, structural power could be appropriate for adequately grasping a “complex and fragmented institution such as the EU” (Holden, 2009, p. 7). In an article published in September 1987 and titled *The Persistent myth of lost hegemony*, Strange holds that “Structural power is the power to choose and to shape the structures of the global

political economy within which other states, their political institutions, their economic enterprises, and (not least) their professional people have to operate" (Strange, 1987, p. 565). What is worth mentioning is that, according to Strange, one could find structural power into four interrelated structures that are redolent of the sides of a pyramid. In other words, each structure supports the other ones. Broadly speaking, in order to attain the status of structural power in world politics, a given state needs to hold a prominent position simultaneously in the following fields: security, credit, knowledge and production. Unlike relational power, that is, the power that A wields over B so that the latter ends up adopting a behaviour that normally would have rejected or refrained from adopting it, structural power needs to be legitimate in order to become authority. To this end, structural power refers to "power over the way things are done and the beliefs sustaining the way things are done" (Strange, 1997, p. 4). I found intriguing especially the latter aspect of structural power which does not exclusively refer to institutions. The non-tangible factors that a structural power employs in order to exert influence consists in "customs, usages, and modes of operation rather than the more narrow definition that stays closer to state – state agreements and state – centered institutions" (Strange, 1989, p. 30). Therefore, a structural power has the ability to also wield indirect and unintentional influence through institutions (Kitchen & Cox, 2019, p. 9).

Beside structural power, the article also relies on the concept called the "geopoliticization" process of the EU, which spans 2014 to 2024. In an article published in 2019, Meunier and Nicolaidis argue that the EU, apart from using trade politically in order to shape institutional change in different countries, started employing trade also in a geopolitical vein. Specifically, the EU resorts to trade in order "to change the global balance of power" (Meunier & Nicolaidis, 2019, p. 103) and "to affect global politics" (Meunier & Nicolaidis, 2019, p. 105). Other authors hold that in order to understand the "geopoliticization" process of the EU one needs to look at how external pressures have led to the "reframing of liberally framed issues into matters of global power competition" (Herranz-Surrallés et al., 2024, p. 5). From this perspective, three degrees of geopoliticization tend to emerge. That is, *superficial geopoliticisation*, which occurs when only a slight change in policy takes place despite geoeconomics international pressures; *reluctant geopoliticisation* which consists in a change in means but not in a change regarding the liberal goals of the policy; and, finally, *deep geopoliticisation*, "when both goals and means become geoeconomic" (Herranz-Surrallés et al., 2024, p. 7). In sum, geopoliticization refers to both a practical dimension – the use of trade to afflict the balance of power at an international level – and a discursive component – a realist framing of aspect that had been previously defined in a liberal vein. Regarding the latter aspect, Herranz-Surrallés defines "geopoliticization" as a policy frame (Herranz-Surrallés, 2024, p. 2). Thus, by sidelining a liberal frame, geopoliticization drives the process of adopting policies that are geared towards either creating strategic asymmetries or gaining strategic advantages over competition (Herranz-

Surrallés, 2024, p. 5). Due to this emphasis on the discursive component, geopoliticization comes closer and closer to securitization. However, unlike securitization which deals with existential threats to a community, geopoliticization tends to be softer as it deals with “more diffuse considerations of competition and strategic rivalry” (Herranz-Surrallés, 2024, p. 2). The method that this article relies on for gathering data is specific to historical institutionalism and consists in a “qualitative case study research that builds on dense, empirical description” (Rixen et al. 2016, 11).

2. The EU’s “state building-security nexus” in Ukraine. An incremental change of the security-development nexus?

Another important concept that this article is premised on is the EU’s “state building-security nexus” in Ukraine. In my view, the “state building-security nexus” stands for the embodiment of the EU’s “geopoliticization” process in terms of both strategic thinking and strategic practice over the last decade. Not only shows the “state building-security nexus” how a rising structural power like the EU deals with conflict in its Eastern neighbourhood but it also reveals a gradual transition of the European Union from employing exclusively low politics when coping with crises to increasingly using high politics. Thus, the “state building-security nexus” could offer a more complex understanding of the European Union, as a structural power that is interested in both its legitimacy and the accumulation of power in its Eastern neighbourhood. Under such circumstances, it would be completely naïve to think that the EU, as a structural power, is only interested in a normative agenda while completely losing sight of a geostrategic one in its neighbourhood.

What this section seeks to show is the incremental transformation of the EU’s already known security-development approach to conflicts to the “state building-security nexus”. Rabinovych maintains that the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) and also the European Union Advisory Mission in Ukraine (EUAM) show that the EU employed a comprehensive approach in Ukraine after 2014, the instantiation of which resides in two practices, that is, the implementation of the Association Agreement starting with 2017, and the “ambitious non-ENP state-building measures” (Rabinovych, 2019, p. 9). Rabinovych’s point regarding the unusual state-building practices of the EU in Ukraine is supported by Härtel’s “a kind of <state building-security nexus> that has emerged in the EU’s strategic thinking and actions in Ukraine” (2023, p. 282). According to Härtel, the abovementioned nexus occurred in 2015 and marked a significant shift in emphasis regarding EU’s vision on reforms from democratization to conflict resolution (*ibidem*).

In an attempt to decipher whether the EU’s development policy had undergone a securitization process, Mark Furness and Stefan Gänzle made a clear-cut difference between the security interests of the donor and the development priorities of the partner countries (Furness & Gänzle, 2016, p. 140). The conclusion that these two

authors reach is that development has been an integral part of the EU's global engagement due to the fact that security policies continue to be dominated by the member states. This notwithstanding, the development policy of the EU could get some salient security overtones like in the Sahel region. Once the European Union is understood as a structural power, it comes as no surprise that, depending on the regional and international context, practices that have been – sometimes exclusively – framed in a liberal vein could also be conceptualised in a realistic manner. Here is what Holden has to say regarding the EU's development policy, the EU's promotion of democracy and human rights, and Eastern enlargement. "In all these cases there are multiple objectives and they can be interpreted in terms of normative/idealist, security, commercial and strategic objectives, but in particular as structural power objectives" (Holden, 2009, p. 18).

The interdependence between security and development occurred in the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS) which states that "security is a precondition of development" (ESS, 2003, p. 30). Also, ESS reveals that state failure represents "an alarming phenomenon, that undermines global governance, and adds to regional instability" (ESS, 2003, p. 32). In the 2008 *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy*, the security-development nexus is mentioned once again and tied to sustainable development, which cannot occur in the absence of peace and security (ESS, 2003, p. 19). In the 2004 *European Neighbourhood Policy*, security is coupled with stability and well-being (ENP, 2004, p. 3). Following the 2004 enlargement, the EU sought to disseminate security, stability and well-being to the neighbouring countries and to prevent the occurrence of new dividing lines. The 2011 *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel* reveals that the "interdependence of security and development" could leave its mark on the stability of the region and also on the ability of states to deal effectively with poverty and security threats. State building and capacity building are key requirements for the economic resilience of the EU's neighbouring countries according to the 2015 *Review of the European Neighbouring Policy*. Last but not least, the 2016 *EU's Global Strategy* also brings into discussion the security and development nexus. Arguably, it is beyond the scope of this text to offer an exhaustive image of the security-development nexus in the EU's strategic documents. The objective lies elsewhere and takes aim at revealing that the security-development nexus has been approached by the EU with a comprehensive approach which then turned into an integrated one. This incremental change in both the discursive and strategic practices of the European Union represents the topic of the following empirical sections.

3. From the comprehensive to the integrated approach in the EU's strategic documents

The EU's security-development nexus has been constantly plagued by coherence problems. While aspects pertaining to security and defence largely fall

under the responsibility of member states, development issues have been dealt with by both the Commission and the member states who “have parallel, sometimes overlapping and sometimes even competing policy frameworks and country-level engagements” (Furness & Gänzle, 2016, p. 8). It is beyond the scope of this section to delve into the institutional change that have occurred at the level of the European Union in order to strengthen the coherence of the security-development nexus, such as the ability of the European External Action Service (EEAS) to bring together the – often – diverging interests of the European Commission and of the EU’s member states. Instead, the process that this section tries to bring under scrutiny is related to the transition of the EU’s strategic thinking from a comprehensive approach to an integrated one in dealing with crisis situations. This process shows that the EU’s security theory or strategic thinking has undergone an incremental change in the last decade. First, this section traces these concepts – comprehensive approach and integrated approach – in the main strategic documents of the European Union, with a particular focus on the one that were issued between 2014 and 2024. Second, the section addresses the difference between comprehensive and the integrated approach in order to understand whether this stands for an incremental change in the EU’s strategic thinking.

As already stated, the section pays heed mostly to the EU’s strategic documents that were issued between 2014 and 2024 in order to highlight the gradual change from the comprehensive to the integrated approach in dealing with crisis situations. Yet, as the security-nexus development had been plagued by coherence problems before 2014, I also seek to understand whether – and how - the concept of comprehensive approach was addressed in the initial strategic documents issued by the EU. Despite the fact that the security-development nexus is mentioned for the first time in the 2003 *European Security Strategy*, this formal document makes no reference to the comprehensive approach. Yet ESS clearly states that “greater coherence is needed not only among EU instruments but also embracing the external activities of the individual member states” (ESS, 2003, p. 41). Five years later, the 2008 *Report on the Implementation of the European Security Strategy* mentions “a comprehensive EU approach” (ESS, 2003, p. 14) required for international cooperation in the field of cyber security. This notwithstanding, neither ESS nor the 2008 Report come up with a fleshed-out concept of comprehensive approach, an aspect that shows that in this regard the EU’s strategic thinking was at an initial phase of development. Unsurprisingly, the 2004 EU’s *Neighbourhood Policy* (ENP) does not bring to the fore the concept of comprehensive approach. What the ENP does mention, though, is a “comprehensive neighbourhood policy” (ENP, 2004, p. 6) that could create conducive conditions for the EU’s neighbouring countries to cash in on the EU’s enlargement in terms of stability, security, and well-being. Save by a reference to “holistic approaches to security”, the comprehensive approach has no place in the 2011 *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*. Indirectly announced by the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, the concept of comprehensive approach

gets fleshed-out in the 2013 EU's comprehensive approach to external conflict and crises. Beside the fact that "comprehensiveness" refers to the "the joined-up deployment of EU instruments and resources, but also to the shared responsibility of EU-level actors and Member States", what is worth stressing about this strategic document is its emphasis on eight measures that aim at improving the coherence and effectiveness of the EU's external action in dealing with crises. These measures are the following: develop a shared analysis, define a common strategic vision, focus on prevention, mobilise the different strengths and capacities of the EU, commit to the long term, linking policies and internal and external action, make better use of the EU delegations, and work in partnership. In the aftermath of the 2014 Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation, the 2016 *EU's Global Strategy* came up with the concept of integrated approach. This document brings-out the many dimensions of conflicts in the Eastern and Southern fragile states. To deal effectively with such conflicts, the EU needs to forge an integrated approach that is *multi-dimensional* – it implies the use of all available policies and instruments -, *multi-phased* – the EU gets involved in all stages of the conflict -, *multi-level* – in order to solve a conflict, EU gets involved at the local, national, regional, and global levels -, *multi-lateral* – all parts involved in a conflict will be approached by the EU. The instruments that the EU could resort to in order to implement its integrated approach in dealing with conflicts in its neighbourhood are multi-dimensional, that is, "diplomatic, security, defence, financial, trade, development cooperation and humanitarian aid", according to the 2018 *Council Conclusions on the Integrated Approach to External Conflicts and Crises*. The 2022 *Strategic Compass* makes reference to the "process of strategic convergence" in dealing with crises and also "our efforts to implement our integrated approach to security, conflicts and crises".

Launched in 2013, the EU's comprehensive approach to crisis and conflict situations encompasses simultaneously two levels, a tactical and a strategic one. The tactical level is represented by the civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), while the strategic, political and institutional level finds its expression in the civilian-military coordination (CMCO). CIMIC hardly represents a novelty in strategic thinking , as it stands for a military doctrine that the EU has borrowed from NATO. In contrast, CMCO has been coined by the EU in order to mitigate the potential divergences between the security agenda of the Council and member states on one hand, and the European Commission's development, cooperation and humanitarian nexus, on the other hand. The objective of the EU's comprehensive approach was twofold. First, to come up with "a more holistic crisis response capacity" (Faleg, 2018, p. 2), and, second, to alleviate the diverging agendas and interests of EU institutions. In the case of NATO, the comprehensive approach has been inserted into the 2010 NATO's Strategic Concept that stressed the necessary connection among political, civilian and military approaches in order to deal effectively with crisis situations. The comprehensive approach has also played an important role on the agenda of OSCE since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act with its three dimensions, that is, the politico-

military, the economic-environmental and the humanitarian one. EU's integrated approach to conflicts and crisis situations was introduced by the 2016 *EU's Global Strategy*. The rationale behind the integrated approach was to simultaneously deepen and clarify the institutional rules that would allow the EU, at least in theory, to be able to mobilise more swiftly and easily collective action when dealing with crisis situations. Exactly as in the case of the comprehensive approach, the integrated approach was hardly a conceptual novelty back in 2016. As a strategic concept and also as a policy aimed at maximizing the impact of collective resources, the integrated approach has witnessed at least three waves of development since 1992 within the United Nations (Faleg, 2018, p. 5). Therefore, in terms of innovation regarding strategic theory, the EU proved once again to be a follower in 2016, an aspect that in itself could speak volumes about the ability of the EU to bring as close as possible its strategic theory and strategic action. At face value, there was no conceptual difference between the comprehensive and the integrated approach in 2016 (Tardy, 2017). On closer examination, though, some important difference stood out. First, the comprehensive approach was devised in a rather technical vein, as a process that aimed at better cooperation among the institutions of a composite actor such as the EU (Tardy 2017; Faleg, 2018). Second, the integrated approach showed a different level of ambition of the EU, especially with its emphasis on multi-phased and multi-level actions. In other words, the EU is not only expected to get involved in all stages of a conflict but also to deal with crisis at local, national, regional, and global levels (Tardy, 2017). Third, the integrated approach presented itself as "more strategic" (Tardy, 2017) by bringing together the political, economic and security aspects of the EU's response to crisis. In practice, the transition from the comprehensive to the integrated approach should result in "a true change in the EU's organizational culture" (Faleg, 2018, p. 4). Whether this "true change" has really occurred in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine represents an interesting research question. In terms of EU's strategic thinking, though, the transition from a comprehensive to an integrated approach to conflicts stands for a gradual change, in the sense that the EU's security theory has become "more strategic".

4. The state building security nexus in Ukraine. The evolution of the EU's strategic practices from a comprehensive to an integrated approach?

What is of interest for this section is whether the EU's state building policies in Ukraine have changed from a comprehensive to an integrated approach between 2014 and 2024? In other words, have the EU's state building policies in Ukraine become more political or strategic, and less technical for the last decade? In order to answer the above and, thus, to explore whether there is variation in the EU's state-building policies in Ukraine, this section traces EU's initiatives over two distinct

periods of time, that is, between 2014 and 2022, and in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Regarding the first period of time that this section covers, I first look into two particular initiatives that the European Union adopted in 2014, that is, the Support Group for Ukraine (SGUA) and the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM). What set SGUA apart from other related initiatives was that the EU had never come up with such a policy regarding a non-EU country (De Groot et al. 2019). SGUA brought together roughly 40 EU officials, was granted almost 300 million euros by the EU between 2015 and 2019, and took aim at reforming key public sectors, such as the judiciary, law enforcement agencies, and public finance. SGUA faced a difficult task as most sectors of the Ukrainian state "had remained largely unchanged since the times of the Soviet Union" (De Groot et al., 2019, p. 1). Under such circumstances, it comes as no surprise that a sweeping reform of the Ukrainian state "would take decades to implement" (De Groot et al., 2019, p. 3). A particular challenge that SGUA needed to overcome in its attempt to revamp the VAT system and the transport system or to reform most of the ineffective state companies was the lack of a critical mass of "agents of change" in the public administration. In an Activity Report titled *The first 18 months* that SGUA published in 2016, details are offered on the sweeping reform that the public administration in Ukraine had already undergone. Beside mentioning the key public sectors that SGUA took aim at, such as governance and rule of law; economic governance; health, labour and internally displaced persons, *The first 18 months* reveals the strategic rationale behind SGUA. Unsurprisingly, SGUA did not pay heed only to the implementation of Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area but to a larger reform of the public administration, in the absence of which Ukraine may not have survived the crisis period following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. *The first 18 months* also reveals that, in line with the EU's comprehensive approach to global security challenges, SGUA collaborates with EEAS, EUAM and other institutions of the European Union. To further highlight the strategic character of the EU's state-building policies in Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, I now turn to EUAM which became operational in December 2014 and took aim at helping the Ukrainian authorities to reform the civilian security sector, which is made up of "the Ministry of Home Affairs, the National Police, Border Guard Services, Security Service, General Prosecutor's Office, local courts, anticorruption bodies" (Meszaros and Țoca, 2020, p. 133). Through the reform of the Ukrainian civilian security sector, EUAM sought to, first, increase the levels of vertical trust in the abovementioned institutions, and, second, dwindle the Russian Federation's influence over Ukraine. A *2023 Report on the achievements of EUAM Ukraine* highlights the Overarching Strategic Plan for the Reform of the Entire Law Enforcement Sector that President Zelenskyy brought into force in May 2023. This particular reform, adds the Report, "signified an essential political commitment to bring Ukraine closer to the EU".

Some authors hold that the EU's policy towards Ukraine did not alter significantly in the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. Despite condemning Russia's actions and imposing sanctions, the EU did not involve directly to solve the conflict (Raik et al., 2024, p. 40). In the aftermath of the Russian annexation of Crimea, both EU's sanctions and state-building measures had done little to coerce Moscow's foreign policy in Ukraine. Yet, the consequences of the abovementioned measures "are likely to be more complex; thus, requiring future research" (Mass, 2019, p. 17). It is beyond the scope of this section to look more deeply into the effects of the EU's state-building measures in Ukraine. Not only that the effects of the conditionality-driven state-building policies of the EU have not yet been unpacked in different situations (Kochenov, 2008), but to try to precisely factor in the impact of state-building policies in a country that is at war, like Ukraine, could prove itself a really difficult scholarly effort. What are the state capacities that will come under scrutiny? The researcher brings into analysis either *hard* state capacities, such as the state of fiscal or road infrastructure, or only *soft* state capacities, such as the ability to mobilise resources in times of crisis? Or both? As already stated, what is of interest for this section is whether the EU's state building policies in Ukraine have changed from a comprehensive to an integrated approach between 2014 and 2024? In other words, have the EU's state building policies in Ukraine become more political and less technical for the last decade? In other words, has the EU's state building policies in Ukraine undergone a "geopoliticization" process?

Rabinovych holds that the EU's state building policy in Ukraine was both more ambitious and part of a comprehensive approach (Rabinovych, 2019, p. 9). The manifestation of the latter lies especially in the 2014 "State-building contract for Ukraine", which was part of a special measure that the European Commission adopted on April 29, 2014. According to the "State-building contract", the European Commission provided EUR 202 million to Ukraine directly from its budget in order to support "structural reforms". Also, through the same Special Measure, Ukraine was granted EUR 40 million in support of the local civil society. Other authors argue that OSCE and especially Germany and France have traditionally dealt with conflicts in the post-Soviet space and this aspect has not changed in Ukraine after 2014. Therefore, the EU's state building policies in Ukraine have come short of the ambitious objectives set by the integrated approach in the 2016 EU's Global Strategy (Härtel, 2023, p. 280). But despite the fact that EU acted like a technical actor, especially between 2014 and 2019, the "State Building Contracts" and the "Special Measures" showed that "Brussels is pursuing a systematic state building approach" (Härtel, 2023, p. 282) in Ukraine. The proof for the above was that State Building Contracts between 2014 and 2019 reached a total of EUR 355 million "far exceeding all other recipient countries" (ibidem). The conclusion that Härtel comes to is that one can argue about "an incremental securitization of the EU's involvement" (2023, p. 285) in Ukraine given the systematic state building measures, macroeconomic aid and technical support. This notwithstanding, the EU seems to have come short of an

integrated approach in Ukraine, at least for the time being. What accounts for the above is that, first, OSCE, Germany and France have been traditionally involved in conflict management, and, second, the reluctance of different EU institutions to embark on a more political role that may have obscured the technical role of the European External Action Service. Despite the fact that it does not pay heed either the comprehensive or the integrated character of the EU's state building policies in Ukraine, Nováki argues that EUAM Ukraine was geopolitically-driven. The reforms that aimed at increasing the resilience of Ukraine's fragile state were not only about the democratization of the country. These reforms' objective were also about undermining Russia's ability to project its influence in Ukraine. Ukraine's state weakness (Wolczuck, 2019; Nováky, 2015) and the "multipolar competition" (Alcaro & Dijkstra 2024) between the EU and Russia that had been triggered mainly by the completely different agendas of the two political actors regarding their neighbourhood, were two reasons that made Brussels to launch the geopolitically-driven EU Assistance Mission in Ukraine (EUAM) in 2014. As EUAM took aim at improving the accountability of Ukraine's security services, which were packed with loyalists of President Yanukovich, Nováki argues that EUAM was less about capacity building and more about EU soft balancing the Russian Federation (Nováky, 2015, p. 261). Therefore, despite the fact that certain initiatives of the EU, like EUAM, had a salient technical character, it would be mistaken not to bring out their simultaneous (geo)political character.

I now turn to the EU's state building-security nexus in Ukraine in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion. Have the EU's state building policies come closer to an integrated approach in this case? In my view, they slightly have. The fact that the EU has chosen to directly offer military assistance to Ukraine, either in the form of weapons or in the form military training for Ukrainian soldiers, shows that the European Union has started to implement an integrated approach in Ukraine besides the already mentioned comprehensive approach that was at play between 2014 and 2022. What has changed? In line with the *multi-phased* dimension of the integrated approach that the 2016 *EU's Global Strategy*, the EU got increasingly involved in all stages of the conflict. And the expression of the latter lies in the setting up of the European Union Military Assistance Mission in Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) in 2022. It is beyond the scope of this section to flesh out EUMAM Ukraine. Of interest is rather to highlight the fact that, through EUMAM Ukraine, the EU has started making the transition from a predominantly low politics approach to conflicts in its neighbourhood to an increasingly high politics view. EUMAM Ukraine shows that "the European Union has taken a further step away from its long-favoured soft power approach to foreign policy" (Ostanina, 2023, p. 1). The 2024 *Annual Progress Report on the Implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* mentions EUMAM Ukraine, the fact that the EU member states agreed to provide Ukraine a financial help of EUR 50 billion between 2024 and 2027, and also the fact that a part of this amount is directly related to the EU's state building-

security nexus in Ukraine. “This crucial funding will help Ukraine keep its administration running, pay salaries, pensions, and provide basic public services, as it continues to defend itself against Russia’s aggression”. The above reveals that the EU’s integrated approach to conflict, despite the fact that it may not be fully at play in Ukraine for the time being, has started to create effects relative to certain dimensions of conflict resolution. And this is another incremental change of the EU’s state building policies in Ukraine.

Conclusions

Instead of investigating whether the European Union has become more geopolitical in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, this article takes a different tack and looks into the “geopoliticization” process of the European Union between 2014 and 2024 with the help of historical institutionalism. The first conclusion that the article reaches is that, in terms of strategic thinking, one can detect incremental change by scrutinizing the formal strategic documents of the EU. In these documents, more emphasis has been placed on a comprehensive approach when dealing with conflicts in the EU’s neighbourhood starting with 2013 and then on the integrative approach starting with 2016. The EU’s state-building policies in Eastern Neighbourhood, the embodiment of which is the “state building-nexus” in Ukraine, have been both more ambitious and more strategic than similar policies that the EU had employed with respects to other conflicts in its neighbouring regions. Yet, despite the fact that one can notice an incremental change in the EU’s state building policies in Ukraine, one cannot talk about a clear transition from a comprehensive to an integrated approach between 2014 and 2022. The latter aspect became more salient in the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the European Union started making a steady transition from a traditional low politics approach to an increasingly prominent high politics approach to conflicts in its neighbourhood. The article hints at a convergence between the EU’s strategic theory and strategic practice between 2014 and 2024, despite the fact that more data are needed in this regard.

In terms of *speed*, the EU’s state building policies in Ukraine registered a higher rate of change in 2022 in comparison to what happened in the aftermath of the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea. In terms of *depth*, the comprehensive approach that the EU employed with respect to public reform in Ukraine gets reinforced with the financial aid, aid in weapons and the training of Ukrainian soldiers through EUMAM Ukraine in Poland and Germany after 2022. By investigating the European Union as a rising structural power, that is interested in both legitimacy and accumulation of power in its neighbourhood, the article offers a different view on the European Union, one that could reconcile its normative profile with its strategic contour. At the same time, the article could open new avenues of research for scholars who are interested in how incremental change in both the EU’s

strategic thinking, such as The European Defence Industrial Strategy, and strategic practice, such as the "geoeconomicization" of Brussels's economic policies, can further deepen the "geopoliticization" process of the EU.

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