

Norms Under Fire: The EU'S Political and Economic Reorientation in Response to Russian Aggression

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Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents a pivotal turning point that has profoundly transformed the European Union's (EU) foreign policy and economic orientation. This study examines the EU's evolving policies in the post-war context through two main dimensions: political and economic transformation. It explores how the Russia–Ukraine War has reshaped the EU's strategic posture and why this shift is crucial in the context of global power dynamics. The central argument is that the EU has reconfigured its long-standing reliance on normative power and market integration toward a more geopolitical, defense-oriented, and strategically autonomous policy framework. Drawing on qualitative analysis of EU foreign policy and energy strategy documents, academic studies, and think-tank reports, the research identifies the war as a *Zeitenwende*, a historical turning point for the EU. Politically, the Union has advanced a more integrated and responsive Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), emphasizing defense and security cohesion. Economically, it has reduced dependence on Russian energy, reinforced energy security, and recalibrated Green Deal priorities. While these shifts indicate deeper integration, persistent vulnerabilities and structural constraints continue to challenge the EU's strategic coherence. Overall, the war has accelerated the EU's transition from a normative to a geopolitical actor in an increasingly multipolar world.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, European Union, normative power, sanctions, political economy, international politics

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Introduction

European political leaders and scholars have frequently described the war between Russia and Ukraine that started in 2022 as a historic *Zeitenwende*. It is a turning point in European affairs that fundamentally changed long-standing assumptions regarding peace and security on the continent. German Chancellor

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Olaf Scholz characterized the war as a tectonic shift in European history. This shift is calling on the European Union to assume greater responsibility in response to this emerging geopolitical reality (Genini, 2025). The conflict weakened post–Cold War confidence in a stable European order. In addition, it compelled the EU to reassess its foreign policy orientation and economic strategies at a structural level. In its aftermath, the Union's external posture underwent a notable transformation. It moved away from an emphasis on integrative normative influence toward a stronger focus on strategic autonomy and security-oriented action. This is a reorientation reinforced by intensifying global power rivalries.

Before 2022, the EU was widely perceived as a normative power. This means a civilian actor that promoted peace, democracy, and human rights primarily through diplomatic engagement and economic instruments rather than military means. This identity, theorized by Ian Manners (2002), shaped the Union's external policy toolkit. It prioritized diplomacy, development cooperation, and trade-based influence over coercion (Manners, 2002; Gerrits, 2009, 1-9). The war in Ukraine, however, exposed the limitations of this model. It demonstrated that normative engagement alone was insufficient to guarantee European stability and security. The crisis intensified the tension between the EU's strategic self-image and the constraints imposed by geopolitical realities. By doing so, it revealed the limits of soft power and prompted a shift away from norm-centred governance and market integration toward a strategic posture rooted in collective security and institutional capacity. This strategic reorientation has materialized across several policy domains. The EU's traditional emphasis on diplomatic multilateralism and normative persuasion has gradually evolved into a more assertive Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It incorporates tangible deterrence and defense-related measures. The pace of this transformation was striking. As High Representative Josep Borrell remarked in March 2022, Europe achieved more progress toward becoming a security-conscious Union in a single week than it had over the previous decade (Genini, 2025).

At the same time, long-standing patterns of energy dependence, trade exposure, and financial interconnection were reassessed through a security-oriented lens. Initiatives such as REPowerEU reflected this shift. It aimed to reduce reliance on Russian fossil fuels and to strengthen resilience against fragile global supply chains. These measures signaled a broader recognition that economic governance and security policy had become increasingly interconnected.

When all is considered, these developments point to a redefinition of the European Union. It is not merely as a community of shared norms, but as a geopolitical actor capable of exercising coercive authority in an era of renewed great-power competition. It can be argued that this process has deepened certain forms of integration. However, it has also remained constrained by institutional fragmentation, political divergence, and uneven strategic capacities. By examining these structural vulnerabilities and political limitations, this analysis explores how the EU has moved from a predominantly normative orientation toward an increasingly geopolitically aligned mode of external action.

Methodology and Data Sources

This study employs qualitative research design. The aim is to examine the European Union's strategic reorientation in the aftermath of the war. The study is interpretive and exploratory in nature. It seeks not to quantify policy outcomes, but rather to systematically trace, contextualize, and analyse the political and economic transformations which have unfolded in response to the conflict. The methodology is derived from evaluating and synthesizing the sources used as data in the relevant sections. Specifically, under each heading, both primary and secondary data are used in harmony with each other as deemed necessary. For example, when using data containing numerical and technical information, or when policy documents related to EU strategies are considered as data, official documents and primary sources are heavily utilized. On the other hand, when addressing current developments and geopolitical changes, commentary articles and analyses are used extensively. In this way, a qualitative analysis has been attempted by synthesizing different sources.

Two principal categories of data underpin the analysis. The first one is official EU documentation, and the second one is scholarly sources. First, primary institutional materials that include policy statements, legislative communications, and leadership speeches were systematically selected based on their relevance to the Union's evolving security and economic posture. Emphasis is placed on the Versailles Declaration (Council of the European Union, 2022a). It marked a pivotal moment of political consensus among EU heads of state and government on strengthening defense capabilities, reducing energy dependencies, and enhancing economic resilience. Although informal in legal status, this declaration functions as a foundational reference point for understanding the EU's high-level strategic response during the initial phase of the crisis.

These materials are complemented by institutional communications issued by the European Commission. They are especially associated with the REPowerEU initiative (European Commission, n.d). These documents outline emergency measures. The measures aimed at diversifying energy supplies, reducing reliance on Russian fossil fuels, and accelerating investments in renewable energy. They are central to tracing the Union's structural shift away from external dependency toward what Commission officials have described as energy sovereignty.

To capture the discursive framing of these policy developments, the study also analyses key public interventions by senior EU officials. Speeches delivered by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, such as her 2022 State of the Union Address, and by High Representative Josep Borrell between 2022 and 2023 were examined for their articulation of normative repositioning, strategic autonomy, and defence integration. These interventions are treated as primary empirical sources that explain how political elites have sought to narrate, justify, and legitimise the Union's evolving policy orientation.

In addition, policy reports and analytical briefs produced by leading European think tanks were incorporated. The aim was to reflect ongoing expert assessments of recent developments. Sources from the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), Bruegel, and the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) were used to complement academic scholarship with real-time policy analysis. These institutions offer detailed evaluations of defence integration, energy resilience, and implementation challenges. For instance, ECFR's work on Europe's strategic awakening and Bruegel's monitoring of gas imports and diversification strategies were employed to triangulate official EU narratives with independent evidence.

The Background to the War in the Russia-Ukraine-European Union Triangle

Ukraine holds a unique and critical importance in Russia's identity, as the relations between the two countries, marked by deep cultural, political, and economic ties, date back centuries. While Kyiv is known as the 'mother of cities,' Kyivan Rus is considered the ancestor of the modern Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian peoples. Christianity was brought from Byzantium to Kyiv in the 8th and 9th centuries and formed the basis of Kyivan Rus. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the loss of Ukraine was perceived by Russia as a historical mistake and a critical security threat to the Russian state, which saw itself as a 'great power.' During the Khrushchev era, Crimea was transferred from Russia to Ukraine; however, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Crimean issue became a subject of considerable debate for Russia. Russia is an energy-rich country, and Ukraine has been the most important transit country for Russian gas (Masters, 2023).

Russia-Ukraine relations have historically been intertwined for various reasons and key incidents. Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union during the Soviet era but regained its independence in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, despite friendship agreements, a lasting normalization between the two countries has not been achieved. Putin's view of Ukraine as part of Russian history and his claim that it was 'artificially created' reveal Moscow's imperialist outlook towards Ukraine (Yardim, 2024). When discussing Russia-Ukraine relations, it is important to mention the historical perspective and perceptions stemming from Russia's identity. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, an ideological vacuum emerged in Russia, and the sense of national security eroded. In the atmosphere of pessimism that prevailed, Russia, which was striving to assert its claim to be a 'strong state,' perceived the secession of Slavic countries such as Ukraine and Belarus from the Soviet Union as a difficult situation to accept (Taştan, 2012, 69-71).

Since gaining independence, Ukraine has experienced conflicts over whether to pursue a pro-Western or pro-Russian foreign policy. This situation stems from ethnic and political divisions between the east and the west of the country. Russians predominantly live in the east, while Ukrainians are in the majority in the west. As a result, the western part of the country advocates a pro-European policy, while the eastern part favors closer ties with Russia. While seeking closer ties with the West, Ukraine has also sought to maintain relations with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to balance Russia's influence. Ukraine's economic, ethnic,

political, and energy dependence on Russia has formed the basis of this balancing policy (Semercioğlu, 2016, 191).

The road leading to the Russia-Ukraine war that began in 2022 can be traced back to earlier events, including the annexation of Crimea. Since the 1990s, Russia has viewed NATO and EU expansion to the east and the 2004 Orange Revolutions in Ukraine as threats to its security, with pro-Western developments in Ukraine causing particular concern. Putin considered the overthrow of the pro-Russian leader a critical threshold and sought to prevent Ukraine from moving closer to the West by annexing Crimea (Mearsheimer, 2014). Following the annexation, Russia announced that it recognized the separatist regions (Donetsk and Lugansk) in eastern Ukraine, paving the way for a Russian military presence to be sent to the regions in question. Russia's decision effectively ended the Minsk Agreements and led to international condemnation and sanctions (Trenin, 2018). Ukraine's policies of rapprochement with the EU and NATO triggered Russia's aggressive stance with steps such as the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent recognition of the independence of Donetsk and Luhansk (Yardıı, 2024). Russia's 2014 intervention can be seen as the end of the post-imperial era, with post-Soviet states reuniting around Russia as Moscow had envisioned. After this crisis, post-Soviet countries showed that they were not 'little brothers' within Moscow's sphere of influence, but geographical neighbors. Since Russia viewed Ukraine as an extension of the 'Russian world'. The concept of the 'Russian World' is a fusion of various elements such as Orthodoxy, the idea of Moscow as the Third Rome, monarchy, Slavophilism, and Pan-Slavism. It can be regarded as an umbrella notion used to enhance the image of the Russian nation. Especially after Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, this concept has been intensively employed by Russia as a tool of propaganda and an integral part of the Russian state. Ukraine's separation from Soviet Russia was perceived as artificial and harmful (Meienberger, 2023, 15-16). Despite Russia's efforts before 2014, the rise to power of a government in Ukraine that was close to Western alliances can be seen as a symbol of Russia's failure (Trenin, 2018). Since the beginning of 2021, Russia has begun to build up military forces on the borders of Crimea, Belarus, and Ukraine. At the same time, attempts have been made to shape public opinion with allegations of genocide against Russians in the Donbas region. Putin has deployed a hybrid warfare strategy involving disinformation, information warfare, cyber-attacks, and proxy forces. In February 2022, the fighting in Donbas intensified, and on 24 February, Putin announced that he was launching a military operation to 'de-Nazify' Ukraine and protect Russians. However, the scope of the operation showed that it was an invasion of the whole of Ukraine (Çalıřkan, 2022, 41).

Many experts see NATO's eastward expansion after the Cold War and Russia's perception of this expansion as a security threat as the most important causes of the war that began in 2022. Post-Soviet leaders and Putin perceived NATO expansion as 'humiliating coercion.' Before the war, Russia listed its demands, requesting certain guarantees and stating that NATO deployments required Russia's permission. Ukraine's rapprochement with Western alliances and

its transformation into a modern democracy were also perceived as a threat by Russia (Masters, 2023).

Russia-Ukraine relations are important in terms of regional and global geopolitical developments. In addition, Ukraine's relations with the EU are also of critical importance. Since gaining its independence, Ukraine has strived to develop good relations with the EU. To exemplify, the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed with the EU in 1994 and entered into force in 1998. It is critical in this regard. Ukraine was the first former Soviet Union country to sign such an agreement with the EU. However, Ukraine's accession trajectory experienced a profound interruption in 2013. At the time, there was the rise to power of the pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich. His administration abruptly suspended negotiations with the European Union. This decision was widely understood to have been taken under intense political and economic pressure from the Kremlin. This policy reversal triggered large-scale public protests across the country. Eventually, it led to regime change and, shortly thereafter, the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea.

Under the subsequent pro-Western leadership of President Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine's engagement with the European Union regained momentum. Bilateral relations were revitalized, and this renewed orientation resulted in the provisional application and subsequent implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) in 2016. The DCFTA marked a substantive deepening of economic integration and regulatory approximation between Ukraine and the EU. Building on this trajectory, Ukraine formally submitted its application for EU membership in 2024. Ukraine articulated an ambitious objective of achieving full accession by 2030. However, the accession process continues to unfold under extraordinarily adverse conditions. The illegal annexation of Crimea and the extended conflict in the Donbas region. Most significantly, the war has imposed severe political, territorial, and institutional constraints on the country's European integration path (Çalışkan, 2023, 44).

In 2022, the war has profoundly unsettled both regional and global geopolitical balances. By resorting to large-scale military force in pursuit of territorial expansion, Moscow violated one of the core principles underpinning the post-Cold War European security order. This eroded a long-standing taboo against overt territorial revisionism on the continent. This rupture represented not merely a regional crisis but a systemic shock to Europe's security architecture. In response, the European Union has undergone a significant process of transformation. The EU, gradually moved beyond its traditional normative orientation toward a more assertive and strategically adaptive posture. Confronted with an unprecedented security challenge, the EU displayed a high degree of political urgency and institutional cohesion. By doing so, the EU formulated and implemented coordinated, high-stakes foreign policy measures. Through this process, the Union has increasingly positioned itself as a geopolitical actor capable of responding collectively to external threats (Casier, 2023, 31; Council of the European Union, 2022b).

The European Union adopted a firm and coordinated position in opposition to Moscow's conduct. The war between Russia and Ukraine is frequently interpreted through the lens of perceived security concerns. The concerns explained the conflict solely in these terms and offer an analytically incomplete account. As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has emphasized, the onset of the war represents a profound *Zeitenwende*. It is a historic rupture in relations between Russia and Europe. In the aftermath of this turning point, NATO has undergone a substantial transformation in both its geographical reach and strategic orientation. This transformation was most notably through the accession of Finland and Sweden. In addition, a significant increase in collective defence spending was observed. By contrast, the Russian Federation has experienced a sustained decline in international standing and suffered considerable military setbacks, developments that have increasingly undermined its strategic credibility (Casier, 2023, 32-35).

Following Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia quickly applied for EU membership. In June 2022, Ukraine and Moldova were granted candidate country status, while Georgia was given a 'European perspective'. Subsequently, negotiations were initiated with Albania and North Macedonia, and in December 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina was declared a candidate country. All these swift decisions constitute a geopolitical response by the EU to the security threat posed by the war. It is assessed that without this attack, the EU would not have made such critical geopolitical moves. When considering the EU's enlargement policy, it is essential to emphasize the geopolitical dimension of these developments. On the other hand, it can be argued that this is an important tool for building security and stability, but that it is a process that does not result in final membership (Leuffen et al, 2025, 3017- 3120). The Russia-Ukraine war has also deeply shaken economic balances in Europe. For example, the European Union's energy dependence on Russia, combined with the sanctions imposed after the war, has caused serious declines in the economies of the Eurozone. The Russia-Ukraine war stands out as the primary cause of the economic slowdown in the EU (Buyar & Şener, 2023, 294).

EU's Support to Ukraine

As the EU is a supranational organisation without direct military power or weapons inventory, it can only take decisions on military aid at the political level; the actual provision of equipment and ammunition is carried out through the national actions of member states. However, this does not diminish the strategic steering role of European institutions. On the contrary, the collective will of EU institutions and the channeling of financial resources into military aid processes have prevented aid from remaining scattered and fragmented, enabling such support to be carried out in a more coordinated, comprehensive, and holistic European approach (Maksak, Drapak, & Gerasymchuk, 2023, 5-6).

Russia's attack in February 2022 shook the post-Cold War perception of peace in Europe and created a new sense of unity in the West. This development

coincided with a period of increasing political polarization. Over the past two decades, mainstream parties have lost power in the face of populist movements that are skeptical of EU and US leadership. However, external threats have encouraged joint action on issues such as arms assistance and refugee acceptance (Hooghe et al., 2024, 461-465).

The European Peace Facility (EPF) is a special fund worth €5.6 billion established by the European Union as part of its 2021–2027 financial package. Although it is called a ‘peace fund’, its main purpose is to finance the joint costs of military operations conducted under the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) and to develop the military capabilities of third countries. The EPF was developed in parallel with the EU's Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU (NGEU) funds, which were established alongside the EU's post-COVID-19 recovery plans (Fabbrini, 2023, 54-55).

The European Union has undertaken a historically unprecedented initiative by supplying both lethal and non-lethal military assistance to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (EPF). This marks the first instance in which the EU has provided lethal weaponry to a third country, reflecting a significant departure from its traditionally normative and civilian-oriented security posture. As of 2024, total commitments under the EPF have reached €11.1 billion, including a dedicated €5 billion allocated to the newly established Ukraine Assistance Fund, formalized in March 2024. Notwithstanding this commitment, the finalization of the fund was delayed by several months due to intra-EU disagreements regarding its operational framework, financial scope, and burden-sharing mechanisms, highlighting both the complexity and political sensitivity of the Union's evolving role as a security actor. (Mills, 2025, 8-9).

In response to the insufficiency of the EPF resources and the deepening of the war in Ukraine, the European Commission proposed a new financial assistance mechanism called MFA+ (The Macro-Financial Assistance Instrument) in the autumn of 2022. This mechanism, by Article 212 of the TFEU, allows the EU to provide financial support to third countries and aims to provide sustainable and predictable financial assistance to Ukraine in particular (Fabbrini, 2023, 55-56).

Through the Macro-Financial Assistance Plus (MFA+) instrument, the European Union aims to ensure that Ukraine has stable, predictable, and substantial access to financing to meet its urgent budgetary needs. In this context, the continuity of essential public services such as salaries, hospitals, pensions, schools, and support for those forced to leave their homes has been guaranteed. MFA+ also seeks to support the reconstruction of Ukraine's critical infrastructure that has been destroyed (European Commission, 2023).

EU Diplomatic and Legal Initiatives: Enlargement, Accountability, and Multilateral Coordination

The European Union's diplomatic response to the war marked a significant adjustment of its external action instruments. This shift was reflected in the renewed

centrality of enlargement policy, the strengthening of international accountability mechanisms, and intensified multilateral coordination. A pivotal element of this transformation was the decision to grant Ukraine EU candidate status in June 2022, which recast enlargement from a largely technocratic process into a strategic geopolitical priority (Anghel & Džankić, 2023, 488). Beyond symbolizing political solidarity, this step aimed to embed Ukraine more firmly within the Union's political and institutional framework.

In the aftermath, EU engagement increasingly focused on accelerating Ukraine's domestic reform agenda. It particularly included areas such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, and economic governance. Progress in these domains provided the basis for the formal opening of accession negotiations by late 2023 (European Commission, 2023).

The EU supported the establishment of the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression (ICPA) within Eurojust in The Hague. This included the mandate to preserve evidence and facilitate the preparation of future indictments related to crimes of aggression (Eurojust, 2023). Furthermore, the creation of the Register of Damage under the authority of the Council of Europe in 2023 was significant. It sought to systematize civilian claims against Russia and to lay an institutional foundation for prospective reparations mechanisms (Council of Europe, 2023).

The European Union also relied extensively on multilateral platforms to consolidate international opposition to Russia's aggression. Within the United Nations General Assembly, the EU helped prepare and mobilize support for Resolution ES-11/1, which condemned the aggression and reaffirmed Ukraine's sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity (European External Action Service, 2022; United Nations General Assembly, 2022).

Initiatives such as the Solidarity Lanes and sustained support for the Black Sea Grain Initiative illustrate the EU's efforts to safeguard international trade flows. At the same time, the EU countered Russian disinformation and coercive narratives (European Commission, 2023, 2025a).

The European Union intensified its efforts to counter disinformation by expanding the operational capacity of the European External Action Service's (EEAS) Strategic Communications (StratCom) Task Forces. These units have played a central role in identifying and debunking pro-Kremlin narratives. They also strengthened the Union's external communication strategy (Pamment, 2020). The decision to restrict the broadcasting of state-controlled Russian media outlets, including RT and Sputnik, within the EU further reflected the Union's normative commitment to countering negative foreign influence.

The European Union's sanctions regime adopted in response to the war represents an unprecedented escalation in both scope and strategic ambition (European Commission, 2023). Building on the restrictive measures introduced

following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Union adopted sixteen successive sanctions packages between early 2022 and early 2025. They substantially widened the range and intensity of economic and financial pressure imposed on Russia (European Council, 2022; Meissner, 2023, 378-381). During the initial phase, sanctions focused primarily on asset freezes and travel bans. They targeted individuals and entities linked to key political and strategic sectors (European Council, 2022). Several major Russian banks were removed from SWIFT, and around \$300 billion of Russian sovereign assets were immobilised in the West, much of them held in Europe; together, these measures sharply constrained Russia's financial room for man oeuvre (Reuters, 2022a-c, 2024; Hood et al., 2026).

The eleventh sanctions package, adopted in June 2023, marked an important institutional development. It formally consolidated the EU's anti-circumvention framework. It strengthened the role of sanctions envoys and diplomatic coordination mechanisms. It is also tasked with monitoring compliance and preventing evasion. By late 2024, enforcement efforts had expanded to target Russia's so-called shadow fleet of tankers. This underscored the Union's intention to limit Moscow's access to global energy markets through maritime restrictions and the extension of asset-freeze measures (Skadden, 2025). Subsequent packages further widened the scope of restrictive measures into areas that had previously remained largely untouched. The twelfth package (December 2023) introduced sanctions on Russian diamond exports, while the fourteenth package (June 2024) imposed restrictions on liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports. This constituted the EU's first direct constraints on Russian gas flows. Enforcement mechanisms were simultaneously broadened to encompass infrastructural and systemic elements. This included Russia's alternative financial messaging system (SPFS), designated transport companies, raw aluminum imports, and the trade of dual-use goods (Council of the European Union, 2024, 2025a; Skadden, 2025). Several countries have not complied with the sanctions packages implemented by the EU; China and Türkiye can be cited as examples.

Türkiye, as a matter of principle, does not participate in sanctions decisions taken outside the United Nations Security Council. Due to this stance, it has also not participated in the sanctions decisions taken against Russia and Iran. Additionally, in 2023, Türkiye did not participate in the mechanism established by the Council of Europe to document the material damage caused by Russia in Ukraine. Turkey considers itself in a key position as a country that has a sensitive relationship with Russia, especially in the energy sector, and can maintain dialogue with both Russia and Ukraine (Aydınlık, 2023)

Through this gradual but sustained escalation, the EU has constructed a sanctions regime that is both comprehensive and adaptable. This regime was characterized by iterative legislative refinement and increasingly robust enforcement structures. These measures reflect a longer-term geo-economic strategy aimed at constraining Russia's economic resilience and military capacity. In addition, it also reinforced the Union's own strategic agency within the international system.

Between 2022 and 2025, despite intense Western sanctions and the high costs of war, the Russian economy demonstrated resilience. The economy was kept under control, attempting to protect itself from the effects of external pressure. (Dabrowski, 2025, 1-5). The analysis titled "How Resilient is Russia's Economy After Four Years of War?" lists the reasons for Russia's economic resilience despite heavy economic sanctions and pressures during the Russia-Ukraine war as follows: Russia maintained its microeconomic resilience because strategies to quickly adapt to new conditions were rapidly developed. Decision-makers proactively made preparations for potential geopolitical tensions and disruptions since the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Infrastructure for controlling the internet and import substitution policies are examples of this. Conservative policies also aimed to increase the country's macroeconomic resilience. The fact that international sanctions were limited to only half of the world's GDP worked in Russia's favor, allowing Russia to find ways to circumvent the sanctions. Russian economic institutions followed a strong and focused strategy immediately after the crisis. The regime's monopoly on information has been used as an effective tool to neutralize those who would oppose austerity policies (Dabrowski, 2025, 13–14).

Viewed in a broader perspective, these legal and diplomatic initiatives signal an evolution in the EU's external posture that combines its longstanding normative commitments with a more explicit recognition of geopolitical realities. This emerging orientation is described as normative power operating within a realist environment (Schwarz, 2025, 1-5). It captures the recalibration of EU foreign policy in response to systemic instability. Ultimately, the Union's ability to sustain internal coherence while balancing principled objectives with strategic imperatives will shape the durability and effectiveness of its response to the war in Ukraine.

Unity of EU and Institutional Constraints in EU Sanction Policy

Although the EU's sanctions regime against Russia has demonstrated an unprecedented degree of unity in eighteen sanctions packages adopted between 2022 and mid-2025, this coherence has been both enabled and constrained by the institutional architecture of the CFSP.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, Member States rapidly converged around a shared position of condemnation, facilitating accelerated decision-making. The Council subsequently extended sectoral sanctions until 2026. This signaled a collective commitment to resist aggression and to sustain economic and political pressure on Moscow (Council of the European Union, 2025a-b). This initial consensus, reflected in the early sanctions packages, was repeatedly reaffirmed through subsequent renewals. This reinforced the Union's credibility in the international arena.

In June 2025, both countries vetoed the proposed eighteenth sanctions package. The package included a ban on Russian gas imports. In response, the EU

explored alternative legal bases under trade law in an effort to bypass unanimity constraints (Politico, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

Hungary, in particular, secured open-ended exemptions from pipeline gas restrictions. Hungary also delayed sanctions on nuclear fuel imports. It invoked concerns related to energy security and household affordability (Financial Times, 2022; Reuters, 2022b, 2023; Blenkinsop & Siebold, 2022). These exemptions illustrate how divergent national interests continue to complicate efforts to sustain foreign policy cohesion within the Union.

By contrast, frontline states such as Poland and the Baltic republics have consistently advocated for tougher sanctions and more extensive financial and security measures. McNaughton and Łukowski (2025) show that Poland and the Baltic states developed distinct but generally robust sanctions-implementation models, although Poland's enforcement structure remained comparatively fragmented. Similarly, Dyduch and Góra (2024) argue that Poland's response to Russian aggression reaffirmed its pro-Western and Atlanticist orientation and strengthened its support for collective EU action on Ukraine.

All these dynamics reveal a persistent tension within EU foreign policymaking. This means moments of strategic unity under conditions of heightened threat coexist with institutional constraints embedded in CFSP procedures. While Eastern Member States have pressed for deeper and more comprehensive sanctions, energy-dependent countries have used their bargaining power to limit the scope of implementation. As Batzella (2024) argues, such divergent preferences have significantly constrained the Union's external actorness, particularly in the energy domain, despite the appearance of formal consensus.

Unity as a Strategic Asset – and its Fragility

One of the more unexpected successes of the European Union's response to the war in Ukraine has been the degree of unity. It was achieved among its Member States in endorsing far-reaching measures. Securing consensus among all twenty-seven governments for successive rounds of sanctions and extensive financial and military assistance was assured. Nevertheless, through sustained diplomatic engagement and repeated compromise, the Union succeeded in maintaining a largely unified position. This cohesion has functioned as a strategic asset. It strengthened the credibility of EU action. It also signaled political resolve to both Moscow and the wider international community.

CFSP, each sanctions package requires unanimous approval. It was a demanding institutional threshold and necessitates complex negotiation and considerable procedural resilience. In the immediate aftermath of the war in early 2022, the shock of the conflict facilitated rapid agreement on the first five sanctions packages. As measures increasingly began to affect sensitive national interests, consensus became more difficult to sustain. The sixth package, adopted in May 2022 and centred on a proposed oil embargo. It vividly illustrated these emerging strains. Negotiations extended for nearly a month amid internal divisions. An

agreement was ultimately secured only through a series of exemptions and tailored compromises. Hungary, in particular, secured major opt-outs during negotiations on the EU's sixth sanctions package, illustrating how unanimity requirements narrowed the scope of the oil embargo (Mintel & von Ondarza, 2022).

Even after a provisional agreement had been reached, Budapest nearly derailed the sixth package by vetoing proposed sanctions against the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, on personal and political grounds. To preserve consensus, the designation was eventually withdrawn, allowing the broader package to proceed (Mintel & von Ondarza, 2022). This episode highlighted both the fragility and the resilience of EU unity. This showed that a single capital was able to compel policy adjustments, and the collective agreement was ultimately maintained.

Over time, such episodes, most prominently involving Hungary, have drawn attention to structural tensions inherent in the unanimity requirement. Under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian government has repeatedly employed vetoes, or the threat as leverage in negotiations extending beyond sanctions policy.

Budapest has indicated its willingness to block the extension of Russia sanctions in an attempt to unfreeze suspended EU money (Csaky & Grant, 2025). Analysts have described this broader strategy as a form of “soft hostage-taking” in EU foreign policy, whereby Ukraine-related decisions are delayed or contested to extract concessions in unrelated areas (Müller & Slominski, 2025).

This underscores the extent of this pattern. Between 2011 and 2025, Hungary exercised more vetoes than any other Member State. Nineteen recorded instances were frequently accompanied by additional demands (Csaky & Grant, 2025). Such behaviour has generated persistent frustration among EU partners. In some cases, this has required procedural improvisation to preserve minimal levels of cohesion. In March 2023, for instance, Hungary blocked an EU summit statement on Ukraine, prompting the remaining twenty-six leaders to issue a declaration without its participation. This is a rare and highly symbolic circumvention intended to signal continued resolve.

These developments illustrate the enduring pressures placed on EU unity under the unanimity rule. Although cohesion has largely been maintained, it remains contingent and vulnerable to national veto strategies. While unanimity was originally designed to ensure collective ownership of sensitive foreign policy decisions, in practice, it can evolve into a structural veto trap when individual governments prioritize narrowly defined domestic interests over collective strategic objectives.

The critical debate surrounding the EU's efforts to maintain its influence as a normative power while simultaneously striving to be a strategic geopolitical actor is significant. Hungary's compliance with the rule of law, when considered alongside the EU's joint action on sanctions against Russia, reveals the potential to

weaken cohesion within the EU. Conversely, compromising normative values in the name of unity could damage the EU's values-based identity.

Effectiveness of EU Sanctions: Economic Impact and Military Constraint

The European Union's sanctions regime against Russia was designed to exert sustained pressure on key economic systems. The aim is to weaken Moscow's capacity to finance and sustain a prolonged military campaign.

Although short-term adjustment mechanisms enabled the Russian economy to stabilise temporarily in mid-2022, forecasts published in 2023 by the IMF, the OECD, and the World Bank pointed to a weak 2023 outlook, ranging from modest growth to mild contraction (IMF, 2023; OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2023; Council of the European Union, 2023). AP News reported that high defence spending had supported Russia's growth figures in the short term, but that inflation and weak foreign investment posed longer-term risks (Cook & McHugh, 2025). SITE analysts argued that war-driven growth masked underlying economic fragilities and raised doubts about the sustainability and welfare benefits of growth driven by military expenditure (Stockholm Institute of Transition Economics, 2025, 3-4).

Limitations to the effectiveness of sanctions also emerged through systematic evasion practices facilitated by intermediary states. Empirical studies employing gravity-model analysis, for example, in relation to vehicle exports from Georgia to Russia, demonstrate how re-export channels via Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan enabled Western-origin goods to enter the Russian market indirectly (Partsvania & Pirveli, 2024, 97-100).

In response, the EU progressively adapted its enforcement strategy by extending restrictive measures to third-country actors involved in circumvention. This included listings and export restrictions affecting entities in China, Iran, and other jurisdictions alleged to support Russia's military-industrial base or facilitate sanctions evasion, indicating a firmer anti-circumvention approach, though not necessarily a full US-style secondary sanctions regime (European Commission, 2024a-c; Szyszczak, 2025).

A particularly acute enforcement challenge arose from the emergence of a shadow fleet of oil tankers engaged in ship-to-ship transfers, flag switching, and opaque ownership practices designed to circumvent import bans and price caps. In its 14th package adopted in June 2024, the EU began directly listing shadow-fleet vessels and imposing port access bans; in 2025, it further expanded these measures through additional vessel blacklists, service prohibitions, and cooperation with the European Maritime Safety Agency to strengthen maritime monitoring and enforcement (European Commission, 2024a-b, 2025).

Diminishing Returns and Extraterritorial Risks

By the time the European Union adopted its sixteenth sanctions package in early 2025, the restrictive regime had become highly extensive and technically

sophisticated. It was increasingly confronted with diminishing marginal returns. Successive rounds of sanctions were required to penetrate deeper into the Russian economy or to close previously identified loopholes, often generating progressively smaller and limited effects. Many of the most accessible targets had already been addressed in earlier packages. This left measures that were either more complex to implement or more politically sensitive, including those related to nuclear energy and remaining export niches.

Moreover, Russia and its commercial partners gradually adjusted to the evolving restrictions. They developed strategies to mitigate their impact. Despite the G7 oil price cap and EU import bans, for example, Russian crude exports continued to be rerouted through a combination of shadow fleet operations and cooperative transit countries. This partially neutralised the intended pressure. Studies indicate that the price cap coalition has faced persistent enforcement challenges and widespread evasion in practice (Rhades, 2023). As a result, newer sanctions packages have increasingly concentrated on anti-circumvention measures, including the closure of regulatory gaps, the targeting of intermediary actors, and the tightening of compliance mechanisms.

Recent rounds were increasingly dominated by technically complex instruments, including refinements to the oil price cap regime, expanded export controls on additional dual-use and advanced-technology goods, and new listings of firms involved in sanctions circumvention (European Commission, 2025a; Council of the European Union, 2025a). The EU has moved cautiously toward more extraterritorial applications of its restrictive measures, a significant development given its longstanding reluctance to embrace secondary sanctions (European Commission, 2025b).

Between 2023 and 2024, EU authorities began publicly identifying companies based in third countries, including Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and China, suspected of facilitating Russia's access to restricted goods (Sibona, 2024, 2-4). In their initial phase, these listings were largely symbolic, primarily prohibiting EU firms from engaging with designated entities. By 2025, however, enforcement had intensified, with the Union directly sanctioning non-EU actors for assisting Russian circumvention efforts.

The eighteenth sanctions package, for instance, included entities located in China, Hong Kong, India, and the UAE. They were allegedly supplying Russia with battlefield-relevant goods. It also extended asset-freeze measures to selected Chinese banks and companies linked to sanctions evasion (Smith et al., 2025). This gradual shift toward extraterritorial enforcement traditionally associated with United States sanctions policy highlights both the Union's growing determination and the geopolitical risks involved. On the one hand, such measures enhance the effectiveness of the sanctions regime by constraining Russia's external supply channels. On the other hand, they risk deepening diplomatic tensions with major economic partners, particularly China. European policymakers are increasingly

aware that they are moving closer to the logic of secondary sanctions, even as they continue to weigh these practices against concerns related to international law, reciprocity, and institutional legitimacy.

As sanctions extend beyond EU borders, the balance between costs and benefits becomes more delicate. While new measures tend to target increasingly marginal segments of the Russian economy, the political and diplomatic stakes continue to rise. In this context, enforcement has emerged as a central arena of contestation. Ensuring consistent compliance across twenty-seven Member States and a wide network of international partners has become as critical to the regime's credibility as the adoption of additional restrictive measures.

Enforcement Gaps and the Push for Coordination

The EU's sanctions campaign against Russia has also revealed a significant structural weakness in the Union's approach. This was, namely, persistent disparities in enforcement across Member States. While restrictive measures are adopted centrally at the EU level, their implementation and supervision remain largely the responsibility of national authorities. In formal terms, EU sanctions take the form of directly applicable regulations. In practice, however, enforcement has developed in a decentralised and uneven manner, producing a fragmented landscape of varying standards, capacities, and procedural rigor.

As a result, sanctions frequently operate in a manner more closely resembling directives than uniform regulatory instruments, giving rise to twenty-seven distinct national enforcement regimes that undermine overall effectiveness. More than 160 national competent authorities are currently responsible for monitoring compliance across the Union, and their institutional capacity, legal expertise, and political commitment vary considerably (Sibona, 2024, 3-5). Some Member States have invested heavily in investigative and prosecutorial mechanisms, while others have been delayed in allocating resources and prioritising enforcement.

These asymmetries have created opportunities for so-called forum shopping. This meant sanctioned actors deliberately route goods, financial flows, or corporate structures through jurisdictions perceived as less stringent. Where customs controls, financial oversight, or judicial follow-up are relatively weak, sanctioned activities can be more easily concealed or redirected. Such practices not only dilute the overall impact of restrictive measures but also distort competition within the internal market, as firms operating in stricter jurisdictions face higher compliance costs than those based in more permissive environments (Sibona, 2024, 2-4).

The EU institutions have taken steps to strengthen and harmonise enforcement frameworks. In late 2022, the European Commission initiated the process of criminalising sanctions evasion at the EU level (European Union, 2025c-d, European Commission, 2025c). They added violations of restrictive measures to the list of EU crimes under Article 83 TFEU. This initiative was followed in March

2024 by the adoption of a directive harmonising criminal penalties for sanctions breaches across Member States (Sibona, 2024, 4). These reforms aim to reduce legal disparities and to ensure that evasion is treated as a serious offence throughout the Union. Nevertheless, key operational aspects of enforcement, including customs inspections, asset freezes, financial investigations, and criminal prosecutions, remain firmly embedded within national administrative structures. In several Member States, limited administrative capacity and uneven political prioritisation continue to constrain effective implementation. Against this background, policymakers and analysts have increasingly advocated more ambitious institutional solutions, most notably the creation of a centralised EU sanctions enforcement body.

Proposals for a European Sanctions Agency or a dedicated coordination platform have gained traction among senior officials and some Member States (Sibona, 2024, 4-6). Proponents argue that, just as the EU has constructed a unified internal market, it requires a comparable institutional framework for sanctions implementation, a single market for enforcement capable of closing regulatory gaps and replacing the current mosaic of national approaches. Such a body could substantially reduce circumvention opportunities and enhance the credibility of EU restrictive measures.

These proposals remain politically sensitive. Several national governments are reluctant to transfer enforcement competencies to the supranational level, and the establishment of a new authority would likely require unanimous political support. In the interim, the Commission has pursued more incremental coordination mechanisms, including the appointment of a Sanctions Envoy and the strengthening of platforms such as the Freeze and Seize Task Force, which focuses on tracing and immobilising oligarch assets.

The recent criminalisation of sanctions violations at the EU level nonetheless signals a broader recognition that the credibility of restrictive measures depends on robust and consistent enforcement. Looking ahead, debates are likely to intensify over whether deeper institutional centralization, potentially in the form of an EU-level equivalent to the US Office of Foreign Assets Control, is necessary to ensure that sanctions are not merely adopted in formal terms but are applied uniformly and effectively across all Member States (Sibona, 2024, 6).

Normative Values vs. Pragmatic Geopolitics

The war in Ukraine has accelerated the European Union's transformation into a more overtly geopolitical actor. This evolution, however, has been marked by a persistent tension between the Union's normative commitments and pragmatic considerations. At the discursive level, the EU continues to frame its response in terms of defending international law, democratic values, and a rules-based international order. It reaffirms its long-standing self-image as a normative power. European leaders have consistently justified sanctions and military, financial, and

humanitarian assistance by reference to core principles such as Ukraine's sovereignty, human rights, and adherence to the United Nations Charter.

The emergency of the conflict has encouraged a series of *realpolitik* adjustments that sit uneasily with these normative claims. To preserve internal cohesion and safeguard strategic interests, the Union has demonstrated a willingness to relax or reinterpret some of its principles in practice. This dual orientation may be described as a form of normative pragmatism. The EU continues to articulate value-based objectives while adapting their application to shifting geopolitical constraints.

The energy sector provides a particularly illustrative example. Prior to the war, the EU frequently emphasised the promotion of clean energy transitions and human rights standards in its external energy relations. Following the onset of the war between Russia and Ukraine, however, it moved rapidly to diversify away from Russian fossil fuels, including through agreements with authoritarian suppliers. In mid-2022, for instance, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to Baku to secure a major gas supply agreement with Azerbaijan. This was notably due to refraining from public criticism of the country's human rights record or its conflict with Armenia. This episode signaled a marked pragmatic shift. It suggested that normative engagement had been subordinated to immediate energy security imperatives. Analysts have interpreted von der Leyen's silence on human rights during the visit as indicative of an interest-driven recalibration of EU external policy (Clingendael Institute, 2023). Comparable patterns emerged in relations with energy suppliers in the Middle East and Africa, as European governments prioritised supply diversification over normative conditionality.

A similar logic is evident in the EU's approach to Russian civil nuclear energy (Politico, 2024). Despite repeated appeals from Ukraine, the Union has refrained from sanctioning Rosatom, largely due to strong opposition from Hungary. The Russian-built Paks II nuclear project was explicitly excluded from the fourteenth sanctions package in 2024, following assurances to Budapest that it would not be targeted (Nuclear Engineering International, 2024). The resulting exemption represents a significant inconsistency within the sanctions regime. It is a major state-owned enterprise supporting Russia's war economy and remains unaffected. This reflects a pragmatic compromise designed to preserve unanimity among Member States.

More broadly, the Union has displayed a willingness to tolerate certain normative inconsistencies in order to sustain internal cohesion (Clingendael Institute, 2023). While publicly championing democracy and human rights, the EU continues to rely on resource imports from politically repressive regimes. Similarly, although it condemns Russian aggression in unequivocal legal terms, the sanctions architecture contains numerous exemptions, transition periods, and sector-specific carve-outs intended to limit domestic economic disruption. These practices do not indicate an abandonment of normative aspirations. Rather, they illustrate the Union's efforts to navigate the delicate boundary between principled engagement and strategic realism.

In this sense, the EU appears to be learning to exercise power in a more conventional geopolitical manner through economic leverage, regulatory pressure, and strategic bargaining while seeking to retain its normative identity. European officials frequently portray such compromises as temporary and tactically necessary, arguing that exceptional circumstances justify limited deviations from established principles when core security interests are at stake.

It has been characterized as an evolving posture as a form of adaptive normative power. These value-based objectives are pursued through more flexible and power-conscious instruments. This is reflected in the continued invocation of international law and human rights to legitimize coercive measures. Even when their implementation involves the selective accommodation of political realities. Within this framework, the concept of Normative Power Europe no longer denotes reliance on persuasion and example alone. However, rather a hybrid model combining normative justification with pragmatic enforcement. In the context of the Ukraine war, ethical commitments are increasingly advanced through strategically calibrated actions, encapsulating the Union's ongoing effort to balance ideals with geopolitical necessity.

Geo-Economic Leverage and Identity Shift

The above-mentioned developments point to a European Union that is increasingly assuming the role of a more assertive security actor. The one that systematically mobilizes economic instruments in pursuit of geopolitical objectives. The growing reliance on geo-economic tools, including sanctions, export controls, energy policy, and regulatory leverage, signals a departure from the Union's traditional self-conception as a predominantly civilian and normative power. Brussels has become progressively more willing to deploy the structural power of the EU Single Market, the world's largest integrated economic space, as a source of external influence and coercive leverage.

This shift is evident in the expanding scope of the sanctions regime. In recent years, the EU has begun to target foreign firms and third-country intermediaries, adopting an approach that has been described as increasingly convergent with United States practices in terms of extraterritorial reach, regulatory intensity, and enforcement discourse (Terlinden, 2024, 310). Within a relatively short period, the Union moved from a largely rule-bound and restraint-oriented foreign policy posture to the deployment of some of the most far-reaching economic coercive measures ever directed at a major power. The war has widely been interpreted as the critical turning point that compelled the EU to engage more fully with the instruments of high politics.

Within months of the outbreak of war, the EU and its partners introduced sweeping asset freezes, trade prohibitions, and financial restrictions. Most notably, two-thirds of the more than \$330 billion in frozen Russian central bank assets were located in the EU, mostly in Belgium (CFR Editors, 2025). This readiness to act

swiftly and decisively in the security domain has prompted renewed scholarly reflection on the EU's external identity. Long portrayed as a civilian power relying primarily on normative influence, the Union has demonstrated an increasing capacity to defend its values through coercive economic means.

The war in Ukraine marked a structural inflection point in EU sanctions policy, after which the Union's approach became more closely aligned with US-style models of intensity, enforcement, and strategic coordination (Terlinden, 2024, 315). Scholars such as Meissner and Graziani (2023) argue that the expansion of economic statecraft has significantly broadened the EU's foreign policy toolkit, reflecting a broader process of geopolitical awakening. Similarly, Lepeu's (2025) analysis highlights the emergence of the European Commission as a central architect of sanctions policy, signaling both an internal redistribution of authority and a shift toward a more capability-oriented model of external action.

In practical terms, the Union's long-standing technocratic strengths in areas such as competition policy, financial regulation, and trade governance have been increasingly repurposed for security-related objectives. This has contributed to a gradual blurring of boundaries between economic management and strategic policy. Recent initiatives, including the anti-coercion instrument and enhanced investment screening mechanisms, illustrate how the EU is beginning to weaponize interdependence in order to protect critical interests and reduce external vulnerabilities.

Within this evolving context, the concept of Normative Power Europe has not been abandoned, but rather reconfigured and supplemented by a more explicitly realist dimension. This transformation is frequently framed in terms of strategic autonomy, understood as the capacity to defend a rules-based order through the credible use of economic power. Although EU institutions continue to anchor restrictive measures in legal and normative justifications, systematically citing violations of international law in sanctions legislation, the underlying shift in orientation is unmistakable.

European policymakers increasingly recognize that the defense of values and interests may, under certain conditions, require direct forms of pressure rather than persuasion alone. This maturation process entails both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, enhanced coercive capacity strengthens the Union's strategic credibility. On the other hand, it raises concerns regarding proportionality, legal consistency, and the potential erosion of normative legitimacy, particularly in cases of overreach or perceived double standards.

Nevertheless, the broader trajectory is clear. In responding to Russia's aggression, EU foreign policy has undergone a substantive recalibration. It has become more cohesive, more assertive in its choice of instruments, and more pragmatic in implementation, despite ongoing internal strains. Whether this transformation will prove durable beyond the current crisis remains an open question. Its longevity will depend on the institutionalization, adaptation, and political sustainability of these practices in the post-war environment.

As of 2025, however, it is evident that Normative Power Europe has evolved into a form capable of deploying sanctions and regulatory leverage on a scale comparable to that of traditional great powers. The Union is increasingly able to operate in the language of power when circumstances require, while continuing to situate that power within its foundational legal and normative framework. How successfully this balance between values and *realpolitik* is maintained will be a defining feature of Europe's geopolitical posture in the years ahead, shaped in large measure by the experience of the Ukraine war.

Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constituted one of the most consequential turning points in the history of the European Union's foreign policy. The crisis confronted the EU with the challenge of redefining its role not only as a regional economic bloc, but also as an emerging geopolitical actor. This study examined the Union's political response to war and the institutional and strategic transformation that unfolded in its aftermath. The findings indicate that, while the EU has undergone a significant recalibration by combining its normative identity with more assertive security-oriented instruments, this evolution has simultaneously been shaped and constrained by economic pressures and persistent divisions among Member States.

In the initial phase of the conflict, the Union grounded its response primarily in normative principles, placing democracy, human rights, and respect for international law at the center of its political discourse. As the war intensified, however, these normative commitments were increasingly complemented by coercive measures, including extensive sanctions, military assistance, and intensified diplomatic engagement. Through this dual approach, the EU sought to preserve its identity as a Normative Power Europe while maintaining credibility within the international system. The imposition of economic and financial restrictions on an unprecedented scale reflected the extent to which value-based foreign policy was stretched in response to pressing security and strategic imperatives.

The crisis exposed important internal vulnerabilities. Divergent national preferences, most notably Hungary's demands for exemptions in the areas of energy and nuclear cooperation, highlighted the fragility of the unanimity requirement in foreign and security policy. These tensions underscored the complex interaction between normative aspirations and geopolitical necessity, revealing how internal decision-making dynamics directly shape the Union's external posture.

Despite these constraints, the degree of solidarity and collective mobilization demonstrated by the EU in response to the war remains striking. The rapid establishment of financial instruments, the coordinated adoption of

comprehensive sanctions, and the alignment of military assistance mechanisms illustrate a strong commitment to collective action. Together, these measures reflected a high level of institutional adaptability and political resolve in the face of an unprecedented security challenge.

In conclusion, the war in Ukraine represents a critical juncture that embodies both continuity and transformation in the EU's foreign policy identity. While core normative commitments have been retained, they have been increasingly embedded within a more pragmatic and geopolitically attuned framework. This recalibration has been tested by economic disruption and internal political frictions, yet it has also reinforced a renewed sense of strategic solidarity within the Union. More broadly, the Ukraine crisis has exposed both the structural limitations and the latent capacities of the EU's evolution from a predominantly normative power toward a more explicitly geopolitical actor. As such, it constitutes a formative process that is likely to shape Europe's international role in the years to come.

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