THE DEBATE ABOUT
THE EUROPEAN UNION POLITY IN
LIGHT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The war in Ukraine presented radically new challenges to the European Union and its Member States of political, economic and security nature. It has brought about new perspectives on the fundamental principles and values of the Union, on the freedoms and responsibilities upheld and cherished by the Union, its societies and peoples, as well as on European solidarity and cooperation. Some interpret these new realities as a precondition for further European Unity, others see it as the reason for emancipation of Central European Members States who now finally become full members of the „EU Club", while yet others point to the new geopolitical role which the EU might take in the international system. French President Macron even put forward an idea about an enlarged European political community, based on shared values with the Western liberal democracies. The resolve and unity shown by the European Union in the months since Russia's invasion in Ukraine also merits the attention of the academic and expert debate. The paper looks into alternative paradigms about the European political integration in the context of these developments and discusses their contribution for the development of European polity.

Keywords: European Union, polity, values, Ukraine, war

1. Introduction

The war of the Russian Federation in Ukraine presented radically new challenges to the European Union and its Member States of political, economic and security nature. It has brought about new perspectives on the fundamental principles and values of the Union, on the freedoms and responsibilities upheld and cherished by the Union, its societies and peoples, as well as on European solidarity and cooperation. Some interpret these new realities as a precondition for further European Unity, or even for expansion of an enlarged European

political community, based on shared values with the Western liberal democracies. The resolve and unity shown by the European Union in the months since Russia's invasion, the new leading role uptaken by the governments of Central Europe and the reconsideration of neutrality for some of the non-aligned Member States offer an opportunity to discuss the impact of this new political context on the development of the integration process towards a European polity.

The paper begins by outlining the main dimensions of the theoretical debate about the nature of European Union integration. This part aims to demonstrate that the integration process so far has been a gradual progression from intergovernmental political cooperation towards deepening regulatory policies, reaching the very texture of European societies. The argument is put forward that from the current historical point onward, further integration requires political mobilization for value-based objectives, which is only possible if true European polity is constructed. The paper then looks into the new realities in the EU post 24 February 2022 from political, geostrategic and ideological standpoint. The key new dimensions of change in the integration process and political environment are outlined. The paper ends with a discussion on the implications of these new realities on the prospect of formation of European polity.

2. The theoretical debate on the nature of European integration and the role of polity

This paper is theoretically informed by the understanding that there is an immanent nature and logic of the European integration process which is established and progresses through permanent qualitative change. The very nature of the integration is to solve constantly evolving and qualitatively escalating problems and this is its specific historical logic.

Jean Monnet, one of the founding fathers of European integration, notes that Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the crises. It is not hard to find evidence today about the veracity of his prognosis – from the challenges of economic recovery after the Second World War, the empty chair crisis in the 60s, the arguments about budgetary reforms and financial contributions in the 80s, the crisis of the Iraq war, the French and Dutch „no" to the Constitutional Treaty... all the way to the Greek financial catastrophe and Brexit.

The theoretical discussion about the nature of European integration is not recent, but the deepening and development of the scientific interest in these issues can be traced back to the Maastricht Treaty, which is among the most significant milestones in the history of political integration in the EU. After this Treaty, a number of theoretical and conceptual attempts arise that try to take stock of the European political process and its logic. Defining this logic takes various forms and here we shall merely mark some of the most significant of those:

- the EU as more than a regime, but less than a state (Wallace 1983);

- the EU as a regional state (Schmidt 2006);
- EU as a form of multi-level governance and dispersed decision-taking at different territorial levels (Jachtenfuchs 2001, Marks et al. 1996, Hooghe and Marks 2001);
- EU as a system of norms and ideas/values (March & Olsen 1998, Finnemore & Sikkink 1998);
- EU as a system of transnational networks (Eising & Kohler-Koch 1999), network governance (Kohler-Koch 1999), based on the coordination of multiple actors and bridging of diverging interests;
- EU as discursive interaction (Risse 2000, Weiler 2000);
- EU as a system of negotiating problem-solving strategies (Scharpf 1997).

Clearly, there is a notable ambivalence of the political process in the EU. On the one hand the traditional mechanisms of domestic political life persist to be of primary importance, but on the other – more active and more multi-faceted supranational dialogues occur. And the dynamics of this ambivalence produce a deepening perception of democratic deficit and legitimacy deficit in the EU, combined with public criticisms about the insufficient effectiveness of the policy process. The European governance becomes increasingly challenged for being both insufficiently effective, and insufficiently legitimate. How is this possible?

In the early decades of European unity, integration was a relatively limited elitist process, which was not based on mass public support, but also did not need such support, as it only concerned few sectoral policies in the economy. The success of this sectoral integration however led to broadening of the collective action and gradually penetrated deep into the field of social relations, which are traditionally a nation state prerogative (ex. labor market regulation, internal security and justice). This in turn led to changes in the institutional landscape, increasing the budget parameters, and the role of the European Parliament in its allocation. Slowly European policies affected ever larger share of the citizens of Member States as addressees of their direct impact. And in terms of tax burden – EU policies affected all citizens. Member State citizens are now expected to be ever more engaged with the integration process, not only as taxpayers, but as addressees of the European-level legislative intervention in social life. Moreover, due to the specifics of relatively limited, albeit increasing EU budget, the Union is predestined to implement integration policies primarily through regulation, not redistribution (Me´ny, Muller & Quermonne 1996, Majone 1996). And this makes EU's democratic representativeness and legitimacy an unavoidable challenge.

The EU integration process to date has only been possible due to a certain level of non-transparency as a trade-off for efficiency (Carvel 1998, Moravcsik 1999, Moravcsik 2002, Bjurulf & Elgström 2004), which allows different actors to recognize various aspects of the integration partnership as having value to them and as a basis for the legitimacy of their participation in this partnership

(Putnam 1988, Metcalfe 1998, Mattila & Lane 2001). This logic has been sustainable before the integration process enters deeply the day to day lives of Europeans as taxpayers, service consumers and potential addressees of... the European arrest warrant, for example. And this is a stage of integration development where the *polity* of the EU becomes central challenge. Because historically in the EU the process of integration has been an evolution from politics (intergovernmental decision-making based on consideration of political and ideological nature) towards policies (concrete sectoral interventions through redistribution or regulation). The foundations of the economic integration in the 50s and 60s were tied to the political considerations how to strengthen French-German reconciliation through permanent connections to avoid conflicts of the past. However, the historical development of the EU integration process gradually brings forward the concrete policies as mechanisms of addressing specific problems, particularly in the context of globalization when Member States are unable to individually tackle many arising issues. Integration becomes ever more interwoven in the very texture of European societies (Wessels & Rometsch 1996), but it takes the form of regulatory policies without genuine transnational party politics, based on the political preferences of a common European political body/demos.

The European integration process today, having started in narrow economic spheres, has impacted the very foundations of how we Europeans interpret governance and democracy (Schmidt 2006), as we now have a power structure without a common vision of the type of society we want to have behind this power structure (Questiaux 2000). The challenge is not only to answer the question *what* should Europe do – „Europe – left or right?" (Hix 2005), but about *how* to do it. Is democracy in the EU possible in the absence of European demos, in light of the generally accepted idea that democracy has the strongest chances for success in socially homogenous societies, without fundamental dividing lines (Almond 1956, also see Tocqueville 1969). Is democracy possible if the EU continues to be perceived as predominantly regulatory, given that domestic democratic legitimacy in the Member States is usually based on elections and re-distributional policies (Mény, Muller & Quermonne 1996, Majone 1996)?

EU development has exhausted the possible integration on the basis of existing preconditions. The permissive consensus of the early days of integration (Lindberg & Scheingold 1970, Hix 2005, Ruzza 2004) is depleted and the need to define the ultimate fundamental/constitutional form of the Union – the *finalité politique* – is more urgent than ever (Shikova 2009). The momentum of European integration has so far been based on the ambiguity between the strong foundation of the European nation state and the search for a new political form beyond it. Those two contradictory principles have invigorated European integration and led to its progression, but this ambiguity could threaten to become fatal if the fundamental challenges in the sphere of politics are not addressed – those of political competition, accountability, left-right divide, interest representation, public opinion. Purely economic expectations cannot

mobilize political support for the riskier and all-encompassing project of a political union – at least one deserving of such name (Habermas 2001). In other words, governance *with* the people requires the existence of a *people*. Here we do not refer to people in the ancient Athenian sense, impossible today, and not even to an „excessively demanding concept of demos" (see for example Innerarity 2014 who warns that this may be utopian and too categorical of an expectation for Europe), but at least in the modern sense of the term as a body with relatively high level of social homogeneity, high level of economization, mass and rational engagement with the economic, leading to shared point of view based on the common interest, but also shared history, cultural tradition, single language that facilitates interactions, shared discursive and media sphere, etc.

According to some, the EU has been missing such shared pan-European social sphere, because of the priority given to diversity and the Union has objected to negatively constructing its identity by contrasting it to an External Other. So far Europe has refused to define itself *politically* by constructing European identity on the basis of limited belonging (evidenced by its determination to pursue enlargement indefinitely) and defied the idea to think of itself exhaustively. Yet belonging requires the existence of a strict border – you belong because others do not (Weiler 1995). Having a strong collective identity and trust in the common good is a basic precondition for legitimate representative governance, which allows for overlooking certain important but contested collective interests and preferences of the national publics. But without such fundamental trust and shared value system there is no reason why the ignored minorities should accept the legitimacy of the policies, adopted by potentially hostile majorities (Scharpf 2003). Moreover, according to some authors this value system cannot be based on purely humanistic and universalistic values, but needs to be defined by the cultural, historic and spiritual consciousness of a common past, shared over many centuries (Engels 2022).

Thus, the question about the construction of European polity is not just one of the challenges the EU faces but is fundamental for the possible future of EU integration. Further integration requires political mobilization for value-based objectives.

The next part looks into the political developments in Europe and the EU after the 24th February and discusses how these new dimensions of change in the political environment may impact the process of construction of a strong European collective identity beyond the nation state.

3. EU and the war in Ukraine: impacts on the formation stronger European collective identity

The onset of the Russian war in Ukraine posed instant and sizeable challenges to European decision-makers and societies. Whether the EU, together with its allies, will be capable of providing a strong and unified response to

these challenges or whether it will split into different opinions and fractions, failing to cooperate in the context of military activity on the continent, has been a decisive question, which could have implications on the future of the European project.

The prospects of EU identity formation based on common threats has received some research interest (Caporaso 2005, Matonytė & Morkevičius 2009, Paikin and Gros 2022). The Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2014 has also been analyzed from this perspective (Gehring 2022, Gorodnichenko and Roland 2014, Gylfason and Wijkman 2014, Gylfason et al. 2014). As the question has many facets, here we will look into three main dimensions, which may have impact on the reinvigoration of the EU on the basis of a shared vision, prompted by an external threat.

Allied for common action

The European Union surprised the world, and even itself, with the rapidness, intensity and unity of its reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine and this „new" Europe seems determined to project both soft and hard power on the world stage (World Economic Forum 2022). The unified European response after the Russian invasion has sent encouraging signals, along with EU states' readiness to change their traditional policy toward Russia (Krastev 2022). But as Putin is militarizing his energy strategy towards the EU, the Union is demonstrating significant alignment. The challenge is whether this solidarity will collapse in the face of gas shortage and pushback from European consumers, or whether the EU will maintain its resolve to protect the very basis of the international rule-based world order, even if at the detriment of EU's domestic consumers and industries. This is no small endeavor, but there are signs that the unified front against Russian aggression will hold stronger than expected. An opinion poll in Germany in September 2022 showed that 70% of respondents want the country to continue supporting Ukraine, even if it leads to higher energy prices, even though diminishing Russian gas supply has driven gas and electricity prices up, and the situation is expected to worsen in winter. Many EU publics also seem favorable of Ukraine receiving EU candidate status (about 2/3 of citizens of Germany, the Netherlands, and France are in favor according to opinion poll conducted by New Europe Center in June 2022 and 65% of the Irish are in favor of Ukraine joining the EU according to European Movement Ireland poll in the same month).

The rapidly imposed broad array of sanctions towards Russia, defined by the EU as comprehensive and robust, has also been interpreted as evidence for EU's determination to stay true to fundamental principles at times of crisis. As EU sanctions regulations have direct effect in all Member States of the EU, and, as such, are legally binding on all natural and legal persons, the unified front for imposing sanctions in multiple economic spheres is a significant demonstration of alignment. According to some forecasts this unified front can be strengthened further if the EU succeeds to produce a long-term plan for

Ukraine, considering the forecasts for a long war. In such a likely scenario, the European publics will expect more clarity and visibility on what the EU is doing for Ukraine and why. Such a plan can consolidate European unity despite the war fatigue, which is imminent at the 6-month mark of military actions, and can counter Russian narratives about a shifting world order (Buras et al. 2022). Ultimately, coping with Russia's invasion of Ukraine at both the diplomatic and political, as well as the economic field, may prove to be „Europe's moment" of critical importance for unity (Krastev 2022).

Central Europe emancipation in the European club

At the EU political arena, the war in Ukraine has brought about improved diplomatic standing of the Central European countries and a remarkable precedent of political representation of the EU and its Western Member States by the Central European countries, which could not be possible just a few years ago. Some authors even see this as „Central Europe's slow emancipation" in the EU with countries in that region finally becoming full members of the club (de Gruyter 2022). One of the most notable examples of such diplomatic leadership was the trip of the three prime ministers of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia to the embattled Ukrainian capital of Kyiv where they met with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Even though some question whether this was their unilateral undertaking without a mandate from Brussels, the prime ministers claimed they are on EU mission and extended the support of the EU to Ukraine. Only two weeks later the Ukrainian President was speaking at the European Parliament. At the June summit meeting in Brussels, Slovenian Prime Minister was asked to speak on behalf of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.

The unequivocal and rapid position in support of Ukraine has also turned Central and Eastern Europe into a region leading the way as Europe's strongest moral voice (Tůma 2022). This is a new position for Central and Eastern Europe Member States and a remarkable one. While for most of their path towards and in the EU as new Member States they have „mostly imitated the West in the aim to become the „new West" (Krastev and Holmes 2019), currently the stream of influence seems to be partly turning the other way around with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe becoming more relevant and inspiring (Tůma 2022).

Unprecedented alignment with EU defense policy

The war in Ukraine has also given rise to unexpected cohesion in the area of defense policy, overcoming some significant „long-standing taboos" (Liboreiro 2022). For the first time ever, the Union has agreed to finance the purchase of lethal weapons for countries that are under attack, a watershed moment for the EU, as described by Commission President von der Leyen. In line with the EU decision, Germany has drastically overturned its post-World War II policy that prohibited sending lethal weapons to conflict zones and is now equipping the Ukrainian government with anti-tank weapons and anti-aircraft missiles.

Finland and Sweden, two traditionally non-aligned countries, are also supporting the Ukrainian army's resistance to the Russian invasion with military supply. Both countries have reconsidered the option for NATO membership in a historic shift, despite Sweden's two-century aversion to military alliances and Finland's willingness not to antagonize Russia as its eastern neighbor with over 1300 km border line. The Finnish and Swedish accession to NATO is interpreted as a game changer, because the previously strategic vacuum in the North is now replaced by a tactical „depth" that facilitates the defense of the Nordic and Baltic states. After all five Nordic countries enter NATO, the Baltic Sea becomes largely a NATO sea (Bundt 2022). Other Member States are also reconsidering key domestic policies and aligning closer with the EU – the Danish government announced a referendum to reconsider its 30-year-old opt-out from the EU common defense policy, which was supported by over 66%.

When interpreting the above dimensions of alignment in the area of defense policy, we should have in mind the deeply rooted historical societal consensus that has supported the military non-alignment policies of the Nordic Member States. Thus, the current shift may be not only a demonstration of rationalized strategies for security at the face of external military threat, but evidence for value-based shifts towards European unity in protection of the foundations of the democratic European order.

4. Discussion

In this paper we aimed to put forward an analysis of the current political, diplomatic, economic and ideological challenges faced by the European Union in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. We proposed a historical interpretation of the integration process as a gradual progression from intergovernmental political cooperation towards deepening regulatory policies, reaching the very texture of European societies. The argument was put forward that from the current historical point onward, further integration requires political mobilization for value-based objectives, which is only possible if true European polity is constructed, uniting a relatively stable social support among the European publics. The unprecedented attempt of Kremlin to change Europe's political map and borders by force may present an opportunity for such redefinition of the EU on the basis of principles and values, which has seemed quite impossible in previous decades.

We discussed three dimensions of political change at the EU level and at the level of individual Member States, which may be forecasting the strengthening of the alignment of the European societies under the pressing circumstances of strategic and geopolitical threat. Some have even seen the emergence of a „new European Union that is ready to adopt a more assertive role as a global economic and geopolitical force for good" (World Economic Forum 2022), and the EU may be on the path to creating an exportable grand narrative (Diamantopoulou 2022). Whether this is indeed „Europe's moment – one where it can showcase its value, and values, to the world" (WEF 2022) will depend

on the ability of EU institutions and national governments to continue to maintain unity on the fundamental democratic and geopolitical questions (supporting Ukraine, sanctioning Russia) while also addressing the mounting domestic challenges (tackling existing inequities, ensuring shared prosperity, enhancing the legitimacy and accountability of EU-level decision-making).

Drawing definitive conclusions about political events of such nature and scale, as they unfold, is hardly ever possible. The aim of this paper was more modest – to track the main trajectories of change in EU's strategic political context. The first six months of Russia's war have seen some important steps forward in Member States' willingness to work together to protect Europe. If secured and strengthened, especially in the likely scenario of prolonged military conflict on European territory, near EU's borders and under the threat of nuclear escalation, this unity and alignment may result in strengthening a European polity, based on shared identity and values, uniting a relatively stable social support among the European publics for democracy, solidarity and peace.

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