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## Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

# Beyond Norms and Geopolitics: The European Union's Hybrid Response to the Russia-Ukraine War

*Normlar ve Jeopolitiğin Ötesinde: Avrupa Birliği'nin Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşına Hibrit Yanıtı*

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### ÖZ

Bu makale, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı ışığında Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) uluslararası çatışma çözümündeki rolündeki dönüşümü incelemektedir. Geleneksel olarak normatif bir güç olarak görülen AB, uzun süre diplomasi, ekonomik teşvikler ve demokratik değerlerin yaygınlaştırılmasına dayanmıştır. Ancak, son dönemdeki jeopolitik zorluklar bu yaklaşımın sınırlarını ortaya koymuştur. AB'nin Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı'na verdiği yanıt benzeri görülmemiş yaptırımlar, askeri destek ve enerji politikalarında değişikliklerle normatif ve stratejik araçların harmanlandığı hibrit bir modele geçişi göstermektedir. Niteliksel vaka analiziyle yazılan makale, AB'nin artık yalnızca normatif ya da jeopolitik güç çerçevesinde anlaşılamayacağını öne sürmektedir. Aksine AB, meşruiyete dayalı ve zorlayıcı araçları dengeleyen hibrit bir aktöre dönüşmüştür. Bu dönüşüm AB'nin uyum yeteneğini artırsa da, iç bölünmeler ve NATO'ya bağımlılık hâlâ etkisini sınırlamaktadır. Bulgular, AB'nin dönüşen uluslararası kimliği ve kriz yönetimi kapasitesi hakkında yeni perspektifler sunmaktadır.

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the transformation of the European Union's (EU) role in international conflict resolution in light of the Russia-Ukraine war. Traditionally viewed as a normative power, the EU has long relied on diplomacy, economic incentives, and the promotion of democratic values. However, recent geopolitical challenges have exposed the limits of this approach. The EU's response to the Russia-Ukraine war, marked by unprecedented sanctions, military assistance, and energy policy shifts, demonstrates a shift toward a hybrid model that blends normative and strategic instruments. Drawing on qualitative case study analysis, the article argues that the EU can no longer be understood solely through the lens of normative or geopolitical power. Instead, it has become a hybrid actor, balancing legitimacy-based and coercive tools. While this transformation enhances the EU's adaptability, internal divisions and reliance on NATO still constrain its agency. The findings offer new insights into the EU's evolving international identity and crisis management capacity.

## 1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has established itself as a major player in international conflict resolution, mainly through its reputation as a normative or civilian power. Traditionally,

the EU has used value-driven tools like diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, economic incentives, and the promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.

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These methods have enabled the EU to influence by shaping international norms and institutional structures, setting it apart from actors that primarily rely on coercion or military force.

In recent years, however, the landscape of international security has undergone significant changes. Increased geopolitical rivalry, rising instability, and especially the Russia-Ukraine war have questioned the effectiveness of the EU's traditional framework. To address these issues, the EU has expanded its toolkit to include strategic measures such as economic sanctions, military aid, and energy security policies alongside its long-standing normative approaches.

Scholarly debates often see these developments through a simple either-or perspective: is the EU holding onto its normative power, or is it becoming a typical geopolitical actor? Some researchers note the Union's growing strategic focus, while others maintain that its normative identity remains central (Manners, 2002). Nevertheless, this binary view does not fully capture the complexity and subtlety of the EU's current path.

This article argues that the EU's approach to conflict resolution is best understood as a hybrid model that merges normative and policy-oriented tools. Instead of fitting neatly into either the normative or the geopolitical category, the EU is increasingly operating as a hybrid actor, adaptively modifying its strategies to meet the needs of a changing, unstable international environment.

By moving beyond the conventional dichotomy, this study seeks to offer a more comprehensive perspective. It addresses the following research questions: How has the EU's conflict-resolution toolkit evolved? What underlying factors drive this evolution? Furthermore, why has the shift toward a more geopolitical posture remained partial rather than resulting in a full-scale reorientation?

To address these questions, the article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on civilian, normative, and international power to establish the conceptual framework. An examination of the emerging debate over hybrid power follows. The third section describes the methodological approach used in the analysis. The fourth section presents a detailed case study of the EU's response to the Russia-Ukraine war, demonstrating the practical implications of the hybrid model. The article concludes by discussing the findings and emphasizing the study's contributions to the broader scholarly conversation.

## 2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Civilian Power Europe

This section contends that the European Union (EU), with its unique institutional framework and approach to external relations, exemplifies the idea of a civilian power. Unlike traditional actors that rely heavily on military strength, territorial expansion, or dominance, the EU has historically sought to shape the international system through civilian

tools and the promotion of normative values (Diez, 2005, p. 614).

The concept of "Civilian Power Europe" (CPE) first entered academic debate in the 1970s, thanks to François Duchêne. Duchêne's work underscored the European Communities' distinctive global role, suggesting that their influence stemmed less from military power than from economic ties, political dialogue, and participation in international institutions. He argued that Europe's power rested on its ability to foster cooperation, economic interdependence, and legal integration, in sharp contrast to regions where coercion and force predominated (Duchêne, 1972, p. 43). However, this perspective has consistently faced criticism, particularly from realist scholars, who argue that civilian power theory underestimates the enduring significance of military capabilities in world politics, and thus, question whether non-coercive tools alone can suffice for meaningful influence.

While Duchêne envisioned the European project as a means of promoting global peace through non-military avenues, critics have maintained that security imperatives and power politics remain central to international outcomes. Duchêne himself described the European Community as "long on economic power and relatively short on armed force" (Duchêne, 1973, p. 17), portraying it as economically robust but militarily limited. Key features of CPE include the primacy of economic strength, the importance of diplomatic cooperation, and the reliance on supranational, legally binding institutions (Twitchett, 1976, pp. 1-2). Building on these ideas, Hanns Maull later defined civilian power as comprising three core elements: recognizing the necessity of cooperation with others to achieve international aims; prioritizing non-military, especially economic, means to secure objectives (with military force as a last resort); and committing to the development of supranational structures to address critical governance challenges (Maull, 1990, pp. 92-93). Nonetheless, both Duchêne's and Maull's theories have been repeatedly challenged by realist scholars, who question whether a purely civilian approach can sustain the EU's influence amid growing global competition.

The "Civilian Power Europe" concept encountered its most significant challenge in the early 1980s. As the Cold War intensified into its second phase and 'high politics' returned to the fore, realist interpretations became dominant, casting doubt on the continued relevance of civilian power. The decade's international context, coupled with Europe's military limitations, led many to dismiss the concept as unrealistic (Lodge, 1993, p. 27). Hedley Bull, for example, famously labeled civilian power a "contradiction in terms" (Bull, 1982). He argued that without meaningful military capability, the European Communities could not expect to exert true influence on the world stage, and proposed an ambitious though, for the time, highly improbable program to enhance European defence autonomy (Manners, 2002, p. 237).

Throughout the Cold War, NATO's security guarantee and

a general reluctance toward independent European defence ensured that the Communities maintained a largely civilian orientation. Consequently, the EC relied on trade, aid, and integration as its main instruments for shaping the external environment. Its international role was thus defined by the absence of military means and a reliance on economic and diplomatic strategies.

Bull's critique later influenced Ian Manners' influential analysis of the EU's normative power. While Bull argued that civilian power relies on the military strength of member states, Manners contended that the post-Cold War era called for a new assessment of both military and civilian power, emphasizing the EU's ability to shape international norms (Manners, 2002, pp. 235-36).

Until the late 1990s, EU foreign policy discussions mainly centered on using civilian tools to handle international affairs. Despite new rules introduced by the Maastricht and Amsterdam Treaties, the common view was that the EU's role in global conflict resolution would still rely on economic and political strategies. Persuasion and dialogue remained important, but the EU increasingly saw itself as a political actor capable of employing both political and economic resources. By 2000, the concept of civilian power was well established in debates about the EU's international role, reflecting a belief in the EU's unique diplomatic style, especially given its lack of military strength. Statements from European Commission members and national governments often promoted the EU as a "global civil power," a term put forward by Prodi and supported in official statements (Prodi, 2000).

The structural constraints of the Cold War greatly shaped the development of the Civilian Power Europe idea. Western European security depended on the Transatlantic Alliance, while the European Communities focused on boosting economic and political integration. Without an independent military force, the Communities relied on economic and diplomatic strategies to reach their aims. Duchêne's early ideas were later built upon by other scholars, who continued to emphasize the Communities' role in reshaping the international order through non-military, multilateral means. The inclusive nature of the European project provided the philosophical foundation for further discussions about the EU's global role. In fact, the Civilian Power Europe framework set the stage for the "Normative Power Europe" concept, which highlights the EU's unique ability to develop and promote international norms and values.

## 2.2. Normative Power Europe

Ian Manners introduced the concept of "Normative Power Europe" (NPE) to explain how the European Union (EU) uniquely influences global affairs (Manners, 2002, p. 240). In his key work, Manners argued that the EU should not be viewed just as a civilian or economic force. Instead, its main role is to shape and change the norms that govern international politics. To support this point, Manners first reviews how civilian and military power have been

understood in Europe, then explains what makes the EU's normative approach special. A key aspect of this uniqueness is the EU's active promotion of values such as peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights (Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2006). Supporting these are secondary values such as social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, and good governance, which have been recognized as central to the EU's external relations. The EU's normative influence is exercised through a variety of channels: institutional participation, attaching political conditions to partnerships, providing economic incentives, and leveraging diplomatic persuasion (Bicchi, 2006). For instance, the EU's accession process requires candidate countries to uphold democratic rights, strengthen human rights protections, and respect the rule of law before they are considered for membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2019). In practice, the EU has demonstrated its normative power through global initiatives, such as its efforts to abolish the death penalty (Youngs, 2004).

Manners makes three main claims about normative power. First, he asserts that "normative power" is not entirely separate from "civilian power"; rather, the former is embedded within the latter (Manners, 2002, p. 240). Second, he suggests that the very discourse around normative power is instrumental in constructing a unique European identity. Third, he points out that the EU is not the only actor to wield normative power similar dynamics can be observed historically, for example, in the actions of the United States (Diez, 2005, pp. 632-33). This conceptualization has been widely debated in the literature, with scholars questioning whether the EU's self-perception as a normative actor aligns with external perceptions and outcomes (Forsberg, 2011, p. 1187).

Despite its conceptual appeal, the idea of Normative Power Europe has sparked considerable debate. Some scholars question whether these frameworks adequately reflect the EU's increasingly complex international behavior. In particular, critics argue that the EU's growing reliance on military and strategic tools challenges the core of its normative identity (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 43). This tension has become especially evident with the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which has introduced new military structures and rapid-reaction forces at the EU level (Howorth, 2014). Such developments suggest that the EU's identity as a normative power may be evolving, necessitating more nuanced theoretical approaches. The contrast between the EU and the United States is often emphasized in this debate. Kagan argued that the US and EU have fundamentally different security approaches the US, with its superior military strength, is more willing to use force. Meanwhile, Europe has developed a softer, non-military strategy that reflects its capabilities and limitations. This dynamic is sometimes summarized with the saying: "the US makes the dinner, while the EU does the dishes." Differences in economic power, policy

consistency, and security cultures have strengthened this divide (Kagan, 2003).

As Whitman (2011) notes, the EU's global influence cannot be fully understood by only looking at its military power. The Union's focus on norms and governance is just as critical. However, some critics argue that the EU's rhetorical emphasis on norms can sometimes hide its strategic or economic interests. In reality, the EU uses both soft power (diplomacy, negotiation, compromise) and hard power tools, and its actions often combine values with pragmatic interests (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 227).

Ultimately, although the idea of Normative Power Europe remains a strong framework for understanding the EU's international role, the line between moral obligation and geopolitical necessity has become more blurred. The ongoing debate over the EU's identity as a global actor now centers on how these aspects can coexist and whether the EU can continue to set global standards while effectively responding to new security challenges.

Normative principles are integrated throughout the European Union's policies and are visible in many of its initiatives. One of the most prominent examples is the EU's accession policy, which is based on the Copenhagen criteria. These criteria require candidate countries to establish democratic institutions, uphold human rights, and respect the rule of law as conditions for membership (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). This approach reflects the EU's self-conception as a 'normative power' (Manners, 2002), emphasizing the export of liberal-democratic norms as a central feature of its external relations (Diez, 2005). Likewise, in its development aid, the EU concentrates on reducing poverty, tackling threats to human security, and promoting good governance clear signs of its normative priorities (Carbone, 2007). The 'normative power Europe' framework has shaped much scholarly analysis of EU external action (Whitman, 2013), highlighting the EU's distinctiveness compared to more traditional actors.

However, the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape has cast doubt on the effectiveness of these normative tools as primary instruments of EU external action. Scholars have increasingly questioned whether the EU's normative approach is sufficient in the face of systemic threats and power politics (Toje, 2011). The war in Ukraine, in particular, has significantly challenged the established security order in Europe and reignited debate about the EU's ability to prevent conflict solely through normative means. Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine brought the war to European soil and exposed the limitations of relying primarily on dialogue, deterrent threats, and normative persuasion during acute security crises (Biscop, 2021).

In response, the EU has taken steps that go far beyond its usual approach. It imposed unprecedented economic sanctions on Russia, provided substantial financial assistance to Ukraine, and delivered significant military aid through mechanisms like the European Peace Facility.

These actions illustrate the EU's growing readiness to deploy hard power alongside its normative strategy. This adjustment aligns with a broader trend toward pragmatic, flexible external action as the EU adapts to a much more unstable international environment.

The war has also triggered important internal debates within the EU about the need for deeper defence cooperation, enhanced energy security, and greater strategic autonomy (Howorth, 2014). This period has made clear that diplomacy, multilateralism, and the promotion of norms remain central pillars of EU foreign policy (Smith, 2014). However, they now operate alongside sanctions, military support, and strategic security measures. The result is a more complex and multi-layered external action, reflecting the increasing challenges facing the Union. Some scholars argue that this evolution represents an "awakening of geopolitical Europe" (Borrell, 2022), with the EU increasingly blending normative and material instruments to safeguard its interests.

Ultimately, the Russia-Ukraine war marks a critical turning point for the EU's international identity. It has not only exposed the limitations of a normative power framework but also fueled a broader discussion about whether the EU is being compelled to adopt a more overtly geopolitical stance in an increasingly competitive world. Recent scholarship suggests this moment may be pivotal for redefining the Union's role in global politics and testing the resilience of its foundational values under pressure (Pishchikova, 2025).

### 2.3. The EU's Evolving International Role: From Normative Power to Strategic Actor

Recent scholarship highlights that the EU's external action can no longer be understood solely through normative frameworks, as strategic and geopolitical instruments have become increasingly central (Foreign Policy Instruments, 2025; Youngs et al., 2023). In international relations, geopolitical power refers to an actor's ability to influence others to obtain material resources and reshape security environments. Traditionally, world order has been associated with military power and coercive capabilities, with realist theorists emphasizing the dominant role of military force in foreign affairs. However, more recent perspectives also recognize economic power driven by technological innovation, energy management, and alliances as a principal form of geopolitical influence.

Synthesizing earlier theoretical perspectives reveals a profound transformation in the conceptualization of EU power. Once predominantly framed as a 'normative power' promoting democracy, human rights, multilateralism, free trade, and sustainable development the EU is now recognized as operating within a more complex paradigm (Michalski & Parker, 2024, p. 263; Foreign Policy Instruments, 2025). The challenges posed by mounting global competition and instability have rendered a solely normative approach increasingly untenable. Consequently, the EU has adopted a more proactive, pragmatic posture,

blending its traditional value-based agenda with concrete strategic instruments. Democracy, human rights, and the rule of law remain foundational, yet they are now routinely complemented or even superseded by mechanisms of deterrence, coercion, and geopolitical competition (Youngs et al., 2023).

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 profoundly reshaped European policy debates, underscoring the dual imperative to assess effects on democracy and the broader geopolitical environment. Western leaders depicted the invasion as an existential threat not only to Ukraine, but also to fundamental democratic norms and the international, rules-based order (Kagan, 2002; Youngs et al., 2023). This framing galvanized EU institutions and member states to articulate renewed commitments to defending democracy, yet, in practice, these normative goals were frequently subordinated to immediate security imperatives and material concerns, resulting in democracy initiatives being overshadowed by strategic priorities (Youngs et al., 2023).

The events of 2022 fundamentally changed the landscape of support for democracy in Europe. The war was widely seen as an attack on both Ukraine's emerging democracy and the broader concept of democracy itself, sparking unity among European democracies but also increasing challenges to democracy within the EU and beyond. Russia's violation of international law and norms risked encouraging other autocratic regimes, making the connection between democracy support and geopolitics especially clear (Youngs et al., 2023).

In this context, deterrence has assumed renewed centrality, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The persistence of the conflict has reinforced the perception that Europe faces enduring and escalating threats. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte's 2025 observation, "We are not at war, but we are not at peace either," epitomizes the prevailing sense of uncertainty. Russia's continued hybrid warfare has exposed enduring gaps in the EU's military deterrence, prompting calls from leaders such as Ursula von der Leyen for urgent enhancements to strategic capabilities (Klimburg, 2026). While the EU still lacks a unified military structure, it increasingly contributes to deterrence through military aid, intensified NATO cooperation, and robust strategic signaling (EU-NATO cooperation, 2025).

Economic sanctions have also become a core pillar of EU external action, marking a shift toward more coercive and restrictive measures (Gehrke & Ringhof, 2023). These sanctions are part of a broader strategy of economic statecraft, where trade policy, financial regulation, energy policy, and investment controls are leveraged to advance geopolitical aims.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the EU is not abandoning its foundational principles, but rather recalibrating its external action by integrating them with more assertive and strategic instruments. This evolving

approach reflects both the constraints of the current international system and the imperatives of a shifting geopolitical landscape, positioning the EU at the intersection of normative legitimacy and pragmatic realism. The Union's recent responses thus reveal an adaptive and multifaceted international identity one that strategically blends traditional value-based strategies with effective, tangible tools (Riga & Lika, 2024).

The notion of "geopolitical Europe" has gained significant traction among policymakers and scholars, who increasingly debate how to equip the EU for a more competitive and uncertain global context (Koenig, 2019; Kissack et al., 2024). Despite its status as one of the world's leading economic powers, the EU's military capabilities remain circumscribed, with collective defence still heavily reliant on NATO. Enduring divergences in national interests, persistent institutional fragmentation, and a dearth of military resources continue to constrain the EU's ability to function as a cohesive strategic actor.

Theoretical frameworks such as Joseph Nye's concept of "smart power" are increasingly pertinent in capturing the EU's evolving approach (Nye, 2004, pp. 5-17, 32; Nye, 2019, p. 7; Keohane & Nye, 2012, pp. 10-15). By integrating economic, diplomatic, and strategic instruments including sanctions, military support, and diplomatic advocacy the EU exemplifies a multidimensional understanding of power that transcends the binary between coercion and consent. This dynamic synthesis allows the EU to navigate the complexities of contemporary global politics more effectively.

In sum, the EU's external action is best conceptualized as a dynamic fusion of normative commitments and strategic imperatives. The shift from "Normative Power Europe" to an increasingly assertive "Geopolitical Europe" marks a paradigmatic transformation in the Union's international posture, even as debates persist regarding the extent and limits of its geopolitical agency (Riga & Lika, 2024; Anghel, 2025; Zolotarova & Lukash, 2025).

### 3. Methodology

This research employs a rigorous qualitative case study design to examine the evolution of the European Union's conflict-resolution strategies, focusing specifically on its response to the Russia-Ukraine war. The case study approach was chosen for its strengths in capturing complex, context-dependent phenomena and in generating deep, longitudinal insights into policy transformation (Yin, 2018; Rule, 2024).

The EU's response to the Russia-Ukraine war was selected as the principal empirical case due to its status as a watershed in EU external policy. This case facilitates an in-depth exploration of the interplay between normative and strategic imperatives, enabling a critical evaluation of hybrid approaches in real-world crisis management. To maximize the robustness and credibility of the findings, data

triangulation was applied across a diverse set of sources. Primary materials comprised official EU documents including Council conclusions, Commission communications, Parliament resolutions, policy statements, press releases, and speeches by key EU officials from 2014 to 2026. Secondary sources included peer-reviewed academic articles, leading policy reports from major think tanks (e.g., Bruegel, CEPS, and the European Council on Foreign Relations), and expert commentaries. Additionally, media coverage from reputable international news outlets and specialized reporting on EU external action and the Russia-Ukraine conflict were systematically reviewed. All documents were coded using categories reflecting normative, strategic, and hybrid approaches, employing a transparent coding protocol to ensure reliability (Saldana, 2021).

The analytical framework combined process tracing and thematic analysis to identify key turning points, patterns, and causal mechanisms underlying the EU's adaptation of conflict resolution strategies. Process tracing was used to map the chronological sequence of policy responses and trace the interaction between normative legitimacy and strategic coercion (Beach & Pedersen, 2023). Thematic analysis of academic and policy literature provided additional contextualization and enabled critical comparison of competing interpretations of the EU's evolving power identity (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The study focused primarily on major EU-level decisions and actions, supplemented, where relevant, by selected member-state contributions.

All data used in this research come from publicly available documents, academic publications, and media sources. No personal or confidential information was collected. Full academic integrity and transparency have been maintained throughout the study, and all sources are properly cited.

While the qualitative case study approach provides rich insights into the EU's conflict-resolution strategies, the exclusive focus on the Russia-Ukraine war may constrain the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Nevertheless, this case offers a highly relevant lens for understanding the EU's current trajectory and serves as a robust empirical foundation for theory-building and future comparative research (Rule, 2024).

To enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the findings, data source triangulation and systematic coding procedures were rigorously implemented. Comprehensive descriptions of research design, data collection, and analytic steps ensure methodological transparency and facilitate reproducibility (Saldana, 2021). By employing this rigorous methodological framework and addressing potential limitations, the study aims to deliver a comprehensive and credible analysis of the European Union's hybrid approach to conflict resolution amid evolving global challenges.

#### 4. The Evolution of EU Conflict Resolution Instruments

The development of the European Union's conflict-resolution mechanisms is best understood as a dynamic, adaptive process, shaped by the interplay between global security transformations and the EU's own institutional evolution. Rather than developing along a linear trajectory, the EU's approach emerges through a complex negotiation between its foundational normative principles and the imperatives of an increasingly competitive geopolitical environment (Manners, 2002; Vlahutin, 2024; Duna, 2025). This section applies a qualitative, process-tracing methodology, triangulating primary policy documents with academic and policy literature, to provide a rigorous analysis of how the EU's toolkit has adapted to contemporary challenges.

In the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the EU's conflict management strategy was anchored in normative and institutional instruments diplomacy, economic incentives, political conditionality, and multilateral engagement driven by a strong ambition to promote democracy, the rule of law, and human rights beyond its borders (Youngs, 2010; Manners, 2002). Over time, however, the emergence of new security challenges and the resurgence of great-power competition particularly exemplified by Russia's invasion of Ukraine have exposed the limitations of a norms-centric strategy. These developments have compelled the EU to systematically reassess and expand its external toolkit, integrating both normative and strategic instruments to enhance its effectiveness in a rapidly evolving global order.

Analytically, this evolution is not a binary shift from normative to hard power. Rather, it reflects a dialectical and iterative process in which the EU continuously navigates the structural constraints of its normative identity while assessing the risks and opportunities associated with more strategic and coercive tools (Missiroli, 2025; Vlahutin, 2024; Duna, 2025). As a result, the EU has developed a multi-layered conflict-resolution architecture in which normative and strategic logics intersect and often reinforce one another. This hybridization underscores the EU's capacity to act as a flexible and adaptive international actor, transcending simplistic dichotomies and responding more effectively to complex security environments.

Accordingly, the following sections employ a rigorous, methodologically-grounded analysis to examine these dynamics across three interconnected pillars. This structure is designed to capture both the enduring continuities and the significant changes characterizing the EU's evolving response to contemporary international challenges.

##### 4.1. The EU's Traditional Normative Instruments

Across all dimensions, the EU's conflict management approach has historically embodied its self-perception as a normative power (Manners, 2002, pp. 241-243). Rooted in

the theory of normative power, the EU has prioritized promoting democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and multilateral cooperation through its external relations (Youngs, 2010). These principles have not only formed the bedrock of the EU's foreign engagement but have also guided its efforts in conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding. Central to this normative agenda is political conditionality: the EU has systematically linked political and economic cooperation to democratic governance and institutional reform, particularly via enlargement and neighborhood policies. The Copenhagen criteria, for example, require prospective member states to guarantee stable democratic institutions, human rights, and the rule of law as prerequisites for accession. This approach is evidenced in process-tracing analyses of EU policy documents and accession negotiations (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Economic instruments have also been central to advancing the EU's normative objectives. Financial assistance, preferential trade agreements, and collaboration with financial institutions have been systematically mobilized to promote institutional transformation and improved governance, especially in unstable or conflict-affected regions (Youngs, 2010). Instruments such as the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) have provided substantial funding to countries like those in the Western Balkans, supporting judicial reform, human rights protection, and governance improvements. The EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, established in the wake of the Orange Revolution, exemplifies this approach by linking economic cooperation to judicial reforms and anti-corruption efforts in Ukraine.

This comprehensive policy framework aligns with the EU's broader mission to address conflict at its roots by fostering economic growth, building institutional capacity, and improving governance systems. In practice, the EU's conflict-resolution activities have focused on diplomacy and civilian crisis management. Notably, the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX) serves as a flagship civilian mission, supporting policing, justice, and customs reform. EU Election Observation Missions, such as those in the Democratic Republic of Congo, have helped enhance transparency and trust in electoral processes. The EU's stabilization and peacebuilding interventions in the Western Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East have consistently relied on a blend of norm diffusion, institutional participation, and economic incentives, with a preference for civilian over military instruments (Manners, 2002; Youngs, 2010).

#### 4.2. Strategic and Coercive Tools

While the EU's conflict management approach was long anchored in normative tools, recent years have witnessed a marked shift toward strategic and coercive policy instruments in its external relations. The intensification of global geopolitical competition, the emergence of new

security threats (such as hybrid and cyber warfare), and the recognized limitations of normative approaches have catalyzed this transition (Portela & Olsen, 2023; Pertiwi, 2024; Vlahutin, 2024; Duna, 2025). Process tracing of EU crisis response policies indicates that the war in Ukraine was a critical juncture, accelerating the integration of strategic instruments into the EU's external toolkit.

A cornerstone of the EU's strategic toolkit is its deployment of economic sanctions under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). These sanctions serve as deterrents against states or individuals that violate international law or threaten peace and security. Process-tracing analysis of policy documents reveals that such measures increasingly target not only states, but also non-state actors engaged in activities like nuclear weapons trafficking and destabilizing operations.

The current sanctions regime is highly detailed, specifying categories and buyers who may be liable for re-exporting products through third countries, such as drones. The war in Ukraine has further underscored sanctions as the EU's most potent foreign policy instrument. Since the conflict's onset, the EU has implemented sweeping restrictions: bans on financial transactions, embargoes on oil and gas, and prohibitions on industrial and military goods destined for Russia. These measures, codified in Council Regulation (EU) 833/2014, are the product of an iterative policy-making process involving extensive coordination among EU institutions and member states (European Commission, 2023).

While these actions highlight the growing importance of geo-economic strategies in conflict management and demonstrate the EU's capacity to wield economic power they also expose significant limitations. The effectiveness of sanctions often depends on the unity and commitment of all member states, with divergent national interests frequently undermining enforcement (Portela & Olsen, 2023). Furthermore, sanctions can have unintended humanitarian consequences and may not always produce the desired strategic effects on targeted actors (Pertiwi, 2024). Comparative, cross-case analysis shows that the success of such measures is often contingent on multilateral coordination and domestic political consensus.

Beyond sanctions, the EU has increasingly integrated economic and energy security instruments into its broader geopolitical strategy, seeking to enhance resilience in critical sectors such as energy, technology, and supply chains. These efforts extend beyond traditional military policy to encompass regulatory frameworks, trade alliances, and financial interventions central arenas in shaping the Union's global influence. However, process tracing and expert commentary highlight vulnerabilities inherent in this approach, including exposure to countermeasures, global market volatility, and the risk of overdependence on external actors (Pertiwi, 2024).

Over time, the EU has strengthened its position by

developing sophisticated regulatory frameworks, forging new trade alliances, operating in global financial markets, and managing complex supply chains (European Commission, 2023). Today, these geo-economic tools are central to the Union's strategy for navigating global challenges and strategic rivalries. Nevertheless, thematic analysis and policy evaluations indicate that their effectiveness must be continually assessed in light of internal divergences, the threat of external retaliation, and the variability of outcomes across different contexts (Portela & Olsen, 2023).

#### 4.3. Hybrid Model: Challenges and Opportunities

The integration of normative and strategic instruments into the EU's conflict-resolution toolkit has given rise to what many scholars and practitioners now describe as a "hybrid" approach (Missiroli, 2025; Vlahutin, 2024; Duna, 2025). Rather than abandoning its normative foundations, the EU has increasingly blended core principles with strategic capabilities to respond to intensifying international competition. The Ukraine conflict is a paradigmatic case: the EU's response has combined robust defence of international law and state sovereignty central normative values with forceful strategic measures, such as imposing sanctions on Russia, delivering military aid to Ukraine, and advancing energy security policies to reduce dependence on Russian resources. This intentional combination of diplomacy, support for democratic reforms, and strategic action exemplifies the hybrid model. Thematic analysis of EU policy responses to Ukraine illustrates the operationalization of this hybridization.

This hybrid approach offers both notable advantages and substantial challenges for the EU as an international actor. On one hand, it provides the flexibility and effectiveness required to address increasingly complex crises, enabling interventions grounded in both values and power (Missiroli, 2025). On the other hand, merging normative and strategic instruments can generate internal tensions and ambiguities. Striking the right balance between normative commitments and coercive tools such as sanctions or military support raises persistent questions about the Union's consistency and credibility on the global stage. Furthermore, process tracing reveals that disagreements among member states over the relative weight of principles versus strategic interests frequently complicate policy formulation and undermine unified responses (Vlahutin, 2024; Duna, 2025).

Enduring institutional boundaries, divergent national preferences, and limited military capacities continue to constrain the EU's ability to function as a fully integrated geopolitical actor. Thus, the evolution of its conflict-resolution instruments should not be interpreted as a simple, linear shift from normative to geopolitical power. Instead, it represents the emergence of a genuinely hybrid international relations framework, where principles and strategies are deeply interdependent yet sometimes in tension. A nuanced, methodologically robust analysis of this hybrid relationship

grounded in process tracing and thematic evaluation is essential for understanding both the strengths and the persistent limitations of the EU's current role in international conflict resolution.

### 5. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, utilizing process tracing, thematic analysis, academic literature, and socio-economic indicators. Drawing on the theoretical framework that conceptualizes the European Union (EU) as a hybrid actor, the findings demonstrate that the Russia-Ukraine war has served as a critical juncture, accelerating the transformation of the EU's external action.

The analysis reveals a clear shift from a predominantly normative and civilian approach, characterized by diplomacy, conditionality, and economic incentives, toward a more complex and multidimensional strategy that incorporates strategic, coercive, and geo-economic instruments. This transformation is not linear; rather, it reflects a layered process in which traditional normative tools continue to function alongside newly expanded capabilities such as sanctions, military assistance, and energy policy interventions.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that this hybridization has occurred across multiple interconnected domains, including security and defence integration, economic statecraft, energy policy, and diplomatic engagement. Simultaneously, the empirical evidence identifies significant socio-economic implications and internal constraints that influence the effectiveness and sustainability of the EU's response.

Collectively, the findings indicate that the EU's evolving role cannot be adequately described by a binary distinction between normative and geopolitical power. Instead, the Union's external action is best conceptualized as a dynamic hybrid model, characterized by the simultaneous use of value-based legitimacy and strategic instruments in response to an increasingly complex and contested international environment.

#### 5.1. The Russia-Ukraine War as a Critical Juncture

The Russia-Ukraine war has emerged as the most consequential empirical test of the European Union's (EU) evolving external action and its shift from a predominantly normative actor to a genuinely hybrid power (Fiott, 2023). Unlike previous crises such as those in the Western Balkans or Libya, this conflict has exposed the limitations of relying solely on traditional normative instruments diplomacy, political dialogue, and conditionality. At the same time, it has pushed the EU to accelerate the integration of strategic and coercive tools into its conflict-resolution framework. Methodologically, the Russia-Ukraine war serves as a "critical case," given its unprecedented scale, its direct challenge to European security, and the intensity and diversity of the EU's policy responses. This makes it a rich context for observing the Union's ongoing hybrid

transformation.

This section systematically compares and contrasts the EU's pre-war and post-war approaches, illustrating how the war accelerated the Union's transition from a predominantly normative actor to a hybrid and increasingly geopolitical power. Drawing on process tracing, thematic analysis, and triangulation of primary and secondary sources, the analysis highlights the profound changes in the EU's policy toolkit, strategic culture, and external perceptions.

## 5.2. The EU's Pre-war Approach: Normative Power and Soft Instruments

In the post-Cold War era, the EU's external identity was largely defined by its commitment to universal values democracy, human rights, and the rule of law pursued through enlargement, neighborhood policies, and development aid (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). The "Normative Power Europe" paradigm painted the Union as a transformative actor, exporting norms to foster stability and peace. In the decades preceding the Ukraine war, the EU's external action was rooted in its self-image as a "normative power" (Manners, 2002). The Union's conflict resolution strategies prioritized the promotion of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, operationalized through diplomacy, structured dialogue, conditionality, and economic incentives. Enlargement policy, the European Neighborhood Policy, and civilian crisis management missions all reflected this model (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022).

The EU's preferred instruments included:

**Political dialogue and mediation:** The EU facilitated negotiations and peace talks in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership, leveraging its reputation as an honest broker.

**Conditionality and incentives:** Tools such as the Copenhagen Criteria and Association Agreements tied access to EU benefits to benchmarks in democratic reform, minority rights, and legal alignment.

**Economic support and technical assistance:** The Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) and other financial mechanisms promoted governance, development, and institutional capacity-building.

**Civilian missions:** Through the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the EU deployed civilian missions such as EULEX in Kosovo to reform justice, policing, and customs.

**Military means were deliberately minimized.** Sanctions were used, but typically as supplementary, targeted measures rather than central instruments. The EU's overall approach was gradualist, emphasizing long-term stabilization through transformation and integration, rather than coercion or rapid intervention.

Civilian and soft-power tools such as the Copenhagen

Criteria, Association Agreements, and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) took precedence, with military means relegated to a secondary role. However, events such as the 2014 Crimea crisis and subsequent instability in the EU's eastern neighborhood exposed the shortcomings of a purely normative approach (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024). Initial reliance on economic conditionality and diplomatic mediation failed to prevent escalation, revealing the need for a more robust and flexible external toolkit. This realization would shape the EU's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

## 5.3. The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Catalyst for Paradigm Shift

The outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine exposed the limits of the EU's traditional approach. Diplomatic efforts and economic conditionality proved inadequate to deter or reverse Russian aggression. The existential nature of the threat and the scale of the humanitarian crisis demanded a recalibration of both the EU's identity and its policy instruments (Fiott, 2023; Missiroli, 2025).

Key dimensions of the paradigm shift include:

**Comprehensive Sanctions:** The EU enacted eleven rounds of sanctions targeting Russian financial institutions, technology exports, energy revenues, and individuals connected to the regime (European Council, 2026). These sanctions were broader, deeper, and more coordinated than any previous EU effort, and their rapid deployment marked a turning point in EU economic statecraft.

**Direct Military Assistance:** For the first time in its history, the EU provided lethal military aid to a country at war via the European Peace Facility (EPF) and coordinated joint procurement of arms and ammunition. By mid-2024, combined EU and member-state commitments to Ukraine's defence had surpassed €30 billion.

**Energy Security and Strategic Autonomy:** The crisis forced the EU to cut its dependence on Russian gas from 40% to below 10% within two years, through diversification, LNG imports, and accelerated investment in renewables (McWilliams et al., 2022; Zolotarova & Lukash, 2025). This required not only policy innovation but also unprecedented solidarity and risk-sharing among member states.

**Enlargement and Strategic Partnerships:** Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 was both a normative and a strategic decision, signaling a deepening of the EU's geopolitical commitment to its eastern neighbors. Simultaneously, cooperation with NATO, the G7, and the US intensified, and the EU sought to counter Russian narratives in the Global South.

**Hybrid Model Institutionalization:** The EU's response blended value-based discourse (defence of democracy, sovereignty, and the rule of law) with hard power tools sanctions, military aid, and energy policy demonstrating a unique hybridization of its external action.

#### 5.4. Geopoliticization: Strategic Adaptation and Policy Transformation

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the 2022 invasion marked a watershed moment, compelling the EU to reassess and adapt its external action paradigm (Fiott, 2023). The proliferation of hybrid threats, energy vulnerabilities, and renewed great power rivalry demanded the integration of military, economic, and diplomatic instruments effectively hybridizing EU foreign policy (European Council, 2022). A timeline of responses illustrates this evolution:

- **February-March 2022:** Immediate condemnation of Russia, diplomatic isolation, and rollout of the first comprehensive sanctions package.
- **Spring-Summer 2022:** Launch of REPowerEU, emergency interventions in energy markets, and a surge in military and humanitarian aid.
- **June 2022:** Granting of EU candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova.
- **2023-2024:** Additional sanctions, increased military aid, joint procurement of ammunition, and deepening defence cooperation (European Council, 2024a).
- **2025:** Reinforcement of sanctions, continued military support to Ukraine, expansion of the European defence industrial base, and efforts to strengthen economic and technological resilience (European Commission, 2025).
- **2025-2026:** Consolidation of a more geopolitical EU through long-term security commitments to Ukraine, enhanced strategic autonomy initiatives, and the closer integration of enlargement, security, and economic policies (European Commission, 2025).

##### 5.4.1. Security and Defence Integration

The Ukraine war has catalyzed an unprecedented level of EU security and defence integration. The European Peace Facility (EPF) enabled the Union to collectively provide lethal military aid, ammunition, and training to Ukraine a move previously unimaginable for the EU (Missiroli, 2025; Fiott, 2023). By mid-2024, EU and member state commitments to military assistance exceeded €30 billion, including air defence systems, armored vehicles, and artillery shells (European Defence Agency, 2023).

The adoption of the "Strategic Compass" in 2022 marked a new phase in collective defence planning and crisis management (European Council, 2022). Defence spending across the EU reached record highs, but progress toward true strategic autonomy remains limited by divergent national priorities and the continued need for Transatlantic cooperation.

##### 5.4.2. Economic Statecraft and Sanctions

Since 2022, the EU has enacted its most comprehensive sanctions regime to date, targeting Russian financial institutions, central bank reserves, technology exports,

aviation, and especially the energy sector (Pertiwi, 2024; European Commission, 2023). By 2024, eleven sanctions packages had been adopted, including bans on coal, oil, and eventually gas imports from Russia (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024).

These measures have had a severe impact on key sectors of the Russian economy banking, high-tech, and arms manufacturing though hydrocarbon revenues, especially via third countries, have partially offset losses (Pertiwi, 2024). At the same time, sanctions have had collateral effects within the EU, including energy price volatility, inflation, and contentious debates over burden sharing. The overall effectiveness of sanctions remains debated, as unity among member states is occasionally strained.

Since February 2022, the EU has adopted 13 sanction packages against Russia marking the most comprehensive and sustained sanctions effort in EU history (European Council, 2026; European Council, 2024b).

The EU has frozen approximately €300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets and €19 billion in assets belonging to sanctioned individuals and entities (European Council, 2024a). Over 2,000 individuals and entities including President Putin, cabinet members, the State Duma, oligarchs, bank executives, and military-industrial companies have been targeted. Seven major Russian banks, such as Sberbank and VTB, were cut off from SWIFT. Russian sovereign wealth funds and state-owned enterprises face severe investment and lending restrictions (European Council, 2026; European Council, 2024c).

##### 5.4.3. Energy Security as Geopolitical Leverage

Energy security has become central to the EU's geopolitical strategy. Before the war, Russia supplied roughly 40% of the EU's gas imports; by late 2023, this figure had fallen below 10% due to diversification, increased LNG imports, and the REPowerEU initiative (McWilliams et al., 2022; European Commission, 2023; Zolotarova, & Lukash, 2025). New LNG terminals, expanded flows from Norway and Algeria, and accelerated investment in renewables have driven this transition.

The EU banned all imports of Russian coal (since August 2022), crude oil (since December 2022), and refined petroleum products (since February 2023). By June 2024, EU imports of Russian oil had dropped by over 95%, and gas imports had fallen below 10% of pre-war levels (IEA, 2024; McWilliams et al., 2022). Export bans were imposed on advanced technology (semiconductors, navigation, aviation), luxury goods, and dual-use items. More than 1,000 Russian ships and aircraft have been denied access to EU ports and airspace (European Commission, 2024).

The REPowerEU plan mobilized €300 billion for energy diversification, renewables, and infrastructure upgrades (European Commission, 2024). LNG imports from the US and Qatar increased by 60% between 2021 and 2024. Investment in renewables (solar, wind, hydrogen) surged,

with the EU installing a record 56 GW of new renewable capacity in 2023 (European Commission, 2024). Joint gas purchasing mechanisms and solidarity agreements have been introduced to manage price spikes and supply disruptions (McWilliams et al., 2022; Zolotarova & Lukash, 2025).

#### 5.4.4. *Diplomacy, Enlargement, and Alliances*

The Ukraine war has revitalized the EU's enlargement and neighborhood policy. Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022 was both a normative and a geopolitical act, signaling a long-term strategic commitment. The EU has also deepened diplomatic engagement with the US, UK, G7, and NATO, while expanding outreach to the Global South to counter Russian narratives (European Council, 2022).

However, the accession process remains complex and politically sensitive. While geopolitical signaling is strong, actual negotiations reveal tensions over necessary reforms, the rule of law, and the Union's capacity to absorb new members, both for Ukraine and internally within the EU.

#### 5.4.5. *Military Assistance and Strategic Coherence*

The EU's hybrid approach is most clearly institutionalized in its simultaneous use of value-based rhetoric and material power. The European Peace Facility, joint arms procurement, and persistent sanctions all illustrate the Union's willingness to blend normative legitimacy with strategic coercion (Missiroli, 2025; Fiott, 2023). At the same time, the EU continues to frame its support for Ukraine as a defence of international law, sovereignty, and democratic values.

By mid-2024, the EU and member states committed over €33 billion in military aid to Ukraine including anti-tank missiles, air defence systems (IRIS-T, Patriot, NASAMS), armored vehicles, drones, and ammunition (European Defence Agency, 2025). The European Peace Facility (EPF) contributed €12 billion for lethal and non-lethal military assistance. EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine) has trained more than 40,000 Ukrainian troops, with plans to reach 50,000 by late 2024 (EEAS, 2024). Member states have delivered more than 500 tanks, 800 infantry fighting vehicles, and 100 multiple-launch rocket systems to Ukraine (European Defence Agency, 2025).

This strategy deploying economic, military, and diplomatic tools alongside a normative discourse has expanded the EU's influence but also surfaced internal tensions, including debates over the limits of military escalation, the sustainability of public support, and the risk of normative erosion. Ukrainian actors, including government and civil society, have generally welcomed EU support but have also called for more rapid and robust action, particularly in areas such as air defence, reconstruction, and clear accession timelines.

Overall, the war has tested not only the EU's external

actorness but also its internal cohesion, agility, and credibility as a global power. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has hastened the EU's transformation into a hybrid strategic-normative actor. Its response mixing diplomacy, sanctions, military aid, energy policy, and enlargement offers a multidimensional template for addressing future crises. Still, the case also reveals persistent limitations: diverging national interests, decision-making inertia, and the ongoing challenge of sustaining unity under pressure.

Looking forward, further research should examine the measurable impacts of EU measures on Russia, Ukraine, and the EU itself; the evolving relationship with the US and NATO; and the long-term prospects for EU strategic autonomy and normative leadership in a rapidly changing international landscape.

#### 5.5. *Socio-Economic Consequences of the Sanctions*

The European Union's unprecedented sanctions regime against Russia, implemented in response to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has generated extensive socio-economic consequences within the EU and globally. This section offers a comprehensive analysis of these effects, drawing on primary EU documents, recent scholarly research, and policy reports.

Since February 2022, the EU has adopted 13 rounds of sanctions targeting Russian financial institutions, energy exports, trade, technology transfers, and individuals linked to the Kremlin (European Council, 2024c; European Commission, 2023). These measures include:

Freezing of approximately €300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets; Cutting major Russian banks off from SWIFT; Ban on the import of Russian coal, crude oil, and petroleum products; Export bans on dual-use and high-tech goods; Travel bans and asset freezes on over 2,000 individuals and entities; This comprehensive package constitutes the most sustained and extensive sanctions effort in EU history (Fiott, 2023; Portela & Olsen, 2023).

The sanctions have significantly constrained the Russian economy, particularly in the following ways:

The European Union's sanctions against Russia have not only operated through formal state-based restrictions but have also triggered a significant wave of voluntary corporate disengagement, amplifying their overall economic impact. Since the onset of the Ukraine invasion, more than 1,000 multinational companies have publicly announced the curtailment, suspension, or termination of their operations in Russia, often going beyond the minimum legal requirements imposed by international sanctions. This large-scale corporate exodus systematically tracked by the Yale Chief Executive Leadership Institute illustrates how sanctions can spill into the private sector, exerting indirect economic pressure that reinforces official policy measures. The withdrawal of firms across sectors such as finance, energy, technology, and consumer goods has disrupted supply chains, reduced foreign investment, and eroded Russia's

integration into the global economy. At the same time, the persistence of some firms in maintaining operations highlights the uneven effectiveness of sanctions and the role of corporate decision-making in shaping their outcomes. Overall, this dynamic demonstrates that the EU's sanctions regime functions not only as a regulatory tool but also as a catalyst for broader market-driven responses, thereby increasing the depth and scope of economic coercion (YALE Celi List of Companies Leaving Russia, 2026)

**Fiscal Strain:** Export restrictions led to a sharp decline in energy revenues. The EU's embargo on Russian oil and the global price cap contributed to a 23% drop in Russian budget revenues from oil and gas in 2023 (IEA, 2024).

**Inflation and Living Standards:** Sanctions-induced supply chain disruptions and import substitution policies triggered inflation, leading to higher consumer prices and declining real wages in Russia (World Bank, 2023).

The sanctions regime is driving structural transformation in both the Russian and EU economies. In the EU, the crisis has accelerated the energy transition, supply chain diversification, and discussions on strategic autonomy. However, this experience also highlights the social costs and political risks of rapid economic decoupling, underscoring the need for robust social policies to support vulnerable groups.

In summary, the EU's sanctions on Russia have produced profound socio-economic consequences, constraining Russia's war effort and prompting significant economic adjustments and social challenges within Europe. This experience highlights both the strengths and limitations of economic statecraft, demonstrating that while sanctions can serve as effective foreign policy tools, their domestic and global spillover effects require careful management.

Although intended to weaken Russia's military capacity, the sanctions have also produced significant, albeit uneven, impacts within the EU. These include:

**Energy Security and Price Volatility:** Before the war, Russia supplied roughly 40% of the EU's natural gas and 27% of its crude oil imports (European Commission, 2023). The abrupt reduction and eventual ban on Russian energy imports triggered a continent-wide energy crisis:

**Price Spikes:** European natural gas prices soared to record levels in the second half of 2022, with the TTF benchmark exceeding €300/MWh in August 2022, nearly 15 times pre-crisis levels (IEA, 2024).

**Inflation:** Energy price shocks were a major driver of EU-wide inflation, which peaked at 10.6% in October 2022, the highest level since the introduction of the euro (Eurostat, 2026).

## 6. Discussion: Reassessing the EU's Transformation

The Russia-Ukraine war has provided a crucial vantage

point for rethinking the European Union's evolving role in international conflict management, offering a vivid empirical test of its external actorness (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024; Fiott, 2023). As the preceding analysis demonstrates, the EU has confronted a dramatically altered security environment by significantly broadening and recalibrating its foreign policy toolkit. This evolution inevitably raises fundamental theoretical questions: Is the EU moving towards the status of a conventional geopolitical power, as suggested by realist and neorealist perspectives (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 225). Alternatively, is it more accurate to describe the EU as consolidating its identity as a hybrid international actor that integrates both normative and strategic approaches in a distinctly European manner (Manners, 2002, p. 236; Missiroli, 2025).

Historically, the EU's international identity has been grounded in the "normative power" paradigm, emphasizing the diffusion of core values democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and multilateralism rather than the projection of coercive power (Whitman, 2011; Youngs, 2010). This civilian power ideal was reflected in a preference for diplomatic engagement, economic incentives, and institution-building, setting the EU apart from traditional great-power politics (Manners, 2002, p. 241; Sjursen, 2006). Even throughout the Ukraine war, the EU has continued to stress the defence of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the rules-based international order, thus sustaining its normative legitimacy and discursive continuity (European Commission, 2023).

At the same time, the Ukraine war has compelled the EU to operationalize a more strategic and material policy toolkit (Fiott, 2023; Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024; Pertiwi, 2024). The breadth and depth of the EU's sanctions against Russia, substantial military and financial support for Ukraine, significant changes in energy policy, and the acceleration of Ukraine's accession process all point to a more assertive and adaptive external agenda (Zolotarova & Lukash, 2025; Koval & Vachudova, 2024). Increasingly, the war is viewed as a "geopolitical reset" for Europe, prompting deeper intra-EU security collaboration, increased defence spending, and closer strategic alignment with both the Transatlantic community and neighboring regions (Koval & Vachudova, 2024; Fiott, 2023; Howorth, 2014).

The institutionalization of new security instruments such as the European Peace Facility, far-reaching economic sanctions, and the Strategic Compass further demonstrates the EU's growing strategic capacity and readiness to act (European Council, 2022; European Defence Agency, 2023). These mechanisms represent a marked departure from the Union's historical reluctance to engage in hard security, indicating a more mature strategic culture.

Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to claim that the EU now mirrors classical great-power geopolitics (Hyde-Price, 2006). Structural and institutional constraints persist: the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) remains fundamentally intergovernmental, leading to slow,

cumbersome decision-making (Keukeleire & Delreux, 2022). The EU's strategic autonomy is further limited by its dependence on NATO military infrastructure and the absence of a unified command structure, distinguishing its agency from that of traditional nation-states (Howorth, 2014; Fiott, 2023).

Contemporary research increasingly frames the EU's actorness in terms of "hybridization" rather than a shift from one model to another (Missiroli, 2025). The hybrid paradigm foregrounds the interplay between material power and normative legitimacy. While realist perspectives stress military capability and strategic interests (Hyde-Price, 2006), the normative framework emphasizes values, legal norms, and collective identity (Manners, 2002, p. 236; Sjørnsen, 2006). In practice, the EU's approach is neither strictly normative nor purely strategic; rather, it involves a dynamic layering and sequencing of both toolkits, often in response to external shocks (Koval & Vachudova, 2024).

The Ukraine war, above all, underscores how the defence of democratic values and international law is now inseparable from the use of economic leverage, military assistance, and energy security policy (Missiroli, 2025). At the discursive level, the EU continues to legitimize its actions through international law and democratic principles (Manners, 2002, p. 242; Whitman, 2011, p. 18). At the operational level, it systematically deploys sanctions, military support, and strategic partnerships tools long associated with classical statecraft. Institutionally, reforms in defence procurement, joint crisis management, and PESCO reflect a steadily growing capacity for coordinated strategic action (European Defence Agency, 2023, p. 6; Howorth, 2014; Fiott, 2023).

In conclusion, the evidence suggests that the EU is neither abandoning its normative roots nor simply morphing into a conventional geopolitical actor. Instead, it is assembling a sophisticated, context-dependent toolkit that enables flexible calibration between normative and strategic instruments. This duality expands European agency but also generates persistent tensions between values and interests, unity and national prerogatives, consensus and rapid response that will continue to shape the EU's future trajectory.

Taken together, the available evidence supports viewing the EU as a maturing hybrid actor in international conflict governance. The Union's legitimacy and influence remain rooted in its normative commitments and transnational achievements, even as it increasingly leverages strategic instruments in an era of competitive geopolitics (Nizhnikau & Moshes, 2024; Koval & Vachudova, 2024). Far from signaling the end of Normative Power Europe, the Russia-Ukraine war marks a crucial inflection point in the EU's adaptation to a fundamentally changed international environment (Manners, 2002; Fiott, 2023).

## 7. Conclusion

This article examines whether the European Union (EU) remains best understood as a normative power or whether the Russia-Ukraine war has triggered a more fundamental evolution in its international role. The analysis presented here demonstrates that the EU's approach to conflict resolution no longer fits neatly within the traditional binary of "normative versus geopolitical power." Instead, the EU increasingly operates as a hybrid actor one that skillfully blends value-based legitimacy with strategic and, at times, coercive instruments in response to a changing and challenging global environment.

Tracing the EU's foundations as a civilian and normative power rooted in democracy, human rights, and multilateralism, this study has shown how recent geopolitical shifts culminating in the war in Ukraine have tested and transformed that identity. The conflict exposed the limits of relying solely on diplomacy, conditionality, and economic incentives. In the face of direct military aggression and systemic threats to European security, these tools proved inadequate.

In response, the EU expanded its policy toolkit in unprecedented ways: imposing sweeping economic sanctions, providing military assistance through the European Peace Facility, overhauling its energy security approach, and accelerating enlargement for Ukraine and Moldova. These actions were not only pragmatic responses to crisis but also carried strong symbolic value, reaffirming the EU's ongoing commitment to defending democracy and the rules-based order even as it adopted more assertive methods.

However, this evolution towards hybrid power remains incomplete and fraught with challenges. Internal divisions, institutional fragmentation, and continued reliance on NATO for hard security all limit the EU's capacity for decisive action. Balancing normative imperatives with strategic interests is an ongoing struggle, as seen in debates over military support, energy solidarity, and the pace of enlargement.

What emerges is a portrait of an EU that is, perhaps unexpectedly, flexible and resilient adapting to rapidly changing realities by leveraging both its normative appeal and its growing strategic capabilities. However, this duality also brings new dilemmas: preserving unity among member states, preventing the dilution of core values under security pressures, and developing mechanisms for timely, coherent crisis response.

The principal contribution of this article lies in moving beyond simplistic dichotomies, offering a nuanced framework that better captures the complexity of the EU's evolving identity. The Ukraine war has provided both a catalyst and a stringent test for this hybrid model, illuminating its strengths as well as its unresolved tensions.

Looking forward, future research should assess the

sustainability and effectiveness of the EU's hybrid approach across diverse crisis contexts and explore whether deeper strategic autonomy can be achieved without eroding the Union's normative foundations. Equally vital will be understanding how both internal divisions and external pressures shape the EU's trajectory in an ever more volatile world.

Ultimately, as global competition intensifies, the EU's attempt to reconcile ethical aspirations with pragmatic necessities will remain central to both academic and policy debates. Whether this hybrid model can truly safeguard Europe's interests and values in the long term will define the next chapter of EU foreign policy.

Beyond its geopolitical and strategic implications, this study's findings highlight that the European Union's hybrid response to the Russia-Ukraine war has also generated substantial socio-economic consequences. The sanctions regime, while effective in constraining Russia's economic and military capacity, has simultaneously imposed high costs within the EU, particularly through energy price volatility, inflationary pressures, and fiscal burdens associated with crisis management measures. The rapid decoupling from Russian energy sources and the restructuring of supply chains have accelerated long-term strategic transformations, including energy diversification and debates on strategic autonomy. However, these adjustments have also exposed internal asymmetries among member states and heightened socio-economic vulnerabilities. In this respect, the EU's experience underscores that economic statecraft is a double-edged instrument: while it enhances external leverage, it also requires robust internal resilience and policy coordination. Consequently, the sustainability of the EU's hybrid model will depend not only on its ability to project power externally but also on its capacity to effectively manage the domestic socio-economic repercussions of its policy choices.

As a conclusion, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has marked a turning point not only for European security but also for the European Union's identity and capacity as a global actor. This research has shown that the EU's response to the crisis has gone far beyond its traditional, normative approach. The Union has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt, deploying a mix of economic, military, diplomatic, and energy tools at a scale and speed rarely seen in its previous foreign policy. While this transformation has clearly strengthened the EU's hand in dealing with high-intensity crises, it has also brought forward new dilemmas. Balancing strategic necessity with foundational values, maintaining unity among diverse member states, and managing the expectations of partners and global audiences are ongoing challenges. The experience of the Ukraine war suggests that the EU's future as an international actor will depend on its capacity to sustain this hybrid approach, learning from both its successes and its setbacks.

Ultimately, the war has not only tested the EU's resilience

but also accelerated the evolution of its external action. Whether the Union can maintain this momentum in the face of future crises will shape its role on the world stage for years to come.

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