From optimist to sceptical liberalism: reforging European Union foreign policy amid crises

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In response to Vladimir Putin’s war with Ukraine, European Union leaders have embarked on a series of initiatives to increase the EU’s ‘strategic autonomy’, defined as its ability to define, defend and pursue its own ideals and interests. For the first time in its history, the EU is directly funding the provision of deadly weapons to a foreign state, and most member states have advanced plans to boost their defence spending to two per cent of GDP, or more. Ten sanctions packages against Russia were passed unanimously in the space of a year, and Europe is quickly ending decades of dependency on Russian energy. This political reforging is not just happening in relation to Russia, nor is it only a reaction to the war in Ukraine. However, the war has catalysed this process to an unprecedented degree and the EU is now acting to ensure security of supplies of everything from military equipment and energy to health supplies, and critical raw materials. 1

Much is at stake for Europe in this endeavour. With the rise of explicitly anti-western sentiment and illiberal forces, most importantly in China and Russia but also within Europe and the United States, observers increasingly argue that the liberal order is in crisis. 2 Critiques of economic liberalization and globalization have been widely voiced, even in Europe and the US. 3 Democratic barometers such as Freedom House have documented democratic backsliding worldwide for decades. 4 Postcolonial movements have shone light on the victims and vulnerable groups whose work enabled the post-Second World War liberal world order but...
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who have not reaped its benefits.\textsuperscript{5} In the context of a liberal international order undermined not just from outside but also by attacks within its core, both realist and critical analyses argue that the European reaction to the war in Ukraine marks a further deterioration of the liberal order. A shift, which was caused either by a ‘geopolitical awakening’\textsuperscript{6} or due to ‘strategies of crisisification, panic politics and geopolitical paranoia’.\textsuperscript{7} As a result, it is argued, we are now witnessing a less idealistic EU foreign policy.\textsuperscript{8}

However, viewing the war in Ukraine and the EU’s reaction to it as a further move away from liberal ideals is not the whole story. It misses important dynamics that have led to a rethinking and a reinvigoration of the EU as a liberal actor. Ukrainians are fighting not just to defend their country, but also for their right to become part of the EU and NATO. In response, European countries have provided very high levels of humanitarian and refugee support. The war has also led to a renewed enlargement process, whereby Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova are now among the list of EU candidate countries. There has been very broad public support and an unprecedented sense of cooperation across security and defence as well as trade policy.\textsuperscript{9} Also, within Europe we are witnessing an increase in support for the EU, as well as a stronger rejection of illiberal initiatives among member states. This response sits in stark contrast with the hesitant European reaction to the annexation of Crimea in 2014.\textsuperscript{10} It constitutes a seemingly paradoxical development whereby Europe’s liberal project is both condemned and vindicated. The article’s overarching research questions, therefore, are: how has the EU responded to the war in Ukraine and the wider backlash against the liberal international order? How does the response reshape EU foreign and security policy?

Contributing to existing and contemporary debates on EU foreign and security policy, we argue that the current European changes are not a move away from liberalism. Rather, they consist primarily of a shift from an optimistic to a sceptical form of liberal ‘actorness’ while the basic liberal ideals are, however, kept intact. Such a shift towards a more sceptical liberal approach is based on a bleaker reading of the trajectory of international affairs, caused not only by the war in Ukraine but also by climate change, the COVID–19 pandemic and doubts about


\textsuperscript{8} Bargués et al., ‘Rescuing the liberal international order’.


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the transatlantic alliance. This pessimism fosters a willingness to change policy actions, emphasizing greater strategic autonomy across diverse sectors of European societies and economies. However, the shift is not reducible to the EU pursuing its own narrow interests. On the contrary, European support for Ukraine and the broader quest for greater European sovereignty imply accepting more security risks and material sacrifices than either an optimistic liberal or a purely interest-driven approach would. This is not to claim that there are no illiberal elements on the European political map, nor to be apologists for present dynamics. And, a sceptical liberal outlook can decay into civilizationalism and hypocrisy. However, to understand these dynamics and pitfalls it is necessary to recognize that liberal ideals continue to shape European decision-making decisively.

Methodologically, this article uses interpretive policy analysis to uncover the changing security role of the EU. Interpretive analysis is useful for our purposes because it is situation-specific and focuses on meanings uncovered by the examination of language used in policy debates, as well as on other human artefacts that convey policy and organizational meanings. Two main sources of data inform the interpretive policy analysis in this article. First, we carried out an extensive mapping and analysis of key policy documents and strategies, dating from the creation of the EU’s Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) until the present day. Central documents analysed for comparison include the EU’s security strategies, which can be seen as landmarks in the development of EU foreign and security policy. The first ever EU security strategy was launched in 2003 when the CSDP was operationalized. The second, and most recent, was introduced in 2016 and followed up in 2022, after the Ukraine war broke out, with a so-called ‘implementation strategy’ relating to the 2016 version. Another central document is the Versailles declaration—the most tangible EU response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The second significant source of data used to deepen the analysis is the series of more than 25 semi-structured interviews conducted with various stakeholders, including officials and politicians based across EU institutions in Brussels. Through these interviews, we learn the interviewees’ own views and interpretations of the studied phenomena. This is helpful to gain a deeper understanding of the policy documents studied, as well as to uncover practitioners’ experiences of the changing EU actorness studied. In addition, existing literature on actorness and the security role of the EU is used in the analysis, especially when it comes to establishing a baseline for comparing the current sentiments behind EU policy-making with those prevalent when the EU first established its international role. Using the literature in this way also serves as a means to strengthen the triangulation of our data.

The article is structured in three parts. First, the existing literature on EU foreign and security policy is reviewed in order to contextualize the changing nature of the EU’s security role and discuss how the theoretical and empirical contribution of the article will help bridge a gap in the existing literature. In the

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second section, we present sceptical liberalism and distinguish a set of analytical tools to capture changes in EU actorness. The third section explores empirically how the policy principles and instruments of the EU’s foreign and security policy are currently undergoing change.

Reviewing debates on EU actorness: beyond ‘normal versus normative power Europe’

EU actorness is a concept central to the theorization and analysis of the EU’s evolution as an international actor. Traditionally, debates about EU actorness have revolved around two main positions: the EU as either a *sui generis* actor or as a ‘normal’ actor in its international conduct.

The position which sees the EU as a *sui generis* actor in international relations perceives the EU as ‘liberal’, ‘civilian’, ‘soft’, ‘normative’ or ‘anti-power’. Early arguments of this kind claimed that the European project—as it emerged after the First and Second World Wars—was primarily defined in opposition to Europe’s own history. As formulated by Ole Wæver, ‘Europe’s Other is Europe’s own past which should not be allowed to become its future’. Thus, in its initial phases, what would become the EU emphasized a primarily inward-looking and pessimistic project most concerned with avoiding the worst violent excesses of the past. The vision was that, through long-term political cooperation and economic trade, the EU would become an ‘asecurity’ community, where war would become not only economically unpalatable but also politically unthinkable. This vision was increasingly realized—to this day it is an irrelevant as well as absurd proposition that Germany, France or other EU member states could again go to war with each other.

With the initiation of the European Political Cooperation in the 1970s, EU foreign ministers began informally coordinating their foreign policies. However, it was not until the fall of the Soviet Union, and the eastern European democratic revolutions that took place in its aftermath, that the EU initiated the articulation of an explicit and formalized foreign policy agenda beyond the economic domain. As the EU began developing a foreign policy in the 1990s, several scholars argued that Europe stood out as a one-of-a-kind global actor. At the centre of this argument was the claim that the EU is a *sui generis* liberal actor in international

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relations because of its history, supranational polity and constitutional setup. In this tradition, in his ‘normative power Europe’ framework, Ian Manners claims that ‘core norms’ (peace, liberty, human rights, rule of law and democracy) based on the EU’s founding principles are what define its global actorness. The EU as a normative or ethical power implies that the underlying goal of external action is to be able to shape what passes for ‘normal’ in world politics. As Manners argues, the most important element of normative power Europe is its ability to ‘live by example’, and consequently propagate its norms by contagion and diffusion, as opposed to physical force and coercion. Through the example of its own liberal peace project where war between EU member states has become unthinkable, the EU gradually promotes a world where security concerns become obsolete as well.

Several scholars have criticized normative power Europe and related perspectives for their claim that the EU is a sui generis actor in global politics. Rather, they argue both that the norms that the EU represents and promotes are not uniquely European, and that the normative power literature neglects the fact that the EU is also a ‘normal’ power player that promotes its own interests. Focusing on interests, scholars such as Karen E. Smith argue that although the EU was possibly a civilian power in its earliest decades, it is not any longer. The EU is, ‘like almost every other international actor on the planet, somewhere along a spectrum between two ideal-types of civilian and military power’. Providing a harsher indictment of the EU’s actorness, the EU has also been characterized as a ‘normative empire’, engaging in policies that support its own economic and security interests in former colonies. Focusing more on the liberal economic approach and bureaucratic acumen of the EU, some observers have made the case that the EU is primarily a ‘market power’, which, because of its market size, institutional capacities and interests, shapes economic and political developments. Common to all these views is that they do not ‘depend upon an analytical preconception that the EU is a particular, different or even unique actor in the international system’.

The war in Ukraine has reinvigorated the decade-long debate on EU foreign actorness. On the one hand, several scholars argue that the war does not mark a fundamental shift, but should be seen as integral to a 50-year development where the EU member states have gradually developed a norm of collective responsi-

17 Manners, ‘Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?’, p. 252.
19 Manners, ‘Normative power Europe reconsidered: beyond the crossroads’.
bility to act. On the other hand, another group of scholars see, rather, that the war marks a geopolitical awakening of the European Union, causing a further normalization of European foreign policy driven by security interests. From this perspective Europe’s increased emphasis on the security of the European continent and citizens to justify increased military and defence spending and border control supports the ‘normal’ security actor view of the EU, undermining its normative status. Specifically, Bargués et al. claim that the defensive reinterpretation of resilience is eroding the distinctive, normative character of EU foreign and security policy, which risks the EU’s identity as a liberal actor.

These bifurcated positions, however, fail to capture important elements of the present dynamics in EU actorness, notably that the last several crises, among them most importantly the war in Ukraine, both vindicate and vitiate the liberal characteristics of European global actorness. They vindicate by causing a surge in support for liberal values in Europe and among many of its neighbours, and an increased willingness to make sacrifices and take risks to defend those values. But at the same time, there is a distancing from the fragilities inherent in the optimist liberal model not only in relation to Russia but also more broadly. To make sense of this apparent paradox, which current debates fail to capture, this article draws on sceptical liberal theory to argue that the European liberal project is indeed changing, but in a way that does not merely risk or undermine but also transforms—and, in some ways, strengthens—the liberal aspects of EU actorness. The defensive liberal model creates complex dilemmas in both Europe’s internal and external relations, but again, it is more beneficial to think through these as being primarily between different distinctively liberal ideals and practices.

Sceptical liberalism in international relations

In EU scholarship, liberal theory is typically associated with a positive view of the trajectory of international affairs; an assumption that liberal forms of organization enable peace and prosperity over time. This is the case for institutionalist, economic, sociological and democratic understandings of liberal interna-

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26 Wivel, ‘USA, det transatlantiske forhold og den europæiske sikkerhedsorden’; de Hoop Scheffer and Weber, ‘Russia’s war on Ukraine’.
29 Bargués et al., ‘Rescuing the liberal international order’, p. 2283.
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tionalism. In this optimistic liberal view, institutional cooperation, free trade and democratic practices lead to more peaceful international relations in the long run. Here the EU is traditionally viewed as ‘the quintessential’ liberal actor, combining institutionalized cooperation, personal freedoms and rights, and free trade to pursue peace and prosperity. 35 According to this perspective, as a global actor the EU promulgates liberal democratic values and enacts a foreign policy aimed at promoting these core values and norms. 36

However, an optimistic view of history and a liberal outlook do not necessarily go hand in hand, and this neglects liberal theory, which has a bleaker and more sceptical view of both the international order and of liberalism itself. This strand of liberal theory focuses less on how liberal values spread and more on how they get undermined, both as a consequence of internal tensions within liberal societies as well as by illiberal alternatives. Scholars in this tradition have written during and in the aftermath of events of actual or potential mass violence including the French Revolution, the Second World War and the Cold War. 39 They include scholars such as Benjamin Constant, Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Judith Shklar and Amanda Anderson. 40

This sceptical liberal tradition helps show that key characteristics and dilemmas in the contemporary European situation are not primarily choices between a liberal or illiberal order, but are primarily dilemmas contained within liberalism itself. In general terms sceptical liberalism, as it is understood here, has three primary characteristics. First, a bleak understanding of the trajectory of the international order; second, a willingness to regulate markets and intervene in international matters, including with military means, to prevent or limit the materialization of unwanted futures; and third, a self-reflective and self-critical view of, in this case, Europe’s not solely positive impact on the international order both historically and in the present.


To elaborate, sceptical liberal theory emphasizes negative historical experience. ‘We know too much to fall into even the slightest utopianism, and without that grain of baseless optimism no genuine political theory can be constructed.’\(^{41}\) Instead, societies where citizens’ basic liberal rights have been respected are the historical exception, and are still only partially realized and for just a small proportion of the world’s population. This is an observation that resonates with recent experiences where European dependence not only on Russian energy but also on Chinese manufacturing and US military capabilities has rendered the continent fragile in the face of geopolitical conflict.\(^{42}\) This recognition speaks to a key sceptical perspective, namely that societies where even basic liberal freedoms and rights are protected are the exception and may remain so. To face up to this reality, sceptical liberal ideology is more open to both market interventions and the use of violence to protect human beings against cruelty, as well as to preserve liberal and egalitarian values.

Furthermore, this form of liberalism distinguishes between and focuses on tensions between liberal ideals on the one hand and concrete experiences and actions on the other.\(^{43}\) This distinction helps emphasize that the EU is not a ‘normative’ nor a ‘liberal’ power, although such an ideological outlook dominates among its decision-makers. Recognizing the distance between ideals and actions, a sceptical liberal outlook is characterized by a reflective approach, which endeavours to detect and prevent liberal intentions from undermining liberal values when turned into practice.\(^{44}\) Consequently, a key emphasis from this perspective is that liberal societies are not merely the solution to the problems we face, but are also complicit in creating them. However, as the empirical analysis will argue, the pessimist and self-critical elements of sceptical liberalism do not always go hand in hand, and when they do not, policies risk becoming hypocritical and civilizational.

To structure the analysis, we distinguish between two separate levels of analysis.\(^{26}\) In the first, there are ‘policy ideals’—intentions, objectives and decisions made by politicians, civil servants or other authorities through which actionable policy emerges. Here, the analysis takes a longitudinal view by discussing the beginnings of the EU’s security role and how this role is now undergoing change. Specifically, we pay attention to the underlying view of history from when the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the CSDP were formed up until today. In the second, ‘policy action’ denotes the processes and specific instruments whereby policy ideals are put into action.\(^{27}\)

**An analysis of changing EU actorness: from optimistic to sceptical?**

In the previous section, we sketched out two understandings of liberalism, one optimistic and one sceptical, which we will use in our analysis to conceptualize the changing nature of EU actorness. First, to establish a baseline, we discuss


\(^{43}\) Candea, ‘”When I see what democracy is…”’;

\(^{44}\) Candea, ‘”When I see what democracy is…”’, p. 460.
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the trajectory of the EU as a global actor, pinpointing central ideals as well as the actions taken to achieve them. Second, we discuss how and why such liberal approaches are moving in a more sceptical direction and the challenges this creates.

When what would become the EU was created as the European Economic Community in 1958 following the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, its primary purpose was to ‘promote peace, its values and the well-being of its peoples’ in Europe. Over the course of decades, the project succeeded in shifting the relations between member states from being defined by interstate insecurity to being those of a security community. Consequently, the EU has been framed by many observers as an almost utopian, Kantian ‘perpetual peace’ project according to which nation-states continue to exist but agree not to enter into war with each other and to adhere to a shared set of liberal values, including ‘pluralism, rule of law and respect for human rights, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women’.46

The end of the Cold War emerged as a window of opportunity for the EU to promote, on the global stage, the liberal values upon which it was founded. Specifically, the Maastricht Treaty (Treaty on European Union) concluded in 1992 gave the EU a formal CFSP, established as a distinct intergovernmental pillar of the EU. The CFSP was the first institutionalized framework on foreign and security cooperation in the history of the EU. The CFSP was intended to institutionally equip the EU to manage any foreign and security policy issues concerning the security of the union. These issues also drew on liberal ideals and included: safeguarding the values, interests and integrity of the EU; promoting international cooperation; developing and consolidating democracy; rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; and preserving peace and international security. For the first time in modern history, sovereign European states thus decided to develop a formal, common foreign and security policy at a time when no external threats compelled them to form a traditional security alliance. This decision was taken by EU member states, despite the fact that international organizations such as NATO and the UN already provided ready-made—and, some would argue, more effective and appropriate—frameworks for conducting international conflict management, which had been increasingly in demand since the end of the Cold War.51

50 Jolyon Howorth, Security and defence policy in the European Union...
Of course, the European integration process—including the emergence of an EU defence dimension—has at all times also been characterized by bargaining around national interests, not least the interests of the ‘big three’: Germany, France and the United Kingdom.\(^{52}\) As such, the CSDP was established following a bilateral summit in the French city of St Malo in 1998, where France and the UK managed to reconcile their differing views on European security cooperation, which had paralysed EU foreign and security policy from the very beginning; namely, the extent to which the EU should be able to carry out security action at the potential expense of the transatlantic relationship.\(^{53}\) Part of the St Malo compromise came to shape the ‘benign’ role that the EU set out to play when it first emerged as a new security actor. The CSDP was not intended to be used as a type of deterrence or defence of the European continent.\(^{54}\) Rather, the EU has portrayed itself as a liberal force for good on the international stage, focusing its CSDP as a conflict management tool to be used in response to humanitarian conflicts and thus as an actor that transcends the anarchic behaviour of states.\(^{55}\) As one EU diplomat involved in EU security and defence for three decades said, looking back:

The EU’s security and defence policy was born out of the heyday of the 1990s, and even though 9/11 changed our world right about the time when the first CSDP missions launched, [the CSDP missions’] message was a positive one. It was about ‘doing good’ for the less fortunate countries outside the European continent. Through such actions, the idea was that it would benefit Europe too. If everyone could adopt European values, we would get closer to a freer, more prosperous world.\(^{56}\)

The EU’s first European Security Strategy (ESS) was launched in 2003, created in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and in the shadow of ‘pre-emptive’ US actions, as well as during the rift over Iraq among EU member states. In contrast to the US strategy at the time, the EU strategy emphasized that its key purpose was to promote the liberal norms of peace, stability, development and human rights.\(^{57}\) In terms of the security environment, the ESS identified five key threats to international peace and security: terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, state failure and organized crime.\(^{58}\) Nowhere does the strategy mention the word ‘enemy’, and it should indeed largely be seen as a product of its time, a deliberate contrast to the US National Security Strategy of 2002, which emphasized the use of military force in the ‘global war on terror’.\(^{59}\)

54 Howorth, *Security and defence policy in the European Union*.
55 Manners, ‘Normative power Europe: a contradiction in terms?’.
56 Authors’ interview with high-level official working in the European Council, May 2022.
CSDP instruments, including CSDP missions, were framed according to selfless, humanitarian concerns within a liberal framework. Of all the CSDP missions so far, only a handful have even touched upon European security interests, primarily by virtue of their proximity to the EU itself (particularly in the Balkans), and not because they involved a direct threat to EU member states. Even the case of CSDP action on the European continent, in Bosnia, was driven by humanitarian goals. All the EU’s independent, land-based military operations have been in sub-Saharan Africa, a region well beyond the EU’s own periphery. At the outset, the underlying policy principle of the EU’s CSDP has been envisioned as carrying out conflict management tasks outside the European continent, not to involve the creation of potentially offensive armed forces to provide territorial defence of the continent. The CSDP operations are very different from other types of crisis management operations, for example those of NATO. Deployment of armed forces is seen only as an option of last resort. Thus, while CSDP missions can be military in nature, they are defined by what they are not, i.e. as peace enforcement, and not the use of force for strategic purposes. As one EU official working within CSDP structures put it: ‘EU missions—even the military ones—had a very different purpose than, for example, a bilateral or NATO military mission as we know them. They have been about promoting European values through peace work.’

In sum, policy choices and instruments driving EU actorness when the EU first emerged as a security actor in the 1990s were guided by an optimistic strand of liberalism. They have not been framed as countering external threats, but as integral to the European peace project promoting liberal values of democracy, rule of law, personal freedoms and rights, as well as free trade. Similarly, policy instruments were smaller-scale military and civilian operations operating outside the European borders, aimed at promoting liberal values rather than narrow European security interests.

A sceptical Zeitenwende?

Today, the early optimism of the EU’s initial external actorness is under pressure. Across EU member states and in EU institutions there is talk of a ‘paradigm shift’, of a Zeitenwende (‘change of era’), an ‘end to naivety’. A few weeks after the beginning of the Ukraine war, European heads of state and government issued the Versailles declaration as the EU response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Here, the war is framed as a bleak historical turning-point:

Russia’s war of aggression constitutes a tectonic shift in European history … Confronted with growing instability, strategic competition and security threats, we decided to take...

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60 Smith, Europe’s Common Security and Defence Policy.
61 Howorth, Security and defence policy in the European Union.
62 Jana Arloth and Frauke Lisa Seidensticker, The ESDP crisis management operations of the European Union and human rights (Berlin: German Institute for Human Rights, 2007); Bailes, “The EU and a “better world”.”
63 Authors’ interview with EU official deployed to four different CSDP missions in the past 15 years, Brussels, May 2022.
more responsibility for our security and take decisive steps towards building our European sovereignty.  

Compared to when the EU first launched its security and defence dimension, there is now an ongoing shift in EU actorness away from an optimistic peace project focused on the security of others to a sceptical security project. As such, European decision-makers are reconsidering some of the core assumptions inherent in an optimistic, liberal framework.  

While Putin’s war in Ukraine is seen as a turning-point, changes in the nature of EU actorness have been under way for some time. Indeed, a range of events that took place prior to February 2022 nudged the underlying progressive and optimistic view on the supremacy of liberalism in a more pessimistic direction. The Russian threat that had seemed so distant in the early post-Cold War days re-emerged following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Moreover, violent conflicts in regions neighbouring Europe contributed to increasing migration, and several terrorist attacks that struck European capitals in recent years were framed as threats to Europe and its citizens. Meanwhile China has been asserting itself as an economic and military great power, which has also been a key factor shaping the EU’s increasingly pessimistic perception of the liberal international order. Trends of renationalization and remodelling of the liberal order have caused shock waves.

The Brexit referendum in June 2016 also reminded the remaining EU member states that the way forward for the EU is no longer ‘ever closer union’. And the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency gave rise to continuing uncertainty about the American security guarantee. Around the same time, in 2016, the EU updated its 2003 security strategy, stating that:

The purpose, even existence, of our Union is being questioned. Yet, our citizens and the world need a strong European Union like never before. Our wider region has become more unstable and more insecure. The crises within and beyond our borders are affecting directly our citizens’ lives. In challenging times … we will indeed have to rethink the way the Union works.

However, while the shift does imply a greater emphasis on external threats to Europe, European decision-makers still emphasize that they have a continued responsibility for defending liberal values beyond Europe as well.

As such, Russia’s war with Ukraine has dramatically reinforced already existing trends in European politics. A central focus has been on ‘building our European sovereignty’—a primary policy priority mentioned multiple times in the Versailles declaration. Originally a French idea, the quest for ‘European sovereignty’ or ‘strategic autonomy’ has been discussed for decades, usually met by resistance...
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from a range of member states, not least those reluctant to further integrate within the field of security and defence in an EU framework. Nevertheless, the concept is now written into official EU documents (from the 2016 Global strategy onwards) and since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine it has become accepted by all member states as a necessary means to achieve European security in today’s world. The EU shift towards emphasizing the need for European sovereignty and independence represents a break with its previous policy principles of security and prosperity through interdependence and cooperation. Although the new emphasis implies an important shift in the EU as a global actor, it does not imply an illiberal one. Rather, the shift is motivated by a bleaker view of the liberal international order, which demands that the EU achieve greater strategic autonomy in order to pursue its liberal ideals. As formulated by a central EU official working in a national delegation in the European Council,

After Putin’s war all agree on the need for the EU to do more on its own across policy areas. For example, to boycott ‘everything Russian’ has become the norm now. Our Russia policy transforms from one day to the next but so did our policy towards China, and the United States—friends and foes. We are realizing that we have to be able to act autonomously in order to increase our capacity for action across all policy areas.69

An important policy area, where this sceptical shift leads to a string of new policy actions, is that of security and defence. Here, EU decision-makers have surrendered their aversion to hard power. As stated by one EU official working in the European Council: ‘We are doing things that few would have thought possible; that the EU would spend money on providing deadly weapons to one party in a war would have been unthinkable even a few years ago’.70 This EU official points to the establishment of the European Peace Facility (EPF), launched in 2021 and used in the Ukraine war to provide Ukraine with lethal equipment and enablers. The EPF was initially allocated €5.692 billion in current prices (€3 billion in 2018 prices) for the 2021–2027 multiannual financial plan. In the context of the war in Ukraine, the EU member states were very quick to agree on using it to finance the delivery of weapons to Ukraine; seven successive tranches of EPF have been used to reimburse states that have delivered weapons to Ukraine worth more than €12 billion, exceeding the initial budget of the instrument several times. The level of military support amounted to a significant share of many eastern European states’ total defence spending. Obviously, few European decision-makers are particularly pleased with either the material costs or the security risks entailed by this level of military support coupled with massive increases in defence spending. However, EU decision-makers see these actions as a necessary shift if Europe wants to protect European and liberal values in the present international order. As one EU diplomat put it:

If we could, we would go back to the world before Putin, before Trump, before Brexit. Then many of these new EU initiatives would not be necessary [i.e. the defence initiatives

69 Authors’ interview with EU official working in the European Commission, May 2022.
70 Authors’ interview with official working in the European Council, May 2022.

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proposed after Putin’s invasion of Ukraine]. Because we still believe in the same things. It is the world that has changed, and accordingly, we must change our instruments too, to retain European norms and values. We want the same, but our ‘old’ instruments will not let us achieve this.71

While an optimistic liberal approach made Europe vulnerable to one-sided dependencies, and to making overly naive assumptions about Russia and other countries’ hostile intentions, sceptical liberalism has its own inherent pitfalls and dilemmas. Remarks made in October 2022 by the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, exemplify how sceptical liberalism can decay into civilizationalism if a sufficiently self-critical approach is not adopted:

Europe is a garden. We have built a garden. Everything works. It is the best combination of political freedom, economic prosperity, and social cohesion that the humankind has been able to build—the three things together. … Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden. The gardeners should take care of it, but they will not protect the garden by building walls. A nice small garden surrounded by high walls in order to prevent the jungle from coming in is not going to be a solution. Because the jungle has a strong growth capacity, and the wall will never be high enough in order to protect the garden. The gardeners have to go to the jungle. Europeans have to be much more engaged with the rest of the world. Otherwise, the rest of the world will invade us, by different ways and means.72

Borrell’s statement echoes a colonial savage versus civilized discourse, as well as a neo-conservative outlook,73 and provoked accusations of a western ‘neo-colonial mentality’74 and even ‘racism’.75 These critiques made Borrell recognize that he was ‘sorry if some have felt offended’ and ‘that neither Europe nor “the West” is perfect’. However, he also doubled down on the claim ‘that “gardeners”, those who want to build a peaceful and lawful order, everywhere should unite and work together to beat back “the jungle”’.76 On the one hand, Borrell’s statements do confirm the hypothesis that the EU leaders’ outlook remains liberal but has taken a sceptical turn. However, the civilizationalist imagery is not just an unlucky framing. It also reveals a key political pitfall inherent in sceptical liberalism. This occurs if the bleak outlook on international affairs, and willingness to intervene

71 Authors’ interview with high-level official working in the European Council, June 2022.
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politically, are not coupled with the third element of sceptical liberalism, namely self-critical reflexivity recognizing Europe as not only the solution but also simultaneously complicit in the challenges the world faces.

In a more optimistic liberal foreign policy, the pursuance of peace and prosperity tends to be integrated within one project sought through economic trade and political cooperation. However, a sceptical liberal outlook helps expose political dilemmas, which the optimist liberal peace approach to EU foreign policy conceals. A defining sceptical liberal dilemma is how radical policy actions that decision-makers are willing to take live up to liberal ideals in the face of bleak political predicaments. For example, EU member states, led by German chancellor Olaf Scholz, initially refused to follow the US with a complete and immediate boycott of Russian energy after Russia initiated the invasion of Ukraine. They justified this move by referring to the need for stable and cheap energy, which was framed as ‘essential for citizens’ public goods and everyday lives’.77 This form of hesitancy, based on considerations for the immediate well-being of European citizens, is here seen not only as material self-interest but also as a safeguard of liberal democracies through ensuring stability for consumers. Europe now faces similar predicaments in its pursuance of strategic autonomy across a wide range of policy areas, where the cost of a sceptical approach will imply significant material costs for European consumers. The EU now presents ambitious action plans across policy from security and defence to climate, biodiversity, industry and energy. However, the material sacrifices that fall on Europeans and that are necessary to act decisively on all these agendas risk causing political backlash both from liberal optimists and illiberal opponents, and therefore create a challenging political balancing act.

Conclusion

Drawing on a sceptical strand of liberal theory, this article has explored how EU actorness is changing in a more pessimist, defensive and autonomous direction following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The EU continues to be driven by liberal ideals, but is currently in a process of adjusting its foreign policy actions to meet a changing security context. Existing debates have analysed EU actorness either as a normative or normal project in international relations. This article has suggested, instead, a move beyond such a dichotomy when analysing how and why the EU is evolving. By doing so, the article contributes to EU studies by offering an alternative to the normal versus normative debate on EU global actorness. It does so by analysing present changes in the EU’s foreign and security policy through the prism of two competing models—optimist and sceptical—both anchored in liberal ideals but justifying diverging political approaches.

The empirical analysis has compared early ideals and actions from when the EU emerged as a foreign policy actor in the beginning of the 1990s up to today. It is

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It is notable that EU actorness has changed from being driven primarily by optimism towards a more sceptical and defensive understanding of international relations and of its own place within them, but still with the same liberal ideals emphasizing human rights, rule of law and democracy. It found that European decision-makers, in statements such as the Versailles declaration, articulate a willingness to create new instruments that compromise both immediate economic interests, bureaucratic procedures and even imply taking security risks, in order to face up to current challenges. The trend is apparent within the EU, where support for the union has surged. The same is true for European external relations, where formal accession negotiations have been initiated with Ukraine and Moldova, and candidate status granted to Georgia following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to analyse other policy areas in detail, the shift can also be detected more broadly. It ranges across economic sectors from energy and health to rare earth minerals, semi-conductors, digital technology and food supply, and is manifested in a whole series of new, concrete political actions such as REPowerEU, the European Critical Raw Materials Act, and the European Chips Act. 78

Thus, although liberal ideals remain central to European global actorness, the actions taken to pursue those ideals have become significantly more interventionist, crisis-oriented and risk-tolerant. Although there are many grounds upon which one could criticize such policies, including a more optimist liberal outlook, and some of them may fail, we will not understand why these decisions are being taken if we do not see them as grounded in an aspiration to defend liberal ideals not just within Europe but also internationally. The EU’s broader plans to ensure strategic autonomy across sectors from green industries to tech will require massive new investments, and will also require Europeans to once more take on harder and dirtier jobs not just in the military, but also in industry and mining, which have increasingly been outsourced. The extent to which European leaders are willing to accept costs and risks to their own citizens will be a key determining factor for whether the EU will act on its increasingly sceptical outlook.