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# **GEOSTRATEGIES, GEOPOLITICS AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD: THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE 'NEW COLD WAR'**

**Christopher S. Browning  
University of Warwick**

*Recent years have seen the EU criticised for its naïve idealism, in particular in its failure to counter Russia's increasingly assertive manoeuvres. While Russia is presented as an inherently geopolitical actor, the EU's emphasis on a normative post-geopolitical agenda is depicted as a losing strategy. The EU, it is argued, must become 'more geopolitical' in what is presented as an emerging 'new Cold War'. However, post-geopolitical depictions of the EU are problematic, but derive from an overly narrow conflation of geopolitics with modernist geopolitical practices. In contrast, the paper argues that the EU's actions are no less impregnated with geopolitical visions aimed at ordering and organising the space beyond its borders, but also argues that the EU's geopolitical visions – and the geostrategies adopted to implement them – are also underpinned by a need to preserve and protect the Union's sense of ontological security. This connection between its geopolitical visions, geostrategies and sense of ontological security is important, as it means challenges to the former can generate considerable anxieties in regard to the latter; anxieties that need a response. The paper argues that the return of traditional geopolitical language can be understood in these terms, calming emerging anxieties by reaffirming a sense of order and stability in terms of an historically known set of coordinates. Although seductive, this move of (mis)recognising contemporary events in terms of historical analogy is also potentially problematic.*

## **Introduction**

Recently it has become common to depict the European Union (EU) as plagued by crisis, wracked by an apparent inability to respond effectively to a number of considerable challenges of both an internal and external nature. Internally the EU is plagued by economic woes, rising populism and a sense of democratic deficit that combined have weakened solidarity within the EU and fostered a certain amount of anti-EU sentiment. Externally the biggest challenge has come from a revanchist Russia emboldened enough to in 2014 annex Crimea and invade eastern Ukraine, in doing so precipitating a security crisis to which the EU struggled to respond (Toal 2017: 19; Youngs 2017: 5, 11). These challenges have material, organisational and political elements, but they are also profoundly ontological. They are ontological because according to EU self-narratives it should not be like this. The EU is

supposed to be the solution, a beacon of prosperous progressive cosmopolitan liberalism, a vision of what 'could (ought to) be'.

This idea of the EU as an historically progressive force remaking world politics is not new. In 2003, for instance, the British diplomat Robert Cooper (2003: 3-31) published an influential treatise and alluring geopolitical vision in which he divided the world into three realms. The EU, he suggested, occupied the heart of a *postmodern* realm of globalisation and liberal interdependence. Here, the nation-state, national borders and preoccupations with sovereignty were declining in importance in favour of an emphasis on openness and mutual interference in each other's affairs. This he contrasted with a *modernist* realm where power politics and geopolitical calculation about the balance of power, borders, sovereignty and war remained enduring, and a *pre-modern* realm of impending chaos characterised by fragile/failing states and a fundamental lack of order. According to Cooper, within the postmodern realm traditional geopolitics and power political behaviour had been superseded, a new world was in the making, although it remained threatened by modernist forces.

Cooper's overtly geopolitical description of European/global order captured developing views in Europe in the post-Cold War period, especially regarding the EU's own self-understanding. As Guzzini puts it: 'the EU has staked its reputation on being an anti-geopolitical unit... a peace organization, a "civilian" or "normative" power, aimed precisely at overcoming the militarism and nationalism, historically associated with classical geopolitical thought that had plagued Europe's early twentieth century' (Guzzini 2012: 62).

While Cooper located the EU firmly within the postmodern world, he suggested Russia's location in 2003 was uncertain (Cooper 2003: 41). Since then Russia has increasingly been depicted as having taken a decidedly modernist turn. Indeed, with its actions in Crimea and Ukraine Russia has overwhelmingly become characterised in Europe and the West as recalcitrant and backward looking, an opportunistic expansionist actor seeking to reassert a great power status by reclaiming a sphere of influence in the borderlands between the EU and Russia (Auer 2015: 960). Russia, it is argued, does not recognise the postmodern and post-geopolitical world of EU Europe and is engaged in a geopolitical competition with Europe, whether Europe recognises this or not.

The stakes are frequently presented as high and within public debate (amongst politicians, academics, think tanks and the media) references to an emerging 'new Cold War' or 'Cold War 2.0' are recurrent (Lucas 2008; Foxall 2009; Wintour and Harding 2016; Nitoiu 2016a; Tidsall 2014; Lind 2017; Ojala and Pantti 2017; Legvold 2016). For some people this is not mere hyperbole since the situation today is viewed as even 'more dangerous' than the Cold War, a point emphasised amongst others by Sir John Sawers, a former head of MI6, and German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (cited in Wintour and Harding 2016). Beyond its military action in Ukraine (and Georgia in 2008), Russia's deployments of nuclear capable missiles in Kaliningrad, its assertive actions in Syria, and its support of right wing populist parties and use of cyber techniques to influence political outcomes in Western democracies, are seen to have precipitated a battle for 'Europe's soul, European values and the future of European peace and democracy on the continent' (Harding 2015).

In this context, critics argue Europe has been naïve and overly idealistic. Rather than a source of strength, its postmodern self-narrative has been a weakness when faced with the aggressive actions and intentions of a decidedly modernist neighbour. The EU is therefore called upon to become more geopolitical and strategic given the challenges that it faces in its neighbourhood, to counter Russia's geopolitics with its own geopolitical moves (e.g. Auer 2015: 955; Rynning 2015). As Auer (2015: 968) argues, 'In response to Russia's geopolitical ambitions, we need our own geopolitics. We must not be ashamed to think about power, and even to project power – soft and hard'. This sentiment has been openly shared by some European leaders, including Polish president Andrzej Duda, who called on EU governments to consider countering Russia's military incursions with its own use of hard power (Youngs 2017: 67).

The call for the EU to (re)embrace geopolitics has in turn been accompanied by the proliferation of previously retired geopolitical labels when discussing contemporary European politics – from Cold War to spheres of influence/interest, borderlands, buffer zones and even Finlandization as an option for states trapped between the EU and Russia (Brzezinski 2014; Kissinger 2014).<sup>1</sup> Such calls are premised on a particular modernist understanding of geopolitics and the EU's identity in international politics, and part of a more general refocusing on what Kaplan (2009; 2014: 32) has termed 'geography's revenge' against post-Cold War Western idealism (also Mead 2014). Or as the president of the European Council,

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<sup>1</sup> Finlandization refers to Finland's Cold War policy of pre-emptively anticipating Moscow's preferences. For proponents it was a pragmatic and rational policy upholding Finnish sovereignty. For critics it was a policy of immoral subservience requiring uncomfortable compromises (Singleton 1981; Majander 1999). On its use in the context of the Ukraine crisis see Juntunen 2017.

Donald Tusk, expressed it: 'Politics has returned to Europe. History is back' (quoted in Youngs 2017: 68).

Against this background this paper makes three arguments. First, that narratives calling for the EU to become 'more geopolitical' – and frameworks like Cooper's tripartite geopolitical categorisation of global politics – misunderstand the nature of both geopolitics and of the EU and its evolving identity. In particular, the distinction drawn between a geopolitical Russia and a post-geopolitical EU is problematic, because it reflects a static and blinkered (modernist) view of the nature of geopolitics, one preoccupied with notions of asserting formalised territorial control. The EU, it is argued, is already a geopolitical actor that actively deploys what can be termed geostrategies aimed at ordering the space beyond its borders according to its normative preferences. However, at least in the eastern neighbourhood – and through its instruments of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) – it has also sought to influence the partners' sense of geographical affiliation and belongingness (Makarychev and Devyatov 2014: 2). A more nuanced understanding of the EU in its neighbourhood, therefore, does not start with the analytical question of it becoming more geopolitical, but by providing an explanation of how its actions already are impregnated with geopolitical visions.

The second argument, in contrast, highlights how the EU's geopolitical geostrategies towards its neighbourhood also constitute fundamental mechanisms of ontological security seeking. These geostrategies, it is argued, reflect, reinforce, re-enact and routinize a particular conception of EU self-identity premised on a particular understanding of the nature of its salient environment. Such geostrategies are central in establishing a sense of self-certainty

and an ability for the EU to engage in world politics. However, while such geostrategies are routinized practices that bracket out anxieties about the nature of selfhood, they are also open to challenge and destabilisation. Such challenges can themselves become a source of ontological anxiety in need of a response. The paper suggests that bringing ontological security to bear can therefore help explain the very nature and generation of tension in EU-Russia relations.

The third argument is that sensitivity to such ontological security dynamics can also help explain the apparent alluring attraction of (and resort to) more traditional geopolitical scripts associated with the 'new cold war' narrative that have become prevalent in recent years. Such narratives arguably seek to respond to the sense of ontological crisis surrounding EU self-conceptions, calming emerging anxieties by reaffirming a sense of self-identity, order and stability in terms of an historically known set of coordinates. They do so, however, essentially by trading in enhanced ontological security for a physical security environment of enhanced precariousness. In conclusion, it is argued that a more complex understanding of geopolitics, combined with an understanding of how geopolitical geostrategies are infused with dynamics of ontological security seeking, can provide a more nuanced way of reflecting on the appropriateness of this contemporary return to a more traditional geopolitics, thereby opening out to alternative ways of how the EU approaches its relations towards the neighbourhood, and Russia in particular.

### **Rethinking Contemporary Geopolitics: The EU in its Neighbourhood**

The first argument is that contemporary claims distinguishing between a geopolitical Russia and a post-geopolitical EU rely on a problematically narrow understanding of geopolitics that limits geopolitics to a traditional late-nineteenth/early twentieth century understanding – as reflected in the works of people like Ratzel, Haushofer, Mackinder and Kjellén. Here, geopolitics is closely tied to a Realist power political understanding, with its emphasis on the balance of power, resource capture and zero-sum logics of competition. Anything departing from this classical understanding is generally, but problematically, seen to lie beyond geopolitics.

For instance, we see this in Cooper's distinction between postmodern, modern and pre-modern worlds, but it has a longer heritage. Following the end of the Cold War, for example, the tendency to draw a clear distinction between geopolitical and non-geopolitical practices was evident in the emergence of a teleological view of global development trends connected to debates about the 'end of history', a central element of which was the claim that traditional geopolitics was increasingly passé (Fukuyama 1993). Luttwak (1990), for example, argued that geopolitical calculation was being replaced by different rationales connected to globalisation and market logics of social interaction and exchange. The Westphalian state, with its emphasis on territorial sovereignty and Hobbesian power politics, it was argued, was transforming into a Lockean 'competition state' more concerned with issues of interdependence and trade, a market actor whose central task was redefined as facilitating and attracting movements of global capital (Cerny 1990; Moio 2008; Fougner 2006). In short, it was argued geography was losing importance to a focus on markets and (geo)economics.

The idea of such a teleological transformation and disjuncture between the geopolitical and the (geo)economic is, however, overstated. First, insofar as traditional geopolitical practices remain very much in evidence, clearly such a transformation remains incomplete. More important, however, is that a focus on (geo)economics does not mean that territory and geography disappear, but that their significance and how they are related to is transforming. Put bluntly, (geo)economics still entails fundamental elements of spatial ordering, just not in the same ways, or for the same reasons, as modernist classical geopolitics focuses on.

Indeed, (geo)economic and geopolitical worlds have actually become mutually imbricated and intertwined, such that traditional geopolitical practices like war and border control have become deeply infused with market logics as the boundaries between the public and private, state and market, and the domestic and international have broken down. Likewise, (geo)economic concerns with trade, markets, globalization and interdependence have become infused with geopolitical concerns of spatial ordering – not least evident in attempts to expand and entrench globalization and the liberal order around the world (Cowen and Smith 2009). Furthermore, questions of identity and geographical affiliation have become bound up in these processes. Thus, while the EU claims to reject the very idea of ‘spheres of influence’ and the need to exert exclusive control over neighbouring spaces (Forsberg and Haukkala 2016: 10; Youngs 2017: 50-4), in reality it not only seeks to embed its normative preferences beyond its borders, but also to influence the sense of ‘Europeanness’ and ‘belonging’ of its partners (Makarychev and Devyatov 2014: 2). Its principle instruments, though, are not force, but economic incentives and the power of attraction/seduction connected to its cultivation of the idea of Europe.

As such, recognised or not, the EU is a fundamentally geopolitical actor. This is clearly evident in its relations with its partners in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), a policy that manifests a particular geopolitical vision of how the space beyond its borders should be ordered according to its normative preferences. Policies like the ENP therefore operate as geostrategies – policies impregnated with geopolitical visions – designed precisely to aid this process of reordering (Crawford and O'Rourke 2008; Crawford and O'Rourke 2010; Walters 2004). For instance, aspirations of geopolitical ordering were evident in the Commission's initial communication on the policy in 2003, which called for the development of 'a zone of prosperity and a friendly neighbourhood – "a ring of friends" – with whom the EU enjoys close, peaceful and co-operative relations' (European Commission 2003:4). These elements of geopolitical ordering were further manifest once it became evident that the 'ring of friends' was viewed as a 'buffer zone' to more threatening spaces lying beyond (Del Sarto and Schumacher 2005: 19, 25-6; Crawford and O'Rourke 2008: 527; Walters 2004).

In this respect, it is important to note that the ENP emerged in response to expansion fatigue following the EU's 2004 eastern enlargement, the sentiment being that further enlargements were unlikely for the foreseeable future. This, however, raised security questions, because the prospect of enlargement had generally been viewed as a stabilising factor on the continent. The ENP, it was hoped, would fill the gap. Although precluding membership the hope was that stability and friendly relations could still be generated by blurring the EU's external borders in some areas of activity in return for the neighbours undertaking reforms in line with EU norms and practices (European Commission/High Representative 2015: 2; Pardo 2004: 735). The partner countries, though, were also expected to enforce stricter control of their borders furthest from the Union, thereby pushing the threatening outside further away.

The ENP is therefore impregnated with a geopolitical vision premised on hierarchies of otherness and threat. It is, in a sense, underpinned by ‘a concentric circles’ (Zielonka 2001: 509; Waever 1997) conception of Europe that depicts the EU as a pole of stability and order, but where the sense of security, stability and order decreases the further you move from its borders. This, though, is complicated by the fact that different partners have been differentially willing to sign up to the ENP agenda, meaning the EU’s ability to export its norms and practices into its neighbourhood has varied. In short, the neighbourhood cannot be treated uniformly, with the EU now accepting it needs to embrace ‘*some kind of variable geometry with different kinds of relationships for those partners that choose different levels of engagement*’ (original emphasis) (European Commission/High Representative 2015: 7).

This suggests three things. First, that the EU now recognises that the conditionality mechanisms transferred across from the enlargement process into the ENP – and that were clearly embedded in a hierarchical logic of spatial ordering in line with EU preferences – have had mixed results. Despite this, though, the EU’s ambitions in this regard have only expanded. For example, energised by the ‘Arab spring’ the ENP’s emphasis on promoting democracy was extended in 2011 to embrace so-called ‘deep democracy’ (European Commission/High Representative 2011). Aside from promoting electoral and institutional reform partners were now also encouraged to reform their ‘economic, civic, cultural and political structures’ along decidedly neoliberal lines, with particular emphasis on economic rights and economic liberalisation (Kurki 2013: 153-4). This aim is now embedded in the EU’s promotion of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas and visa free regimes for the most willing partners (European Commission/High Representative 2015: 2). The reliance on conditionality and

promising 'more for more' (a closer relationship in return for more change) is clearly designed as a mechanism of strategic leverage over the partners; as is the threat that failure to reform will potentially result in reduced EU funding (European Commission/High Representative 2011: 3).<sup>2</sup> Despite its mixed record, conditionality has therefore been central to the EU's aspirations of spatial ordering within the neighbourhood, and is driven by an 'imperial impulse' to remake its neighbourhood in its own image.<sup>3</sup>

Second, however, the very reliance on conditionality and attempts to establish a 'ring of friends' by promoting the partners' adoption of EU norms and practices has also affected how security is conceptualised and spatialized in the ENP. In short, threat and security become functions of how far the partners have been willing to become like the EU. Reluctance, or a slow pace of change, has the effect of constituting them as 'unwilling' and hence less friendly, whereas outright rejection of the ENP carries the danger of identifying the partner as even potentially threatening. This is because it entails a rejection of what we might term the EU's totalising liberal security discourse towards the neighbourhood (???????? and ????????? 2008: 545).

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<sup>2</sup> Importantly, conditionality is not applied in every case, such as in 2013 when the EU unsuccessfully tried to get Ukrainian President Yanukovich to sign an Association Agreement, despite the continued imprisonment of opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko (Raik 2016). In this case a sense of geopolitical competition with Russia over Ukraine's future was evident, with conditionality sacrificed in favour of a strategy of hoping that allowing Ukraine to sign up to a closer relationship would itself encourage the democratic and economic reforms conditionality had so far failed to deliver.

<sup>3</sup> The EU's geopolitical vision is 'imperial' insofar as it seeks to reshape its outside in its own image and according to its own normative standards. In this respect, it operates in line with nineteenth century notions of the hierarchical 'standard of civilisation', where outsiders are expected to incorporate its own standards, rules and regulations as universal norms and where their willingness to do so comes to define the level and nature of cooperation the EU envisages with them (see Behr 2007; Behr and Stivachtis 2016). Foster (2015: 63) argues the EU is also imperial insofar as its geopolitical vision constitutes an idealised discourse of superiority, of 'what ought to be', but also a discourse which as such '*needs* inequality in order to exist' (original emphasis).

Third, although the emphasis on conditionality suggests the ENP is underpinned by an imperialist geopolitical impulse to spatially order the EU's neighbourhood in terms of its own normative preferences, as the EU has itself acknowledged via its talk of the need to think in terms of a 'variable geometry' at its borders, its actual abilities here are inherently limited by the policy's reception amongst the partners (???????? and ???????? 2010). As argued below, this vulnerability to the partners is not simply a question that affects policy implementation and effectiveness, but one that can have unsettling ontological dimensions.

### **Geostrategies as Ontological Security Seeking**

Despite its postmodern credentials, then, the EU remains engaged in geopolitical practices of spatial ordering, with these practices notably inflected with geoeconomic preoccupations with economic liberalisation and trade. The second argument is that these geostrategies also constitute fundamental mechanisms of ontological security seeking by the EU, with this helping to explain the very nature and generation of tension in EU-Russia relations and the responses this has produced – not least in respect of their re-scripting in terms of a 'new Cold War' narrative.

Although debates about ontological security are complex, broadly speaking ontological security refers to an actor's (e.g. the EU's) ability to 'go on' in everyday life without slipping into melancholic or schizophrenic states characterised by high levels of debilitating anxiety (Giddens 1991: 35-41). Ontological security, it is argued, requires that the actor is able to establish and maintain a sense of order and stability with regard to their salient environment. Various things can contribute to this, but several are usually accorded particular significance.

First, is the development of a coherent biographical narrative of self-identity that locates the individual in time and space and in relation to salient others. Such narratives provide a core conception of who the self claims to be and are important as they establish expectations about the nature of the environment within which they exist and provide a sense of orientation for the self in respect of its behaviours with others. This points to the second element, which concerns the development and maintenance of trust in the nature of particular core relationships. To be clear, this is not about trusting relationships as such, but trust in the nature of the relationship established, be that one of friendship or enmity (Kleinman and Kleinman 2013: 495). Third, it is argued that actors will seek to routinize their conceptions of self-identity, with such routines becoming performative of their sense of ontological security. For example, for the EU this would include the routinisation of particular policy mechanisms (like conditionality), standard operating procedures, or declaratory performances.

Objections to treating the EU as a coherent, collective actor amenable to ontological security analysis can be raised. As evidenced by its current woes the EU is far from uniform and in respect of its relations with Russia is internally conflicted by its member-states' 'differing histories, positions and foreign policy traditions' (Ojala and Pantti 2017: 51). At stake, however, is rather how group members often find their own sense of ontological security through the status, standing and identity of the collective. Thus, just as nations/sports teams often provide a sense of identity, standing and order for citizens/supporters, in debates about Russia it appears that the EU also performs a similar function, as evidenced by how current anxieties about Russia are expressed in terms of angst and anxiety about the EU. Agents directly acting on behalf of collectives (like EU officials) are liable to have a heightened

experience of this, at least insofar as they feel a sense of responsibility for the collective and more directly merge their own sense of identity and self-esteem with its perceived reputation and performance with stakeholders (Steele 2008: 15-20). As such, the lack of unity surrounding the EU is not an argument against the application of ontological security analysis, but can rather be understood as a potential source of anxiety for anyone for whom the institution performs an ontological security function.

Ultimately, ontological security entails managing uncertainties and anxieties about the nature of existence. Insofar as biographical narratives of self-identity and the maintenance of particular relationships and routines establish a sense of order and coherence about the nature of everyday reality then actors, it is argued, have a solid basis for action and will seek to uphold these things. In contrast, when biographical narratives of self-identity become destabilised, or established relationships unsettled and routines set awry, ontological anxieties about the nature of the situation and one's own conception of self-hood and self-esteem are liable to increase. When faced with such ontological insecurity actors will try to respond by reasserting a sense of order and stability – either by reaffirming established self-understandings and routines or embracing new ones deemed more applicable to the situation at hand (Giddens 1991: 39-41).

As applied to the EU and its policies toward the neighbourhood, the suggestion is that the ENP's geopolitical ordering is best interpreted as driven by fundamental impulses of the EU's need to maintain a stable sense of self-identity and coherence in its relations with others, and where challenges to these have more recently become sources of ontological anxiety to be avoided. In this respect, the geostrategy of the ENP rests on a particular 'mindscape' or

geospatial vision about the nature of the EU and its borders, with this having become central to how the EU establishes a sense of ontological security. The concept of the 'mindscape' refers to how actors generate particular geospatial visions and mental maps that frame the way they perceive their environment and how they are likely to interact with and move within it (Liulevicius 2000: 151). In ontological security terms mindscapes can be conceptualised as an ordering device that establishes the bases upon which actors can understand the nature of the situation they face, and not least help them distinguish between the 'normal' and expected and the 'abnormal' and unexpected. As Eglitis (2004: 8-10) puts it, mindscapes essentially entail a vision of what 'ought' to be.

The mindscape embedded within the EU's geostrategy of the ENP arguably has four key elements to it, with each central to the Union's sense of ontological security within the neighbourhood. The first entails a teleological vision that locates the EU at the forefront of a universal developmental model premised on ideas of liberal economic and democratic political governance, a vision where the EU sees itself as having consciously rejected geopolitical power politics and nationalism's obsession with territory and control in favour of communicative rationality and the power of attraction (Guzzini 2012: 62; Auer 2015: 963, 968). This model is assumed to be universally attractive and in accordance with historical imperatives. Second, it is not only the model, but the EU itself that is viewed as attractive to others. Outsiders are expected to desire closer relations with it. Such a positive – even narcissistic – conception of EU self-identity is not unusual. As Chernobrov (2016: 7) notes, positive self-concepts are important for collectives seeking to hold themselves together and are also typically established via hierarchies with others characterised in less positive or inferior terms. This links to the third element, which is that the world beyond the EU's borders

is a world of risks. In ontological security terms there are two aspects to this. First, there is the notion of the EU as safe and 'homely' in contrast to the threats, disorder and chaos that lies beyond. As emphasised in the ontological security literature, the idea of 'home' is psychologically powerful, because home offers the promise of 'a site of constancy in the social and material environment... a secure base on which identities are constructed' (Kinnvall 2004: 747). Identifications of home, though, almost inevitably entail depicting them in relation to an external realm characterised as less certain and potentially dangerous. Second, however, beyond this reaffirmation of the EU as a safe haven, the representation of the world beyond the EU's borders as one of risks also establishes a sense of narrative coherence about the nature of the EU's environment. In short, it offers a cosmic ordering of the world. As it has enlarged eastwards this has only been amplified with many of the new member states emphasising themes of liberation and civilizational struggle with Russia (Toal 2017: 7). Finally, and despite the emphasis on universalism in the first two elements, the ENP also rests on a geocultural and restricted conception of Europeanness, a point evident in the policy's subdivision between a 'European' east and a 'non-European' south.

The claim, therefore, is that this mindscape crystallises core elements of the EU's enduring self-narrative that get played out in geostrategies like the ENP, and which in turn have become fundamental to how the EU establishes a sense of ontological security. We see this, for example, in how the ENP's conditionality mechanisms routinize hierarchical relations between the EU and its partners; in how a failure to transform in line with EU norms and practices is viewed as potentially threatening, and certainly as an indicator of a lack of 'Europeanness'; but we also see it in how the EU has felt the need to develop the ENP in the first place, as a mechanism of normative expansion. In short, the ENP's very set up, design

and subsequent day-to-day implementation – routinized in action plans with individual partners and periodical policy reviews – help establish a sense of stability and certainty about the nature of the EU’s salient environment and its place and identity in the world in relation to others.

### **Ontological Security Challenges in the Neighbourhood**

There is, however, another side to this. While the geostrategy of the ENP reinforces an established sense of self-identity in relation to others and provides a sense of cosmic ordering, it is also inevitably a source of potential ontological insecurity and anxiety insofar as it may be challenged. These challenges can come in different forms.

Some challenges take the form of ‘a holding to account’. These do not contest the basic contours of EU ontological security seeking practices, narratives and routines, but question the EU’s own adherence to them. They therefore threaten to generate significant internal anxieties by requiring the self to confront whether it is actually living up to its ideals and sense of moral destiny, and where falling short may generate feelings of self-rejection and despair (Tillich 2014: 48-9; Rumelili 2015: 12). In short, ontological security seeking not only entails a concern with establishing meaning and stability, but also entails a moral concern with who we have become. As Steele (2005) notes, our sense of ontological security is destabilised whenever we feel a sense of shame, because shame challenges the integrity of claims to selfhood.

However, while shame is something ontological security seeking actors therefore seek to avoid, it is also something that can be activated in others. Given the sense of superiority and moral mission underpinning core conceptions of EU self-understanding, the EU is arguably particularly prone to such shaming strategies. For example, during the 2004 enlargement process Eastern European applicant states actively sought to 'shame' the EU into offering membership by suggesting that EU claims to self-identity as a peace project open to all in Europe were on the line (Schimmelfennig 2004). Despite there being good economic and political reasons for deciding otherwise, the applicants successfully turned the issue of enlargement into an ontological crisis for the EU. Various of the EU's eastern partners in the ENP have adopted much the same strategy, also refusing to accept the EU's new borders as permanent and therefore rejecting the ENP's whole underpinning rationale (on Ukraine see [Korotkiy and Kozmin 2010: 114](#); Raik 2016). In similar terms, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has similarly sought to shame the EU into action by emphasising how Ukraine's war with Russia is also Europe's war, where Ukraine 'fights for European values and defends European security on its frontiers' (quoted in Toal 2017: 294).

Other challenges, however, can be more exacting, because they directly question the basic contours of ontological security seeking practices and therefore have the potential to generate a broader sense of crisis. Challenges like this may threaten to fundamentally undermine established routines and narratives of self-identity, but also the sense of stability and trust in the nature of one's relationships with others. In respect of the EU's geostrategies and geopolitical mindscape towards its neighbourhood, such ontological anxieties have largely been generated by the failure of salient others to acknowledge or sufficiently affirm

core elements of the EU's ontological security seeking practices. This is evident in respect of two sets of actors, the semi-insiders of the ENP and those outside the ENP (principally Russia).

Regarding semi-insiders one of the key challenges arises when neighbourhood partner countries exhibit significant reluctance in undertaking reforms (e.g. Ukraine, Azerbaijan), or even reject closer relations with the EU through the ENP outright. One example is Armenia, which in September 2013 and at the last minute – though admittedly under pressure from Moscow – rejected an Association Agreement/Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area in favour of joining Russia's Eurasian Economic Union instead, the EU having emphasised that the latter precluded the former (European Commission/High Representative 2013: 22; 2014: 5).<sup>4</sup> Another example concerns the general sense of puzzlement that was evident throughout much of Europe when large numbers of Ukrainian citizens took up arms to fight for secession to Russia, rather than envisage Ukraine's closer relationship with the EU.<sup>5</sup> Rejections like this are double-edged for the EU. While they may be welcomed as answering troubling ongoing questions about the final demarcation of the EU's borders, in ontological security terms they can generate anxiety as signifying the EU's apparent lack of attraction and its claims to be at the forefront of a universalist developmental model.

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<sup>4</sup> The issue is that while the EU's DCFTAs would still enable partners to independently sign other free trade agreements, such as with the CIS, as members of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) they can only sign trade deals as a bloc, much as the EU operates. Arguably then, through the EEU Russia is trying to establish exclusive control over the trade policies of countries in the shared neighbourhood, something the EU claims it is trying to avoid (Raik 2016).

<sup>5</sup> That many of these fighters may have been motivated more by opposition to being ruled by a 'fascist' and 'illegitimate' government in Kiev than being opposed to the EU per se is less relevant here than how these actions were perceived and interpreted across Europe. Surveys undertaken by Toal (2017: 233-4) actually suggest large numbers of Ukrainians in the east of the country now reject a European identification.

It is relevant to bring in the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), here, an initiative launched in 2009 as a sub-policy of the ENP specifically focused on the Eastern neighbours. Although the EU has consistently argued the EaP is not directed against anyone (i.e. Russia) – a technocratic rather than a geopolitical exercise only designed to enhance the partners' reform process (Youngs 2017: 50-2) – Russia perceives it otherwise. Indeed, Russia has tended to view the EU's externally directed regionalist policies in competitive zero-sum terms as mechanisms of geopolitical expansion designed to build an EU sphere of influence (Pop 2009) and further marginalise Russia, rather than as opportunities for breaking the dualism between enlargement/inclusion and neighbourhood/exclusion (Makarychev 2012: 6, 13). Moreover, Russian suspicions should not be summarily discounted since the EaP was launched in view of heightened concerns amongst the neighbours and the EU's newer members in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in particular, following Russia's military action in Georgia in 2008 (Raik 2016). For the CEE members – historically more suspicious of Russia's intentions – there has been a clear desire for the EU to become more engaged in the post-Soviet space and to turn the eastern neighbourhood into a buffer zone with Russia (Nitoiu 2016b).

As Makarychev (2012: 13) argues, this should make us wary of simplistic assertions that only Russia engages in traditional geopolitics. However, while apparently modernist geopolitical desires are evident here, the mechanism for their achievement is important. Of relevance is that the EaP rests on encouraging prospective partners to make a 'European choice'. Thus, while the EaP indicated the EU's willingness to 'jettison a "Russia first" philosophy', the goal has been to encourage the partners to embrace a sense of belonging and affiliation to a particular normative order and understanding of European space and identity (Makarychev and Devyatov 2014: 1-2). Unlike Russia, which has been more overt and coercive in exerting

political, economic and security pressure to encourage countries to join the Eurasian Economic Union instead, it is central to the EU's sense of self that it does not enforce its regionalist desires on others, but that they freely choose to embrace the European option. This, after all, is what the EU is believed to have left behind and fundamentally stands for. Indeed, this notion of choice precisely underpins EU claims that the EaP is not about geopolitics. To quote Carl Bildt, the then foreign minister of Sweden (one of the EaP's co-authors along with Poland), 'The Eastern Partnership is not about spheres of influence. The difference is that these countries themselves opted to join' (quoted in Pop 2009). It is precisely this view that two years earlier enabled Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, to proclaim the EU to be the world's first 'non-imperial empire' (quoted in Foster 2015: 1). Such views, of course, can appear naïve. As Korosteleva (2016: 40-1) notes, in seeking to draw the partners into the EU's normative order through technocratic convergence the ENP/EaP is a region building project that entails elements of inclusion/exclusion by definition. Given Russian sensitivities it is perhaps unsurprising it has generated geopolitical tensions (Casier 2016: 22).

The key point, however, is that when partners fail to make this choice the EU's privileged claims to self-identity and as a model to be aspired for and emulated are therefore undermined. Such actions are not only unexpected and abnormal when seen through the lenses of the EU's established geopolitical mindscape, but they also show how mechanisms of conditionality, that essentially routinize privileged and hierarchical conceptions of EU identity in relation to others, do not always work. This, in turn, destabilises the sense of trust and stability that has been assumed to exist in the nature of relationships established with specific others.

These anxieties, however, are enhanced when we step outside the ENP framework and where the major challenge comes from Russia. In this respect, despite Russia's power politics and geopolitical manoeuvring in recent years – its military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, its assertive approach to energy politics, and most recently in Syria – arguably it is at the ontological level that Russia presents the EU with the greatest challenge.

The basic ontological security challenge of Russia for the EU is ultimately its steadfast refusal to accept the universalist presumptions of EU self-narratives or the notion (expectation even) that Russia should accept a diminished and subordinate standing in relation to the EU. Despite EU proclamations of an equal partnership the basic sentiment in Europe remains one of viewing Russia as a laggard, mired in historically anachronistic modes of thinking, becoming increasingly authoritarian and fully expected to suffer continuing economic, social, political and even military decline, and therefore only destined for greater marginalisation. This view fundamentally reaffirms EU conceptions of self-identity.

However, Russia's refusal to accept this view of itself – and to resurrect itself by fully embracing 'European' economic and political norms and practices – has long perplexed and frustrated European/Western commentators who have struggled to explain Russia's resolute deviation from the 'norm'.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, however, President Putin has consistently countered, suggesting that what the EU deems normal is itself a regrettable deviation, and actually highly abnormal. Putin's emphasis has therefore been on Russia as the bastion of 'true Europe', the

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<sup>6</sup> Kagan (2014: 32) refers to the sense of 'disbelief bordering on disorientation' exhibited by the Obama administration and many academics and pundits in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea.

protector of true European values of sovereignty (see Morozov 2015), in contrast to the degenerative and immoral postmodernising EU. This narrative does not simply represent a rejection of EU norms, but a direct challenge to its universalising aspirations. Through projects like the Eurasian Economic Union Russia is offering a direct competitor to the EU project, one that even the EU has begun to recognise is making 'the EU less attractive as a model and partner' (European Commission/High Representative 2013: 22). Indeed, this challenge is such that the EU has even begun to question the efficacy of the conditionality mechanism in the ENP and the policy's inherently hierarchical nature (European Commission/High Representative 2015: 2, 4, 9). In Putin, therefore, the hierarchical imperial mindscape and geopolitical vision of the ENP confronts a Russia with its own contending geopolitical vision and mindscape.

In this respect, Putin's Russia has existed as an ontological thorn in the EU's side, a constant source of anxiety and puzzlement highlighting the limits of the EU's capacities of norm projection. As such it challenges the EU's very claims to selfhood, suggesting that the EU is not as alluring or successful as imagined, challenges which when placed within the broader context of the post-2008 economic crisis, the ongoing refugee crisis, the rise of anti-EU sentiment across member states, and the destabilising effects of the Brexit referendum, have only been exacerbated. The concern and sense of existential anxiety engendered is deeply felt. As the EU warned in one of the key documents feeding into its new global strategy, 'the lure of anti-democratic models promoted from outside' is not just a threat with respect to partners 'turning away from the EU, and looking for inspiration and support elsewhere', but is even understood as a real threat for the Union itself, a Union that desperately needs to regain 'lost confidence' (European Union 2015: 134-5, 146).

## **The Temptations of Traditional Geopolitics**

Given the above, the EU's perceived inability to exert influence beyond its borders and control its neighbourhood feeds into broader existential questions that also threaten to further undermine the Union internally. For many, the EU therefore appears caught in a maelstrom of internal and external pressures, unable to respond effectively. Such feelings are often exacerbated when comparison is made to the apparently decisive (and indeed begrudgingly admired) manoeuvrings of Putin, who is frequently depicted as running rings round other European leaders (Meister 2017). For some, previous self-confidence in the legitimacy and universal relevance of the EU's project and values is draining away, leaving the Union facing a profound ontological crisis.

In such situations, when established self-narratives and routines are being fundamentally challenged, ontological security analysis anticipates that actors will necessarily seek to reaffirm a sense of order and stability, and hence ontological security. This may be done by reaffirming established self-narratives, routines and practices. However, it may also be done by embracing new ones or shifting to previous conceptions that are seen to provide the desired sense of stability and self-certainty. Indeed, Chernobrov (2016: 1) argues that recourse to previous (but hitherto marginalised) narratives is particularly tempting as it entails slotting unexpected and unpredictable events into a set of familiar and predictable expectations. However, studies on ontological security have demonstrated that when faced with existential anxieties actors also often engage in practices of securitisation, by shifting the focus away from troubling anxieties about the nature of selfhood, to reclaim this through the

identification of securitised objects of fear against which counter-measures can be taken (Rumelili 2015: 14; Tillich 2014: 35-7; Mälksoo 2015).

Both these elements are identifiable in contemporary proclamations of the 'return of geopolitics' and an emergent 'new Cold War'. Thus, in view of the perceived 'failure' of one set of ontological security generating narratives and routines about self-identity, we see an embracing and resurrection of an earlier Cold War set of geopolitical narratives invoking a familiar set of metaphors (spheres of influence, new Cold War, buffer zones, Finlandization). Insofar as this is becoming a significant competing master narrative it is one that seeks to offer the stability desired by reconfiguring uncertainties and complexities of current events in terms of what we already know. It suggests, in short, that there is nothing new here. However, proclamations of a 'return of geopolitics' and a 'new Cold War' also have the effect of shifting Russia from the category of partner back to that of a potential enemy, and towards which tougher and more combative approaches should be adopted (Ciută and Klinke 2010: 327). Thus, Russia's previously apparently 'unexpected', 'perplexing' and 'abnormal' behaviour becomes reconfigured precisely as what is to be expected by a country driven by desires to re-establish its (Tsarist/Soviet) great power status in power political terms; it is, as Ciută and Klinke (2010: 326) put it, re-scripted as 'inher[ing] in its very *nature*' (original emphasis). And, of course, this merely reproduces a more enduring script in European political discourse of depicting Russia as the bogeyman and laggard of Europe (Neumann 1999). As a result, Russia's actions and motivations become reinterpreted in highly recognisable terms, and where anxieties about the current situation are transposed into a set of securitised fears.

It is interesting, therefore, that having previously disavowed any notion that the EU is engaged in a geopolitical competition with Russia in the neighbourhood, such a framing has become increasingly embraced in official circles since 2014, and not only in public and media discourse. For instance, reflecting on Russia's actions in Ukraine, in 2014 outgoing Commission President José Manuel Barroso redefined the EU's enlargement policy towards the east precisely in such terms, suggesting that without it Russian ambitions would surely extend beyond Ukraine to Bulgaria and the Baltic States (cited in Forsberg and Haukkala 2016: 9). Similarly, the ENP is no longer simply understood in purely technocratic terms, but has been redefined as a policy of geopolitical resilience against the destabilising actions of Russia. The ENP reform process is therefore no longer understood only in terms of extending EU norms of good governance, but also where doing so is central to helping the 'neighbouring countries remain free to make their own political, diplomatic and economic choices, by reducing the scope for external leverage or coercion' (European Commission 2017: 5, 14; Youngs 2017: 157)

While repositioning Russia in this way suggests the country is inherently threatening and untrustworthy, a potential threat to Europe's economic, political and physical security, at an ontological security level such a discourse is self-affirming. Indeed, it is precisely European anxieties of ontological insecurity that provide an incentive to securitise Russia as a military and economic threat which can be mobilised against. Thus, while Russia now reappears as untrustworthy, in ontological security terms this is simply reaffirming an old truth, where its untrustworthiness becomes precisely what we can trust in. Stability in the nature of the relationship is returned. Such a narrative, however, not only re-establishes a sense of self-identity and order, but resurrects European self-identity in positive terms, re-establishing a

sense of narcissistic consistency that was being challenged (Chernobrov 2016: 7-8). This is to say that the framing offers a moral judgement that reclaims Europe once more as 'good' for its continuing defence of freedom and liberty, while simultaneously depicting Russia as historically renegade (Ciută and Klinke 2010: 327), with Western commentators and statesmen quick to invoke a temporal disjuncture, criticising Moscow for being stuck in either Cold War balance of power mind-sets or the imperial hinterlands of the nineteenth century (Toal 2017: 24).<sup>7</sup> The narrative therefore promises to provide 'feelings of identity, validation, and superiority while compensating for inner divisions and self-alienation' (Chernobrov 2016: 7).

Importantly, this is not to suggest that Russia's actions do not give cause for concern. When thinkers close to the Kremlin, like Alexander Dugin, actively advocate Russia's expansion into neighbouring regions (Tolstoy and McCaffrey 2015; Ingram 2001; Snyder 2014), they seem to confirm the fears that underpin the modernist geopolitical perspective of the new Cold War narrative. However, it is important to recognise that, just as evident in calls for the EU to become more geopolitical, the widespread embracing of traditional geopolitical scripts and populist nationalism in Russia may also be interpreted as responding to Russia's own ontological insecurities (Clover 1999; 2016; Toal 2017: 46-7). For Russia too, the discourse offers an escape from anxieties connected to the loss of status and role following the break-up of the Soviet Union and to endemic problems of a lack of economic reform and development. In the idea of a new Cold War, standing defiant against the West and proclaiming to offer an alternative to Western neo-imperialism, Russians re-find a sense of

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<sup>7</sup> As US Secretary of State, John Kerry, put it in reference to Russia's actions in Crimea, 'It's really 19<sup>th</sup> century behaviour in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (quoted in Kagan 2014: 32).

pride in the nation, an Other upon which to blame misfortunes, and a sense of ordering in respect of the world in which they find themselves (Morozov 2015).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, developments in EU/West-Russia relations over recent years seem to confirm the hypothesis of the ontological security literature 'that actors prefer relationships they have practiced and recognize, even if attachment to these relationships maintains conflict or reproduces other harmful, but recognizable and certain, situations' (Chernobrov 2016: 3). In particular, it seems to confirm Mitzen's (2006) alternative account of the endurance of security dilemmas detrimental to the physical and economic security of the parties involved. For Mitzen, security dilemmas are less about problems of (mis)trust in a Hobbesian anarchy as realist accounts contend, and more about how relations of enmity – despite raising concerns about physical safety – ultimately enhance a sense of identity and provide a comforting narrative about the nature of world politics. What this teaches us, Mitzen contends, is that ontological security concerns often seem to trump concerns of physical security (also Rumelili 2015). To this extent, Western responses of sanctions, veiled threats of further measures, NATO military manoeuvres and troop deployments to Poland and the Baltic States, while understandable as such, only feed into an underlying dynamic in Russia that is clearly welcomed by many for its reinforcement of a narrative that replaces anxiety about the future with a sense of certitude in terms of Russia's identity and mission in the world. Insofar as Russian responses do likewise in Europe and the West we might even speak of a 'spiral of ontological (in)security' generation (Lupovici draft). The attraction of tropes of a new Cold War and a return of geopolitics is precisely that they salve anxiety about current events by

fitting them into clearly established systems of meaning, though doing so entails reducing anxieties by emphasising a world of threats and fears connected to an increasingly securitised other.

There are obviously potential problems with this. While the (re)-securitisation of enemy others may help ameliorate anxieties about a sense of ontological insecurity, doing so entails ramping up the overall sense of threat and carries the danger of becoming self-fulfilling. Such practices inevitably entail the danger that the complexities of contemporary events are overlooked in favour of seeing them as just further examples of an established pattern. Thus, we see a tendency to depict events in Ukraine (as well as suspected sightings of Russian submarines in Swedish waters, interceptions of Russian military aircraft, or NATO redeployments in the region) simply 'as signifiers of Cold War times' (Chernobrov 2016: 3). The danger is that this results in 'unnecessary escalation', with such conflation being both 'attractive and dangerous'; dangerous because 'It creates an illusion of predictability but prevents seeing other dimensions of the problem and leads to a known and well-rehearsed routine of policy escalation and popular suspicion' all premised on the illusion that we actually know the other (Chernobrov 2016: 3-4). For Chernobrov (2016: 2), all this constitutes a form of '(mis)recognition dictated by a societal need for ontological security' and which is further evidenced, for instance, in how official European support for Ukrainian protestors on Maidan square was largely premised on identifying them as archetypal cosmopolitan Europeans 'like us'. The protestors of the Arab Spring movements were identified likewise. The attraction of doing so is that it serves to confirm the EU's own sense of self-identity and founding narrative. The problem, of course, and where (mis)recognition comes in, is that these groups were much more diverse, and which in the Ukrainian case arguably led to the EU – and not least European

media (Ojala and Pantti 2017:46-7) – overlooking fascist and neo-Nazi elements amongst the protestors and the subsequent new coalition government (Chernobrov 2016: 5, 8; Toal 2017: 213; Youngs 2017: 121).<sup>8</sup> Of course, acknowledging that we do not actually know the full nature of the situation we face, or exactly who the other is and what motivates them, can generate anxiety, with this being why locating new events in established narratives is so tempting.

To end, the above analysis has emphasised that calls for the EU to become ‘more geopolitical’ in its relations with Russia are problematic in several respects. First, it has been demonstrated that the EU is already (and always has been) a geopolitical actor. However, the EU’s geopolitics are heavily imbricated with geoeconomic (and postmodern) elements, where through geostrategies like the ENP/EaP the EU actively engages in practices of spatial ordering beyond its borders. Moreover, these geostrategies also perform ontological security seeking functions insofar as they routinize particular conceptions of EU self-identity and established understandings of the nature of the EU’s salient environment. As such, however, they can also be challenged, undermined and destabilised, and the EU’s sense of ontological security imperilled as a result. Calls for the EU to become more geopolitical – where this equates to a desire for a more modernist Cold War style geopolitics – reflect how far the EU’s sense of ontological security has been challenged in the neighbourhood (but also more broadly).

Crucially, though, it has been argued that such calls are themselves a form of ontological security seeking, an attempt to replace one set of narratives of spatial ordering and self-

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<sup>8</sup> As Toal (2017: 218) notes, in contrast, and just as inaccurately, Putin has tended to identify any manifestation of Ukrainian nationalism as almost synonymous with fascist nationalism.

identity generation, with another felt to be better able to account for the nature of the contemporary situation. The temptation of this modernist turn is that it re-establishes a sense of cognitive control and order over what has become felt to be unpredictable and unexpected. The danger, however, is that the sense of ontological certitude established is too simplified, overrides the complexities of the contemporary situation, but in doing so threatens to become self-fulfilling. Thus, just as it is wrong to suggest the EU does not do geopolitics, it is similarly wrong to suggest that modernist geopolitics captures the full essence of Russia, a country that is also heavily integrated into the globalised world economy, with this significantly raising the costs of it withdrawing from such interactions or excessively damaging its image and reputation with potential (Western) investors. This should also make us question whether simple modernist geopolitical calculation is all that is at play in Russia's recent, more overt geopolitical moves in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria, with analysts suggesting a range of explanations are available (Toal 2017; Triesman 2016). As such, meeting Russia's traditional modernist geopolitical moves by resorting to its own modernist geopolitical responses, not only threatens to generate a spiral effect, but also overlooks the possibility that alternative strategies may be available. It may also, however, only serve to enhance the sense of ontological anxiety within the EU by further challenging core elements of its own self-narrative as a peace organization aimed precisely at overcoming militarism, nationalism and traditional geopolitics in Europe (Guzzini 2012: 62).

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