

**EU FOREIGN POLICY IN A NETWORKED  
WORLD**

**WEBS AGAINST POWER POLITICS**

**Kristi Raik**

## EU FOREIGN POLICY IN A NETWORKED WORLD: WEBS AGAINST POWER POLITICS

The liberal, norms-based international order is being challenged by two contradicting trends: the rise of power politics and geopolitical conflicts, on the one hand, and the diffusion of power and increased importance of networks, on the other. This paper explores how increased connectivity is shaping the agenda and practice of EU foreign policy and re-defining the traditional tensions between realist and liberal approaches to global politics.

It argues that the EU should develop foreign policy strategies that utilise networks as an asset against power politics, looking at two examples of how a network-based approach can help the EU to defend its values and interests: networks for resilience against hybrid threats, and networks for supporting Ukraine. These cases shed light on how the concept of networks can contribute to the EU's strategy in today's fluid global politics and unstable regional security environment.



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# EU FOREIGN POLICY IN A NETWORKED WORLD

## WEBS AGAINST POWER POLITICS

### INTRODUCTION: CONTRADICTING CHALLENGES TO THE LIBERAL ORDER<sup>1</sup>

The EU's global actorness is firmly rooted in the idea of a liberal, norms-based international order, but in recent years, this order has been increasingly challenged by new trends. One can distinguish between two key dimensions of change. One is the changing distribution of power and subsequent geopolitical tensions. The relative decline of the US and Europe is indicated by figures such as the global distribution of military and economic resources, and population size.<sup>2</sup> The rise of new actors gives increased prominence to (geo)political competition between major powers along the lines of realist IR theory. In short, we seem to be moving towards a multipolar order.

However, this state-centric structure is challenged by another dimension of change: the implosion of connections and diffusion of power. Borders are porous and state sovereignty is, in many respects, an illusion, as we are connected together by flows of people, goods, money, data and energy. Expanding networks of actors are enabled by new forms of physical connectivity that link together different parts of the world. Some go as far as to argue that this renders territories and borders irrelevant<sup>3</sup> – a claim that is hard to sustain in light of territorial conflicts over Crimea and the South China Sea, to name just a few. Yet it is hard to deny that governance has become more difficult, and an increasing variety of actors can shape global events.<sup>4</sup>

These two dimensions of change are in contradiction with each other, and yet they are simultaneously challenging the liberal, rules-based order. The norms and institutions that have regulated international relations since the end of the Second World War are under strain. The geopolitical tensions between great powers are not casting us back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but play out in new ways in today's networked world. Europe,

among others, is puzzled about how to address the new uncertainties and reassess its own place in the world.

This FIIA Analysis explores the increased importance of networks from the viewpoint of EU foreign policy. At the same time, it highlights interaction and tension between the two major trends of connectivity and power politics. It is argued below that the EU, in its foreign and security policy, should make a more comprehensive strategic effort to think and act as a network power in a densely interconnected world. This points *inter alia* to a proactive approach to engaging partners inside and outside Europe who share the EU's interests. Faced with the return of great-power competition and exclusive forms of nationalism, the EU should foster and make use of open networks, but also defend its key networks and make them more resilient. Moreover, the EU should develop foreign policy strategies that utilise networks as an asset against power politics.

This Analysis aims to contribute to research on the EU's global actorness, not by focusing on its possible uniqueness, but by exploring more practically oriented questions such as: How does the EU understand the networked world and operate in it? How can it use network strategies to counter power politics and defend the EU's values and interests? Hence, the EU is seen here as an interesting case of how increased connectivity is shaping the agenda and practice of foreign policy and re-defining the traditional tensions between realist and liberal approaches to global politics. Liberal and realist theories of IR are applied in the Analysis as broad conceptual frameworks that are reflected in the worldviews, strategies, interests and choices of foreign policy actors. In other words, liberalism and geopolitical realism are seen as ideational constructions that give meaning to the surrounding reality, and condition foreign policy practice.<sup>5</sup>

The Analysis will firstly outline the concept of a networked world. It will then analyse the EU's liberal

1 The author is grateful to Rosa Balfour, Juha Jokela, Svitlana Kobzar, Teija Tiilikainen and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2 On military expenditure, see Sipri 2017; on the economy and population, see Eurostat 2016.

3 E.g. Khanna 2016.

4 National Intelligence Council 2017; see also Naím 2013.

5 This approach follows constructivist understandings about the role of ideational factors in shaping foreign policy practice and the importance of intersubjectively shared norms and values as a causal force in international relations (e.g. Checkel 1998; Goldstein & Keohane 1993 (eds.); Wendt 1999).

vision of global networks, which is contrasted with a realist approach to networks as an instrument of state power. The rest of the paper explores two examples of how a network-based approach can help the EU to defend its values and interests and maintain a norms-based European order: networks for resilience against hybrid threats, and networks for supporting Ukraine. Both new challenges to resilience and the Ukraine conflict can be seen as expressions or symptoms of increased great-power competition and the global trend towards multipolarity. As it is neither a state nor a major power in a realist sense, the limitations on what the EU can do in these areas have been evident. Hence, these are important examples of how to utilise a network-based approach to confront power politics and shape events in ways that draw on the EU's relative strengths.

## A NEW WORLD OF POLES AND NETWORKS

The challenges posed by the relative decline of the West and gradual movement towards a multipolar, multi-order, poly-centric or inter-polar world order have been discussed in Europe for many years.<sup>6</sup> The notion of a rules-based order has a central place in the EU's vision of the world – as formulated by Tocci, multilateralism and the rule of law 'constitute the very moral and ideational bedrock of the European project'.<sup>7</sup> Yet with the declining ability and willingness of the US to sustain international norms and institutions, it is not clear who, if anyone, will take on the role of global leadership. Calls for Europe (or Germany) to do this have been met with caution and doubt.<sup>8</sup>

More optimistic voices argue that the rising powers may become constructive pillars of a new and different, but still rules-based world order.<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, the rise of new powers that do not share Western understandings of order has engendered notions such as 'nonpolarity', 'no one's world' or 'multi-order world' – a world without a clear leader or a shared order.<sup>10</sup> What is common to these different views on the impact of rising powers is the understanding that it is not just the number of poles and distribution of power among

them that is changing, but one should also anticipate a qualitative change to the rules and norms that underpin global politics.

At the same time, the increasingly networked world challenges the state-centric structure of international relations. The diffusion of power and multiplicity of actors are puzzling not just for states, but also for state-centric international organisations, starting from the UN. The rising powers, and perhaps increasingly some Western actors as well, uphold rather traditional understandings of statehood and sovereignty. Yet they are embedded in webs of interdependencies like never before. The chessboard and the web co-exist, as described by Anne-Marie Slaughter.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of networks can be applied to both structure and agency in global politics. The structure of networks takes a 'specific institutional form' characterised by horizontal, not hierarchical relations.<sup>12</sup> Global networks differ from international organisations not just by including non-governmental actors, but also by being more informal, flexible and open. Hence, the network structure implies certain conditions and parameters for action and the exercise of power. In a network structure, no actor has the formal power to impose outcomes on others. A network consists of interconnected nodes which are independent actors in their own right. At the same time, a network can perform as an actor in its own right, pursuing certain goals shared by its members. Networks can be led – or rather, steered – from the centre, by the actor with the best connections. Network agency requires continuous flows between the nodes; in other words, networks are not static.

States remain the main actors in international relations, but they are part of global networks that include a variety of actors ranging from NGOs and companies to criminal and terrorist groups. States and international organisations, and a quasi-state such as the EU, can exert influence on the global scene by working with and through the fluid, open and non-hierarchical networks involving different types of actors. As discussed below, non-state actors may be partners of governments within a network (e.g. coalitions of pro-reform actors in Ukraine), or governments may delegate or outsource certain tasks to networks of non-state actors (e.g. gathering evidence

6 Renard & Biscop (eds.) 2016; Flockhart 2016; Grevi 2009.

7 Tocci 2017, p. 9.

8 E.g. Leonard 2017; Dempsey 2018.

9 Stuenkel 2016; Acharya 2016.

10 Haass 2008; Kupchan 2012; Flockhart 2016, op. cit.

11 Slaughter 2017.

12 Kahler 2009, p. 31.

of disinformation across the EU).<sup>13</sup> Of course, various non-state actors have always played some role in international relations, so this is not a radically new phenomenon. However, the hugely increased density and speed of connections between actors is elevating the relevance of a network-based understanding of the world, and is opening up new space for different kinds of actorness and power.

## THE EU'S LIBERAL VISION OF GLOBAL NETWORKS

The EU is a network actor by its very nature, with its member states and citizens tied together by a uniquely dense web of connections and interdependencies. A great number and broad range of actors are involved in its policy-making through a multi-level system of governance. The EU's own vision of its place in the world presents this feature of the Union as a 'unique advantage' that should enable Europeans to shape global developments in the era of an 'unprecedented degree of global connectivity' and 'exponential spread of webs'.<sup>14</sup>

It is no surprise that the idea of global networks that encompass and empower various non-state actors has been embraced by the EU. The EU is not suited to be a major actor in a world of realist power politics; indeed, historically, its very purpose is to tame power politics. Less state-centric visions of the global order seem to make more space for a quasi-state actor such as the EU. The EU's nature as a unique entity that 'vacillates between a state identity and that of a different actor' has inspired a rich academic discussion whereby this uniqueness has been seen as a source of both weakness and strength.<sup>15</sup>

Yet although the EU internally serves as a prime example of a network actor, there is nothing EU-specific about the idea of network power as such. Any actor, from major states to NGOs, companies and individuals, can pursue its goals through networking with others who share a similar agenda. Likewise, all global actors are embedded in webs of physical connectivity that enable and constrain their power.

The idea of being less state-centric than states, partnering with a range of actors and combining a

broad range of foreign policy instruments was already visible in the discussions on the European Security Strategy (ESS) of 2003. The ESS reflected the EU's specific approach to security, characterised as comprehensive and cooperative, highlighting the importance of dialogue, multilateralism and a less state-centric approach in comparison to the Cold War era.<sup>16</sup>

The European Global Strategy (EGS) adopted in 2016 conveys an explicitly network-based understanding of world politics and the EU's role in it. The EU sets out to act as an 'agenda-shaper, a connector, coordinator and facilitator within a networked web of players'.<sup>17</sup> The EU's vision of open networks is liberal in the sense of relying on respect for freedom, the rule of law, openness of society and government. It is also liberal in its view of international order as embedded in institutions and shared norms that constrain state behaviour and foster cooperation. In the EGS, civil society actors are singled out among other partners, and the EU makes a commitment to protect and empower human rights defenders in particular. At the same time, the pendulum has swung from outward-looking idealism towards defensive realism, although the EGS is still a distinctly liberal strategy.<sup>18</sup> Upheavals in the neighbourhood, including wars in Libya, Syria and eastern Ukraine, provoked a debate on whether EU foreign policy should be based on a more realist understanding of international relations in order to accommodate the rise of power politics.<sup>19</sup>

The concept of networks not only applies to the EU's external relations, but is also helpful for understanding the EU-internal structures and practices of foreign and security policy-making. European diplomacy takes shape via intensive inter- and transgovernmental networks, where the European External Action Service can function as a hub.<sup>20</sup> It has no formal authority over national diplomacies or EU institutions operating in this field, but it can pursue a leadership role by placing itself in the middle of the network of EU foreign policy actors and cherishing active connections across the web. Outside the Union, a similar coordinating role is carried out by the EU Delegations that coordinate diplomatic representations of member states, while building networks with local actors

13 Ibid., pp. 10–19.

14 European Union 2015.

15 Tiilikainen 2014, p. 131; Whitman 2011 (ed.).

16 Biscop 2004.

17 European Union 2016, p. 43.

18 Tocci 2017, pp. 55, 61.

19 Youngs 2017.

20 Balfour, Carta & Raik 2015 (eds.).

	<b>State-centric world</b>	<b>Networked world</b>
Realist view, 0-sum logic prevails, force over norms	Inter-state competition, marginal role of international institutions	Struggle over who controls networks; closed networks as instruments of state power
Liberal view, pursuit of win-win logic and norms over force	Liberal internationalism, UN-based order, multilateralism	Open networks including state and non-state actors; cosmopolitan order

Figure 1. Liberal and realist notions of the state-centric world and networked world.

as well as other external actors represented on the ground.<sup>21</sup>

The EU's perspective on the networked world chimes with the notion of liberal internationalism 'updated for the digital age', aimed at 'open order building' that involves webs of various actors.<sup>22</sup> This liberal view, while perceived as benign and positive by its proponents, is contested from different perspectives. Conceptually, it is contested by a realist approach that acknowledges the increased importance of connections, but stresses the need for states to control networks and use them as instruments of power.<sup>23</sup> Politically, the liberal view is contested by authoritarian regimes that perceive open networks that allow free flows of information and empower a wide range of actors as a threat. (Moreover, network structures are widely applied in terrorist and criminal activity.) Consequently, the network as a structure is value-free and can be harnessed by various political ideologies and interests. Well-known examples of the 'anti-liberal' use of networks include the spread of disinformation, manipulation of social media, or control over energy connections as tools of power politics.<sup>24</sup>

As summarised in Figure 1 above, a simplified distinction between realist and liberal understandings of international relations provides two competing conceptual frameworks for making sense of the shift from the state-centric world to the networked world. The different notions arguably co-exist: there are inter-state settings and processes dominated by the realist logic, but there are also international and

transnational structures and dynamics that favour rules-based and win-win action. Networks penetrate both settings, but operate differently and perform different functions in realist versus liberal perspectives on the world.

It is debatable whether a network actor such as the EU actually has an advantage in dealing with webs of interdependence. It is also debatable whether Western democracies are better placed in the interconnected world or whether, as argued by Kupchan, 'more centralized states are in many respects better able to cope with globalization than more pluralistic ones'.<sup>25</sup> The authoritarian model has certainly gained fresh appeal due to the rise of China and Russia, which are investing heavily in the control and manipulation of open networks.<sup>26</sup>

According to a number of organisational theorists, however, hierarchical entities perform well in stable, predictable environments, whereas networked organisations are better at adapting to changing and ambiguous environments.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, networks are more resilient than hierarchical entities – resilience being another new central concept in EU foreign policy discourse.<sup>28</sup> The EU's own vision highlights both democratic pluralism in general and the EU's complexity of governance in particular as strengths that make the EU more capable of adapting to the fluid global context.

21 Bicchieri & Maurer 2018.

22 Slaughter 2016, op. cit., p. 78.

23 Ramo 2016; see also Slaughter 2016, pp. 204–206.

24 E.g. Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016; Grigas 2017.

25 Kupchan 2012, op. cit., p. 8.

26 Freedom House 2017.

27 Overview in Slaughter 2017, 51–52.

28 Graub & Popescu 2017 (eds.).

## DEVELOPING NETWORK STRATEGIES IN EU FOREIGN POLICY

One can distinguish between various types of network strategies, such as networks aimed at strengthening one's own resilience, networks built for carrying out specific tasks, and networks developed for addressing large-scale global problems.<sup>29</sup> All of these are relevant with a view to pursuing the EU's foreign policy goals, such as countering hybrid threats (a case of strengthening resilience), managing conflicts in the neighbourhood (a case of specific tasks) or curbing climate change (a prime example of a large-scale global problem). In order to make progress in any of these fields, the EU needs to coordinate a number of actors inside and outside the Union and address the importance of connectivity among these actors. The EU cannot place itself above other actors and exercise leadership in a top-down manner, but it can pursue a well-connected position within networks in a manner that enables it to shape events and influence others.

The two examples discussed below, networks for resilience against hybrid threats and networks for supporting Ukraine, reflect the contradictory trends outlined above, namely the rise of great power competition on the one hand, and the diffusion of power and increased connectivity on the other. Both issues have risen high on the EU agenda as a result of the outbreak of tensions between the EU and Russia in 2014. They highlight the continued importance of the state-centric structure of international affairs and return of power politics in ways that many had thought or hoped Europe had left behind.

Yet these cases also illustrate the tensions between the trends of connectivity and power politics and help us understand how power political competition takes new forms in the networked world. These are also highly relevant cases for exploring the question of how the EU can draw on its relative strengths and utilise 'webs against power politics'. Hence, the purpose of the following analysis is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the two complex topics, but to examine the relevance of network-based agency in developing EU policies.

## 1. Networks for strengthening the EU's resilience against hybrid threats

In recent years, the concept of resilience has edged towards the centre of EU foreign policy debates together with Europe's sharply increased attention to defence and protection, and the rise of so-called hybrid threats.<sup>30</sup> The EU defines hybrid threats as a 'mixture of coercive and subversive activity, conventional and nonconventional methods (i.e. diplomatic, military, economic, technological), which can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific objectives while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare'.<sup>31</sup> The highly disruptive use of such methods by Russia against Ukraine in 2014 was followed by an upsurge of disinformation, election meddling and other types of pressure against a number of Western countries in recent years. The concept of hybrid threats is also applied to the activities and goals of some terrorist groups, notably ISIL. The objectives pursued via hybrid methods include destabilisation of open societies and undermining Western unity. Connectivity and openness are used in anti-Western hybrid tactics as a source of vulnerability.

Resilience is a key concept in the EU's response to hybrid threats. It refers to a 'capacity to withstand stress and recover', with critical infrastructure and civil preparedness playing a key role.<sup>32</sup> The increased importance of webs of physical connectivity are at the heart of the heightened concern about resilience. The level of resilience of each society primarily depends on national measures, but in the interconnected world states have to cooperate in order to ensure security of networks that are vital for their welfare and daily functioning.<sup>33</sup> Societies are closely interconnected by transnational networks and flows (of people, goods, energy, information, money), which is a source of both major opportunities and vulnerabilities. The level of digitalisation and technological advances of contemporary societies distinguishes today's hybrid threats from similar methods used during the Cold War era.

Hence, networks and connectivity are central to both concepts, resilience as well as hybrid threats. The rise of these issues on the agenda is a by-product of

29 Slaughter 2017.

30 This Analysis looks at resilience against hybrid threats, i.e. malicious activities by hostile actors, while leaving aside resilience against other types of risks such as natural disasters and technological disruptions.

31 European Commission 2016.

32 Ibid.

33 Hamilton 2016.

the trend of power politics, but technological advances and expanding webs of interdependence transform into new forms of power politics such as cyber attacks against electricity systems or the spread of disinformation via social media.<sup>34</sup>

The EU's response reflects the necessity to involve different policy areas and actors in efforts to cope with such threats. In recent years, the EU has launched or supported several new structures and initiatives to improve resilience against hybrid threats. The European Commission has introduced the aspect of resilience into its work in a number of sectors including energy, transport, customs, space, health and finance.<sup>35</sup> The rise of hybrid threats has provided a new context and urgency for the EU's work in the field of protecting European critical infrastructure (including major transport and energy connections and information infrastructure) in coordination with relevant national authorities and private actors.<sup>36</sup> One recent example of the EU partnering with the private sector is the contractual Public-Private Partnership on cybersecurity between the European Commission and the European Cybersecurity Organization (ECISO), launched in 2016, which works on protection against cyber threats and development of the cybersecurity industry.<sup>37</sup>

Resilience strategies also require linking military and non-military means. Hence, countering hybrid threats and strengthening resilience has become one of the top priorities in the recent flurry of new cooperation between the EU and NATO.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, resilience has become a central topic in the EU's renewed policy towards its neighbours.<sup>39</sup> In the neighbourhood policy, resilience has offered a useful concept for paying greater attention to security issues.<sup>40</sup> This is being done with a liberal EU twist, stressing the importance of the rule of law and protection of human rights for resilience. At the same time, the new focus on resilience responds to the voices calling for a more realist understanding of international relations as a basis for EU strategy, as mentioned above.

The 'European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats' established by Finland in 2017 complements the measures taken by the EU institutions

and NATO. Based in Helsinki, the Centre has a unique status, as it serves and is endorsed by both the EU and NATO, without formally belonging under either organisation. The Centre operates as a network-based structure, bringing together relevant actors from the participating states,<sup>41</sup> the EU and NATO to share expertise and develop ways to counter hybrid threats and improve resilience. One of the early priorities of the Centre is to improve shared situational awareness, possibly through developing a digital platform available for all stakeholders. Systematic sharing of best practices developed at the national level is another important goal.<sup>42</sup> Finland itself provides a model of comprehensive societal security, developed over many years, which engages state actors, the private sector and civil society in ensuring the vital functions of society in a crisis situation.<sup>43</sup>

Shared situational awareness at the EU level is also the task of the small 'Hybrid Fusion Cell' operating under Intcen (EU intelligence and situation centre) at the EEAS. Intcen relies on information shared by the member states and other EU bodies such as the Commission and EU Delegations in third countries. Furthermore, the Council has introduced the process of a hybrid risk survey that aims to bring together assessments from the member states.<sup>44</sup> While formal information-sharing in the EU framework still faces many challenges, informal connections among member states and other actors are vital for shaping and updating a shared understanding about the nature and impact of hybrid threats.<sup>45</sup>

To add another specific example, the active spread of disinformation has been a salient feature of malicious hybrid activities targeted against the EU, its member states and partner countries. In 2015, the EU established a small East StratCom Task Force (initially including nine officials, mostly seconded from the member states) within the EEAS and adopted an Action Plan on Strategic Communication with a view to countering specifically Russian propaganda and improving the EU's communication in the Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Improving the EU's ability to address disinformation targeted at the EU itself and its member states was a secondary task of the Task Force.

34 E.g. Reuters 2017.

35 European Commission 2017c.

36 Commission of the European Communities 2006.

37 Limnell 2018.

38 Raik & Järvenpää 2017.

39 European Commission 2017b.

40 See Juncos 2017.

41 Sixteen states, including members of both the EU and NATO, have joined the Centre.

42 Cederberg, Eronen & Mustonen 2017.

43 Security Committee 2017.

44 European Commission 2017c, op. cit.; see also Cederberg et al., op. cit.

45 Raik & Järvenpää, op. cit.

To compensate for the limited resources, the task force built up a network of experts from EU member states and EaP countries who report on fake news appearing in the media in their countries. Compiling these data and exposing disinformation has been the most visible part of its activity.<sup>46</sup>

The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, has been repeatedly criticised by a number of member states and experts for allocating very limited resources and attention to this issue.<sup>47</sup> Under growing demand, the EEAS budget for strategic communication capacity was increased for the year 2018.<sup>48</sup> While much of the criticism has been targeted at the EEAS, the need for other institutions, notably the Commission, to engage more in developing EU-internal strategic communication in the face of disinformation has received far less attention. In late 2017, the Commission also launched new initiatives in this field, including a high-level expert group with an advisory role, consisting of non-governmental actors.<sup>49</sup>

These brief examples show that the EU relies heavily on a web of actors, including member states and non-state actors, in handling resilience against hybrid threats. The EU institutions are still searching for an appropriate form and degree of engagement, starting from generating a shared situational awareness and strategic vision to coordination among different actors and policy sectors. It is too early to assess the results of the new initiatives, but they do indicate at least a serious recognition of the need to tackle the rise of hybrid threats and build resilience in a manner that engages a range of state and non-state actors.

## 2. Networks for advancing peace and reforms in Ukraine

Since 2014, the annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine have been the sharpest indicators of the rise of realist geopolitics in Europe. Even before these events, the conflict over Ukraine pushed the EU towards positioning itself in a geopolitical contest vis-à-vis Russia. Although the EU did not wish to see the conflict in zero-sum terms, it had to respond to

Russia's aggressive efforts to impose its dominance over Ukraine. The EU's normative approach and liberal vision of the European order struggled to remain relevant.<sup>50</sup> The crisis provoked a struggle inside the EU between advocates of Realpolitik, who favoured accommodation to Russia's goals, and supporters of a norms-based commitment to Ukraine's right to self-determination and assistance to domestic, EU-oriented reform efforts. The EU has tried to distance itself from the military conflict and the game of realist geopolitics, but has not reneged on its main commitments and forms of engagement, including the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens (both entered into force in 2017), and economic and sectoral assistance.<sup>51</sup>

Networking with a range of EU, Ukrainian and international actors and strengthening connections between the EU and Ukraine are key features of the EU's approach to Ukraine. Dense networking among domestic and international pro-reform actors has been an important dynamic in Ukraine since 2014. The political scene is characterized by a plurality of political, business and civil society actors enmeshed in complex configurations of cooperation, competition and conflict. It is essential for external donors to identify the most effective partners in advancing domestic reforms. Andrew Wilson characterises the political landscape as being fragmented between 'real reformers', 'counter-revolutionaries' interested in maintaining systemic corruption, nationalists who prioritise security and 'decolonisation' from Russia, and openly pro-Russian actors.<sup>52</sup>

NGOs play a key role among the reformers, especially in the most difficult area of fighting corruption. Cooperation between international donors and local NGOs has provided concrete results, such as introducing a transparent e-procurement mechanism (ProZorro) and e-declarations where officials declare their assets, pushing ahead reform of the health sector, and implementing the measures required for visa liberalisation with the EU.<sup>53</sup> Recognising the importance of NGOs, the EU has almost doubled its support for Ukrainian civil society since 2014 (from €12 million in 2010–2013 to over €20 million in 2014–2017).<sup>54</sup> However, EU support for civil society has been criticised

46 See the database at EU vs Disinfo and Twitter account @EUvsDisinfo.

47 Open letter to Mogherini; Politico.eu 2017; EUobserver 2017.

48 From 200,000 to 1.1 million EUR per year. Council of the EU 2017.

49 European Commission 2017d; European Commission 2018.

50 Raik 2017.

51 See Youngs 2017, op. cit.

52 Wilson 2017.

53 For critical reviews, see Oxenstierna & Hedenskog 2017; Twigg 2017.

54 Ioannides 2018, p. 81.

for supporting a limited number of Western-oriented NGOs that are capable of applying for funding, and for difficulties in effectively connecting the work of NGOs with political structures and helping to increase confidence between civil society and the state.<sup>55</sup>

In 2014, the EU established a special Support Group for Ukraine, which has been helpful in channeling assistance from different EU sources to meet Ukraine's needs, and in coordinating with other donors. The Group has coordinated dozens of assistance projects conducted by the EU and its member states. It has also worked with major International Financial Institutions active in Ukraine, for example with the IMF on the reform of Ukraine's tax administration, the World Bank on infrastructure development, and the EBRD on energy-efficient renovation of residential buildings.<sup>56</sup> All of these donors have emphasised the fight against corruption as a condition for continued assistance. In late 2017, a backlash of anti-corruption measures provoked a chorus of criticism by domestic pro-reform actors, the EU, IMF and other donors.<sup>57</sup> Yet many reformist NGOs and experts have called for tougher and more focused conditionality by the EU and other donors.

The EU Delegation to Ukraine is among the most important external actors on the ground, well connected to local state and non-state actors as well as other external players. It functions as a hub that coordinates diplomatic representations of the member states while also representing the EU's common policy in the country.<sup>58</sup> There are persistent differences between member-states' views on issues such as supporting Ukraine's security and the future shape of EU-Ukraine relations, which complicates coordination on the ground. Nonetheless, analysis provided by the delegation has played an important role in shaping EU policies during the Ukraine crisis.

The EU is also represented by the EU Advisory Mission launched in 2014, which aims to support reform in the civilian security sector. The EUAM initially struggled to establish a role in the context of Ukraine's urgent security needs in fighting the war. The broadening of the EUAM mandate in 2016 helped the mission to start making a more meaningful contribution through practical assistance projects and law-enforcement training. Coordination among different external

donors and the Ukrainian authorities has become an important task of the mission.<sup>59</sup>

As noted above, the EU has no direct role in matters of hard security, including conflict resolution efforts. In a country at war, and in a region where unresolved security issues severely hamper overall development, this is a significant handicap. Many member states have been wary about a stronger security role, which could involve presence in the conflict-affected regions or military assistance to Ukraine, out of fear of becoming part of a proxy war against Russia. The EU's contribution to security happens indirectly through measures such as promoting reforms, sanctioning Russia's unacceptable behaviour, supporting the work of the OSCE monitoring mission and humanitarian aid. The EU has been a strong supporter of the OSCE mission, focusing on technological support, notably satellite imagery.<sup>60</sup> Coordination with the US, NATO and other donors active in the field of security sector reform has been challenging.<sup>61</sup>

The participation of Germany and France, alongside Russia and Ukraine, in the Normandy format of conflict resolution talks has ensured the indirect presence of the EU in the process. Yet the absence of EU institutions has been a source of tension inside the Union. If it were more strongly attached to the EU framework, the role of France and Germany might serve as a more positive case of a small task network or 'contact group' operating on behalf of the EU in a context where the participation of institutions is not possible or purposeful. The idea of utilising small informal groupings of actors in pursuit of specific foreign policy goals has been much discussed in the EU. Negotiations on the nuclear agreement with Iran in the format of 'E3/EU + 3' (including France, Germany, the UK and the EU High Representative + the US, Russia and China) have been seen as a positive example. However, this type of network action has raised objections among smaller member states wary of their influence being weakened.<sup>62</sup>

Apart from building networks among actors, it is important to connect Ukraine more efficiently to European infrastructure and strengthen physical links such as roads, energy connections and flows of trade. Connectivity has been singled out as one of the key priorities

55 Youngs 2018, in Ioannides, *op. cit.*; Lebrun 2018.

56 European Commission, Support Group for Ukraine 2016.

57 'Open letter of the Ukrainian civil society'; European External Action Service 2017; IMF 2017.

58 Baltag 2018.

59 Author interviews, Kiev, January 2017.

60 European Commission 2017.

61 Author interviews, Kiev, January 2017.

62 Tocci, *op. cit.*, pp. 79–80.

of the Eastern Partnership.<sup>63</sup> The EU is Ukraine's largest trade partner, and the DCFTA provides new opportunities for business ties.<sup>64</sup> However, access to the EU market is still difficult for Ukrainian companies, and SMEs in particular need support for modernisation in order to be able to benefit from the DCFTA.<sup>65</sup>

Several new infrastructure projects connecting Ukraine to the EU are underway, including a new railway tunnel in the Carpathians, new international connections to several local Ukrainian airports, and the aim to include the Dnipro River in the Trans-European Transport network.<sup>66</sup> While connections with the EU are being strengthened, ties to Russia have drastically decreased. Cutting Ukraine's ties to Russia has not been the goal of the EU or Ukraine, but results from Russia's activities, most notably the war in eastern Ukraine and punitive trade measures applied since 2013–14.<sup>67</sup> Russia has also introduced a number of infrastructure projects that cut off Ukraine, including a new north–south railway connection that bypasses Ukraine and the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.<sup>68</sup> Unless balanced by a rapid improvement in connections to the EU, the cut-off from many traditional ties to the East increases Ukraine's vulnerability and hampers economic development.

To sum up, the EU policy towards Ukraine serves as an example of building alliances among various actors working towards shared goals: representatives of the EU and its member states, other international donors, pro-reform actors in the Ukrainian government, and local NGOs. Networking on the ground has helped the EU to promote its goals and also to put aside to some extent the problem of diversity among member states' priorities and commitments. However, disagreements among member states, especially their different views on how to address the geopolitical tensions, have constrained the EU's ability to engage in peace-building, both at the international level of high politics and at the local level where the EU could, for example, support confidence-building in the conflict-affected regions. The importance of developing physical connectivity has grown due to the geopolitical reorientation of Ukraine, and needs to be strongly emphasised in the EU's future policy.

## CONCLUSION

The starting point for this paper was the understanding that two contradicting trends – the rise of geopolitical realism and great power competition, on the one hand, and the diffusion of power and increased importance of connectivity, on the other – are challenging the liberal norms-based international order. The EU is not well equipped, in terms of both its identity and resources, to be successful in a realist geopolitical contest. It is much better positioned to tackle the challenge of connectivity and diffusion of power, which are strong characteristics of the EU itself. The world of networks can be accommodated to a liberal worldview (and vice versa), whereas the world of zero-sum geopolitical struggle is an antidote to the EU's liberal norms.

As stressed above, the liberal understanding of open networks is politically contested. Networks can be a policy instrument to be harnessed to serve different strategies, values and interests. The EU's views on free flows of information or networks that empower non-state actors are an object of power political competition and need to be defended against authoritarian approaches. The two cases discussed in this paper served as examples to illustrate the relevance of building networks against power politics.

First, the EU has an important role to play in ensuring the resilience of the webs of connectivity that are vital for today's societies. Resilience against hybrid threats in particular is a field in which the number of actors and initiatives has been growing fast, and a shared EU agenda is gradually taking shape. A consistent contribution by EU institutions is necessary for strengthening shared strategic awareness and coordination among actors and policy areas across the EU and with key partners such as NATO.

The second example highlighted that the EU's networking capabilities are essential for its ability to shape developments in Ukraine and help the country withstand the ongoing war and broader geopolitical conflict with Russia. The lack of a direct role in conflict resolution is a major limitation of EU actorness in the region. However, the EU's activity in promoting domestic reforms via networks of pro-reform actors, including domestic and external, state and non-state actors, is hugely important for the country's future.

The concept of networks has been applied in this paper at two levels: as an understanding of how today's global politics is structured, and as a form of actorness. The spread of network structures, characterised

63 European Union 2017.

64 The EU's share of Ukraine's exports went up from 25% in 2012 to 37% in 2016.

65 Chatham House (several authors) 2017.

66 Kyslytska 2017.

67 Cenusa et al. 2014.

68 Mankoff & Hillman 2017.

by dynamic and non-hierarchical connections, favours actors who are well connected and able to project power via informal networks. This poses challenges to traditional forms of state power based on top-down control and sovereign power tied to territoriality. However, it does not necessarily pose a fundamental challenge to the state-centric international system, since states are adapting to the increased importance of networks and operating through and within networks.

The EU is developing extensive networks in the two policy cases discussed above, strengthening its own resilience and supporting Ukraine. However, to make the most of these networks, it needs to work on a stronger shared understanding among the member states on what the main threats are that one needs to build resilience against, and what is it that the EU wants to achieve in its relations with Ukraine. An understanding about the networked world and the practice of networking can help the EU to strengthen its strategic vision, but the definition of shared goals among 27 member states remains a major challenge for the Union's common foreign and security policy. Networks can be a tool for achieving the EU's goals in the interconnected world, but this requires the EU to agree on its goals.

This paper has sought to shed light on how the concept of networks can help develop the EU's strategy in today's fluid global politics and unstable regional security environment. The EU should not assume that it can be an effective network power in the world simply because of its internal nature as a networked actor. It has yet to prove that it can turn its networked nature into a foreign policy strength. Conscious nurturing of networks – both networks of actors and physical connectivity – is needed to capitalise on their potential. By embracing and employing the concept of networks, the EU can develop its ability to shape global events in accordance with its worldview and instruments of power.

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