

**Tuomas Forsberg – Hiski Haukkala**

## **AN EMPIRE WITHOUT AN EMPEROR? THE EU AND ITS EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD**

### 1. Introduction

The metaphor of “empire” has not infrequently been applied to the European Union – most notably by Jan Zielonka (2006) – and there is indeed a growing, though not necessarily very well interconnected body of scholarly literature on the topic (see Behr and Stivachtis, 2016 and e.g. Waever, 1997; Gravier, 2009; Marks, 2012). The extent to which the EU has been, or can be interpreted as an “empire” clearly depends on what is meant by it. The term is often used in a negative sense to indicate the “imperialist” ambitions and policies of the “Brussels bureaucracy”, allegedly to subjugate its member states or how the bureaucracy or the leading member states dominate the continent and some other parts of the world, particularly the former European colonies. On the other hand, there are people who see “empire” as a more positive concept, implying the diversity of the constituent units, with multiple loyalties and overlapping authorities. An example of this is Zielonka (2006), who defines the EU as a neo-mediaeval polity, or Robert Cooper (2002), who sees it as a postmodern one. Those who embrace ‘imperialism’ also stress the civilisational aspect of developed and enlightened imperial communities, although more often this mission is seen in a critical light. Even the EU Commission President Manuel Barroso once noted that “sometimes I like to compare the EU as a creation to the organisation of empire. We have the dimension of empire” (Mahony, 2007). However, he distanced himself from the negative aspects of the concept by adding that “what we have is the first non-imperial empire”. Given these loaded meanings, it might be difficult to refer to “empire” as a purely analytical concept. Nevertheless, “empire” can be seen as a vast territorial unit larger than a nation-state, consisting of a centre and peripheries but often without definitive outer borders, or even more nominally as a territorial unit ruled by an emperor. If the EU is an empire in the former sense, it is definitively an empire without an emperor.

The potential usefulness of the imperial metaphor is not necessarily connected to the actual power of the entity, as history has known both weak and strong empires. Recent events – the Ukraine crisis and Brexit – have mainly emphasised the weakness of the EU’s power, and the concept of “empire” is therefore used to search for analogies with the fall of the Roman Empire (see e.g. Yaroshenko et al., 2015). Yet even recent events can be interpreted as signs of strength. The EU has been accused of being the main culprit in the Crimean crisis because of its imperial ambitions in the Eastern neighbourhood, and Brexit can be seen as a reaction to the EU’s growing ability to penetrate even the big, nominally fully sovereign member states.

The discussion of the EU’s role in international affairs – whether or not this is ‘imperial’ by ambition or effect – is inevitably related to the question of what kind of power it is (see e.g. Bull, 1982). The most typical view is that the EU is a ‘civilian’ power, or rather an economic one with primarily economic interests (see e.g. Damro, 2012). However, this view is increasingly contested by notions of the EU as a ‘normative power’ with universal normative interests (Manners, 2002) on the one hand, and a more traditional geopolitical power on the other (Hyde-Price, 2006). These notions, however, are all ideal-types and therefore the EU can appear in different incarnations at the same time. The attempt to capture the nature of the EU with one attribute may be fruitless. As Karen Smith (2008) has noted, studies on the EU should move away from the question of what the EU is, and turn to what the EU does, and what the activities of the EU do to others. The same problem is related to the concept of “empire”.

As the imperial metaphor tends to suggest, the EU clearly has interests and ambitions beyond its current borders. This, however, does not yet make the EU any more imperial than any other power, even small ones which also have international objectives. What gives the EU some 'imperial' characteristics is the fact that, throughout its history, it has also been involved in extending its territory. At the same time, the attempt to extend the scope of EU rules beyond EU borders by exercising 'external governance' has been manifest in both rhetoric and action (Lavenex, 2004). In its own view, the EU has been acting as a force for the good, and aims to extend normative orders which are regarded either as mutually shared or universal (Manners, 2002). This is, however, where the views of the EU tend to clash with others, and they do so particularly in the context of its eastern neighbourhood and in the case of Ukraine.

During the past few years, a new discourse has emerged which regards the EU as a geopolitical player in search of its own material interest, 'restoring classical imperial tropes of power relations between core and periphery' (Sakwa, 2015: 563). The international arena, especially in the eastern neighbourhood, is seen as a zero-sum game which has, in fact, been created by the EU itself. The EU is allegedly driven by imperial ambition in terms of spreading its values and norms, though these are not universal and only help to assert its rule. The imperial EU can only be stopped by relying on harsh measures that send a message, as was done by Russia in the Ukraine crisis. For example, Julian Pänke (2015: 351) has argued that 'the outbreak of violence in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood is the culmination of a foreseeable development since the end of the Cold War, when the EU initiated its attempts to establish a civilisational identity by externalizing its norms to the exterior'.

This chapter will look at the EU and its eastern policies from the perspective of imperial metaphors and analogies (for an early attempt, see Wæver 1997). In general, views of the EU's role in its eastern neighbourhood vary greatly. As the Ukraine crisis testifies, the question of who was driving the EU policy which aimed to deepen cooperation between the EU and the countries in its eastern neighbourhood, along with the motives behind it, has been highly contested (see e.g. Kostanyan, 2017). This chapter first examines the background and evolution of EU policies in the East, starting with the Eastern Enlargement in 2004, then moves on to explore the European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership, and finally discusses the EU's conduct in the Ukraine crisis (see also Forsberg and Haukkala, 2016).

## 2. The Eastern Enlargement

The so-called Eastern Enlargement of the European Union, which took effect in May 2004, has been – and will most likely remain – its largest single round of enlargement. It consisted of 10 states, most of them former socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, as well as Slovenia, which was the first former Yugoslav republic to enter the Union, and Cyprus and Malta in the Mediterranean. Moreover, Bulgaria and Romania, which were deemed not yet ready to join the EU in 2004, were granted access from 2007.

This 'big bang' enlargement of the EU was generally motivated by the noble goal of ending the division of Europe. It was often coupled with the idea that the rich western European states owed something to the eastern states which had remained captive on the other side of the iron curtain during the Cold War. Vaclav Havel's speeches and texts at the time are quite indicative of the general mood, when he repeatedly called on the West to accept its responsibility, even if it entailed self-sacrifice. Havel (1994) forcefully argued that 'fear in the West of cheap Eastern goods, that fear of getting more deeply involved anywhere where there are no immediate gains, of that caution, that lack of imagination and courage, that love of the status quo ... leads many ... to lock them up in the world to which they have become accustomed.' 'If the West does not accept its co-responsibility for the world,' Havel continued, 'and find a key to the East, it will ultimately lose the key to itself'. By adopting the new members, the Union recognised the inherent European-ness of these

countries, demonstrated not only by their geographical location but also by their willingness to commit to the key European values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.

The critical question is, of course, whether such noble statements constitute the real reason for enlargement, or whether the rhetoric was only instrumental in masking more mundane aims such as geopolitical and economic interests (Moravcsik and Vachudova, 2003). Both factors were probably at play, but as Frank Schimmelfennig (2003) has argued, the rhetoric was indeed of key significance in determining the way in which the Eastern Enlargement took place. The collective identity of the EU rested on liberal values, and refraining from enlargement would have heavily contradicted these principles. Hence, the EU was bound to take the bold step towards enlargement, as the candidates had expressed a sovereign will to join the Union and had fulfilled the required conditions. The opponents of the enlargement were 'rhetorically entrapped', since they could not veto the enlargement without simultaneously denying their declared identity and thereby losing their credibility as community members.

There were indeed forces in some old member states that resisted the enlargement or wanted to postpone it. There were fears of the Union losing its effectiveness, and its established culture and identity, or that the enlargement would cost too much money in trying to support the economically weaker states in raising their living standards closer to those of the EU level. However, these voices were effectively sidelined in the course of the process. The strategic, geopolitical argumentation was largely marginal, apart from general references to peace and stability, since all the eastern European countries were also applying for membership of NATO, and joined it before their accession to the EU (Higashino, 2004; O'Brennan, 2007). Indeed, the EU enlargement was not generally seen as threatening Russia in any relevant way, nor did Russia consider the enlargement to be directed against its interests, except for the question of the Schengen regime, which caused problems for the Kaliningrad region as the inhabitants could not freely move from the exclave to the main part of Russia by land. It also restricted Russians in terms of travelling to the new member states, as they now required visas to enter (see Forsberg and Haukkala, 2016: Ch. 5).

At the same time, some interests in favour of enlargement were not so noble. The British, in particular, saw the enlargement as a way of preventing the deepening of the Union and increasing its own influence against the Franco-German axis. Economic interests also mattered, since the new member states provided not only new markets but also a cheap labour force, in particular for German industry or, from a Marxist perspective, western European capital which could then also put pressure on wages and working conditions in the old member states (Anderson, 2009: 55). Yet, as mentioned above, the economic reasons were more often seen as an argument for postponing the enlargement, setting conditions for it and searching for means other than enlargement to foster economic cooperation.

The enlargement process was not characterised by mutual bargaining but by a unidirectional process in which the EU monitored whether the candidate countries had fulfilled the standards it had set for admission, known as the Copenhagen Criteria. Democracy, human rights and the rule of law were seen as the key elements of these criteria, and particular emphasis was placed on minority rights. Hartmut Behr (2007) regards this as a sign of the EU's imperial conduct. Yet the asymmetrical bargaining position did not depend on the coercive power of the EU but on the fact that the candidate countries wanted membership more than the EU did. Moreover, the candidate countries needed to harmonise their legislation with EU law. However, this was not much different to the previous rounds of enlargement. When Austria, Finland and Sweden joined the EU in 1995, they also had to accept the community *acquis* as a precondition of their membership. Indeed, as Georgeta Pourchot (2016, 27-28) has noted, the eastern Europeans were not asked to implement reforms which were any different to those already undertaken by the existing member states themselves, although it should be added that some of the old members had been able to negotiate exceptions and the new members had to accept a transition period for the free movement of labour. Moreover, Pourchot continued, once the new members had joined the Union, they were granted equal

rights in terms of sharing responsibilities of leadership and governance, such as holding the rotating Council Presidency some years after their entry into the Union. Or, as put by Tony Blair's advisor, Robert Cooper (2002), who soon thereafter became Director-General for External and Politico-Military Affairs at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union:

In the past empires have imposed their laws and systems of government; in this case no one is imposing anything. Instead, a voluntary movement of self-imposition is taking place. While you are a candidate for EU membership you have to accept what is given - a whole mass of laws and regulations - as subject countries once did. But the prize is that once you are inside you will have a voice in the commonwealth. If this process is a kind of voluntary imperialism, the end state might be described as a cooperative empire.

The Eastern Enlargement was highly significant in its effects, since it helped to transform the new member states in fundamental ways (Grabbe, 2006; Schimmelfennig and Seidelmeier, 2005). As a consequence, it has become almost an axiom that the enlargement has been the EU's most effective foreign-policy tool. Yet the EU has not been capable of influencing the political and economic development of countries which have not chosen the European orientation, even smaller states such as Belarus (Korosteleva, 2009). Moreover, the EU clearly had much more power during the negotiation process towards membership than when the countries became members. As the cases of Hungary and Poland now most plainly show, the EU has had more limited leverage over these countries since they have become members of the Union.

In sum, the enlargement of the European Union to the East is in unison with the imperial metaphor to the extent that it involves an element of territorial expansion. However, the enlargement was not coercive and was in fact initiated by the new members themselves who wanted to join the Union. The EU, for its part, defined the conditions under which accession was possible, but setting these conditions was more a reaction to the perceived pressure to enlarge than an imperialist plan. The EU was then rhetorically entrapped in following an enlargement strategy based on its values rather than strategic and economic interests. The imperial metaphor also fails in terms of the fact that the new members were granted full membership rights and were not incorporated through distinct peripheral status.

### 3. The European Neighbourhood Policy

The EU had already started to plan a new policy towards its neighbouring areas before the Big Bang enlargement of 2004, referring to a "wider Europe". The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which covered both the former Soviet states in Europe (except for Russia, which opted out) and the Mediterranean countries, was set up on the basis of a Commission proposal in March 2003, and a strategy paper was issued in May 2004 (European Commission, 2004). This entailed promises of increased funding compared to the old programmes. The Neighbourhood Policy was clearly motivated by the Union's growing political weight and ambition in international affairs in the early 2000s, as demonstrated by the adoption of the European Security Strategy in December 2003. It was also needed because the enlargement was about to bring new direct neighbours into the Union from the East, and they would face new barriers if their relationship with the Union was to remain intact. As the European Security Strategy declared: "It is not in our interest that enlargement should create new dividing lines in Europe. We need to extend the benefits of economic and political cooperation to our neighbours in the East while tackling political problems there" (European Council, 2003:7).

At the same time, it was evident that the 'old' members wanted to set the agenda before the new members joined the Union. Their main concern was that the new policy should not lead to exaggerated promises of future enlargements or unrealistic budgetary commitments. The ENP was instead an attempt

to devise an alternative to further enlargements of the Union. Rather than full integration and institutional immersion, the 'neighbours' were offered wide-ranging cooperation, technical assistance and association schemes with the goal of extending the Union's normative agenda. For this purpose, the mechanism of conditionality – "more funds for more reform" – was applied to relations with the non-candidate countries too. In return for effective implementation of reforms (including aligning significant parts of national legislation with the EU *acquis*), the EU would grant closer economic integration and political cooperation with its partners. In several key respects the ENP resembled the accession process in bringing the neighbouring countries closer to the Union, but with one key difference: the golden carrot of full EU accession was not at any point seriously on the table.

As with the enlargement process, it was clear which party was in the stronger position in the process, and able to define the scope and conditions of relations. The ENP did not give much meaningful say to the neighbours in setting the agenda. Despite the rhetoric of 'joint ownership', the objectives and the means were non-negotiable, and the only time the partners were consulted was when individual action plans were being agreed with benchmarks and timetables. This was nothing new as such, since the Union is known to be a rigid negotiating partner even in more symmetrical relationships, because of the bureaucratic ways in which its mandate has usually been set up. Yet in the Neighbourhood Policy there was clearly a hegemonic aspect to the way the Union conceived its mission; it was offering (or withholding) economic benefits according to the neighbours' ability and willingness to implement the Union's normative agenda. In other words, the EU was willing to give its neighbours influence basically only in terms of when they wanted to implement the Union's demands, and not in terms of how this was to be done (Haukkala, 2008; Bicchi, 2006; Korosteleva, 2011). The neighbours were not granted access to decision-making, apart from some more technocratic and policy areas such as air transport or transboundary water management, where a more network type of governance was adopted (Lavenex, 2008). Moreover, the EU's insistence on the normative dimension involving democracy, human rights and the rule of law was based on the idea that these values were shared, and that the ENP countries had already committed to them in the institutional frameworks set by the Council of Europe and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Nevertheless, this aspect of asymmetric relations, and the EU's ability to impose the agenda for the ENP countries, has led Pänke (2013; 2015) to conclude that the European Neighbourhood Policy was characterised by normative imperialism. Although the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law were all shared in principle, what these principles entailed and how they were interpreted in relation to actual policies was more problematic.

Judging by its reception and outcomes, the ENP was not fully successful as a policy. In particular, the neighbours who wished to establish a closer relationship with the Union were not particularly impressed by the benefits of the Neighbourhood Policy (Bechev and Nicolaïdis, 2010; Korosteleva, 2011a and 2011b). Ukraine has been a case in point, repeatedly voicing its frustration over the lack of credible accession prospects, as well as the negligible level of market access and economic aid from the Union (Haukkala, 2008; Sasse, 2008; Scott 2017). Many people had hence expected more effective 'imperialism' from the EU. By contrast, bureaucratic sluggishness, confusing demands and the perceived lack of local knowledge were common concerns of the partnership countries. Overall, the pace of reforms depended on the willingness of local elites to undertake them, and the EU had only limited opportunities to engage its preferred leaders. In other words, understanding the effect of EU policies is not possible without taking into account domestic politics in the neighbouring countries (Casier, 2011; Langbein and Börzel, 2013; Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk, 2016). At the same time, the lack of any serious progress in terms of reforms in many of the neighbouring countries made it fairly easy for the Union to defer making further promises of economic aid or other concessions.

In sum, the Neighbourhood Policy was created out of a mixture of diverse motivations, and it took multiple forms rather than a clear implemented plan. In terms of its territorial features, it resembled imperial aspirations in building a buffer zone of a 'ring of friends' and in extending its normative reach around its outer borders, making the borders controllable but fuzzy at the same time. Yet, as Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2008) have suggested, the EU has followed different territorial models and conceptions of border in its Eastern Neighbourhood Policy. As with the enlargement policy, the EU acted from a hegemonic position in defining the agenda under which the eastern countries could cooperate and integrate with it. However, it did not have the imperial strength or will to coerce partner countries to cooperate with it, but depended to a great extent on the willingness of the local elites to choose the European orientation. The carrots the EU offered to the ENP countries were too small for them, as these countries preferred full integration, but the sticks were also too small to constitute any effective punishment for those who were not interested in approaching the Union.

#### 4. The Eastern Partnership and the revised Neighbourhood Policy

The ENP was further developed in the course of time. The EU launched the Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009 on the basis of the Polish–Swedish initiative. The initiative was partly a response to post-Rose revolutionary Georgia and Orange Ukraine, who were pressing hard for full accession perspectives. The EU also needed to preserve the initiative after Russia had increased its own attempt to influence developments in the region and had resorted to military force in Georgia. Yet it was equally clear that the EaP was also internally motivated, as a counterweight to the French initiative of a Union for the Mediterranean, launched by President Nicolas Sarkozy during the French EU Presidency in July 2008. Moreover, the initiative was to "ideologically enhance" the status of the eastern partners and offer them a membership perspective, since they were, after all, European states. Yet closer ties with the eastern neighbourhood countries seemed to be hampered by "enlargement fatigue" within the EU. As the Polish Foreign Minister Radek Sikorski asserted, "We in Poland make a distinction between the southern dimension and the eastern dimension [of the ENP] and it consists in this -- to the south, we have neighbors of Europe, to the east we have European neighbors" (Lobjakas, 2008).

Compared to the ENP, the main innovation in the EaP was the new multilateral platform which encouraged the convergence of the partner countries' legislation, norms and practices with those of the Union. The practical implementation of the multilateral track has taken place through four thematic platforms: (i) democracy, good governance and stability; (ii) economic integration and convergence with EU policies; (iii) energy security and (iv) people-to-people contacts. The multilateral track has also provided for civil society participation through a separate forum whose results will feed into the thematic platforms. The EaP has achieved visibility and concrete substance through a number of regional flagship projects ranging from border management to energy efficiency and environmental concerns. Once again, political association and deeper economic integration were on offer for partner countries which advanced in the agreed reforms. A related plan was to encourage free trade within the region itself. Of concrete and most immediate interest to the citizens of the partner countries is the facilitation of mobility. The EaP is expanding on the established goal of country-by-country advancement towards visa facilitation and readmission agreements, with prospects of a dialogue on visas and the possibility of eventual visa freedom. Integral to the success of this path is the partner countries' ability to deal with the challenges posed by illegal immigration and other border security-related issues.

The EU also revised its neighbourhood policies in 2011 and again in 2015 in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. The new ENP sought to re-insert differentiation and conditionality into the process by adopting 'a more for more' approach, whereby the neighbours were more clearly rewarded for their positive efforts as

well as potentially penalised for the lack of them. The idea was to put less emphasis on the promotion of democracy as the core of the policy, and to offer instead a much wider framework under which flexible strategies of cooperation and integration could be applied (Schumacher and Bouris, 2017). At the same time, the EU was suffering from internal problems where both the Euro crisis and the trend towards renationalisation of member states' policies limited the ambitions of the EU in the East. Nevertheless, there was more emphasis on geopolitical reflection in the framework of the ENP after, but not before the Ukraine crisis, though the policy revision still failed to provide a coherent long-term vision (Kostanyan, 2017: 142).

In spite of the new frameworks, the Union's eastern policy was plagued by internal contradictions and inconsistency. As George Christou (2010) argued, the EaP was based on the simultaneous and uneasy co-existence of two binary logics, whereby cooperation and containment, alongside the essential securitisation of the eastern neighbourhood, effectively limited and prevented the EU from facilitating meaningful change through its policies. Tanja Börzel and Vera van Hüllen (2014), in turn, have stressed that the democratisation of (semi-)authoritarian countries entails the risk of their destabilisation, at least in the short run. Therefore they think that promoting effective and democratic governance has become a conflicting objective: "The lower the level of political liberalization and the higher the instability of a country, the more ineffective the EU is in asserting a democratic reform agenda in the ENP Action Plans, clearly favouring stability over change" (see also Wichmann, 2007; Theuns, 2017; Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017).

Others, looking at EU policy from the point of view of political economy, claim that the EU's promotion of democracy is not the core objective but that its aims rest on the neoliberal model of market society, and therefore the relaxation of democratic principles followed quite naturally. The 'fuzzy liberalism' adopted by the EU advocated pluralism and support for independent civil society actors, but 'a neoliberal set of concerns' such as the 'investment climate, excessive regulation, property rights [and] improved market access to public procurement' seemed to dominate the discourse (Kurki, 2012: 152). Indeed, the EU's policies in eastern Europe and elsewhere, involving the promotion of free markets, austerity and various neoliberal measures, has tended to aggravate social conflict rather than create stability (Patomäki, 2017).

The effectiveness of the EU policies under the aegis of the ENP was thus limited at best and counterproductive at worst. There is in fact relatively little evidence that a change for the better has been achieved by the EU in and through its policies towards the East, and "the effect of EU influence under the ENP on the regime dynamics in [the] Eastern neighbourhood appears to be close to nil" (Buscaneanu, 2016: 212). Democratisation processes have mainly stopped in the region. Part of the explanation is that Russia has increasingly contested the EU's normative hegemony in the region and has challenged the EU view of democratic principles (Haukkala, 2008; 2016). Jakob Tolstrup (2013, 250), however, has argued that the positive impact of the EU has been one of preventing autocratisation rather than really pushing democratisation forward. Although the EU has been manifestly disinterested in pursuing spheres of influence and has, in fact, declined to frame its role in the East in this manner, the underlying reality has nevertheless been Russia's insistence on framing the EU's role in largely negative and competitive terms. As a consequence, the EU has been locked into an integration competition with Russia over Eastern Europe, although it has been both unwilling and ill-equipped to play this game. On top of this, the two have also adopted conflicting regime preferences concerning the countries in between, Ukraine in particular, with Russia pursuing increasingly coercive zero-sum strategies to win the key countries over (Smith, 2016).

## 5. The EU and the Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine crisis has brought the role of the EU to the forefront, as it has been directly coupled with the question of who bears the main responsibility for the internal turmoil in Ukraine and the ensuing

confrontation with Russia (see e.g. Mearsheimer, 2014). Russia has repeatedly accused the EU of ignoring Moscow in the preparation of the Association Agreements, and has regarded the EU approach as unilateral and imperialistic, essentially forcing on the partners a false choice between the East and the West. Moreover, Russia claimed that the repeated concerns it raised with regard to the negative effects of the planned Association Agreements with the EaP countries were not taken seriously in Brussels. The EU officials, in contrast, asserted that Russia was kept in the loop and that the economic effects the agreements would have on Russia would be marginal and largely beneficial. For example, the Commission President Barroso argued that ‘the Russian government [including Putin] was informed about the details of the Association Agreement with Ukraine’, and therefore he should not have been surprised by it (Eder and Schiltz, 2014). Moreover, the EU repeatedly reminded Russia that the agreements were bilateral between the EU and its eastern partners, and that under international law third parties have no right to interfere in the conclusion of such treaties.

From its own point of view the EU did not challenge Russia in the region, but it did implicitly contest Russia’s claim to have its own sphere of privileged interests. In practice, the EU had long acted in a manner that did not challenge Russia’s key role in conflicts, in particular when it came to conflicts in Georgia or Moldova. In the run-up to the Ukraine conflict, the EU had already been rendered quite timid in its approaches towards the region. It factored Russian sentiments and objections into its policies and shied away from developing responses that could be seen as threatening from Moscow’s vantage point. As a consequence the EU approach entailed tacit approval, and unintentionally lent support to Russia’s claims to its special ‘sphere of influence’ in the East. As Carl Bildt explained in an interview in March 2015:

I think we should have reacted more strongly towards Russia when they started to misbehave in the summer of 2013. Clearly, when they started the sanctions against Ukraine, we didn’t see clearly the implications of that, and I remember that [former Polish Foreign Minister] Radek [Sikorski] and myself were trying to alert Brussels and Brussels was more or less asleep (RFE RL 2015).

The EU had worked hard to strengthen relations with the Eastern Partnership countries by concluding Association Agreements, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. The negotiations progressed with Armenia, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. In autumn 2014, however, Armenia announced that it had opted for the Eurasian Customs Union instead, and only one week before the Vilnius partnership summit where the documents should have been signed, Ukraine also declined the deal with the EU after Russia had exercised political pressure and offered major economic benefits to encourage it to do so. The EU representatives were frustrated because of this last-minute cancellation, but initially it seemed clear that the EU had resigned itself to ‘losing’ Ukraine to Russia. Yanukovich’s decision was, in the words of High Representative Catherine Ashton (2013), greeted as ‘a disappointment not just for the EU but, we believe, for the people of Ukraine’. Although Barroso signalled ‘our political readiness to sign sooner or later this association agreement’, Ukraine’s refusal was nevertheless accepted as a *fait accompli*, as was Armenia’s. Despite some internal pressures to the contrary, the EU did not engage itself in a last-minute bidding war to try to win Ukraine over, other than abandoning its demand that Yulia Tymoshenko be released. Instead, the EU representatives announced that there would be no new benchmarks for the treaty, as the Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich demanded that he needed a bigger loan from the Union. ‘I feel like I’m at a wedding where the groom has suddenly issued new, last-minute stipulations’, said Chancellor Merkel at the Vilnius Summit (Spiegel Staff, 2014), without realising that the failure to achieve an agreement had any wider geopolitical ramifications. EU officials started to blame Mr. Yanukovich directly for the failure, rather than Russia, as he was seen as simply wanting free money and playing Moscow off against Brussels (Buckley and Olearchyk, 2013). This could, theoretically, have marked the end of all the drama over Ukraine, at least in the short term. Yet this was not to be, as the domestic unrest under the slogan of



'EuroMaidan' that started to gather pace in Ukraine from November 2013 onwards resulted not only in the collapse of the Yanukovich regime in February 2014, but also in a steadily escalating conflict between Ukraine and Russia. The EU leaders and officials did not expect such a popular uprising in support of the Association Agreement but they empathetically supported the protest movement, which they saw as reflecting a genuine European calling for the Ukrainian people (Burlyuk 2017). Catherine Ashton, for example, visited the square in Kyiv and sent a message to the protesters: 'I was among you on Maidan in the evening and was impressed by the determination of Ukrainians demonstrating for the European perspective of their country' (Ashton 2013).

The difficulties the EU faced in trying to strike the right balance between its normative and strategic interests in its eastern policy also became evident during the unfolding crisis in Ukraine and the conflict with Russia. On the one hand, there has been an imperative to show 'strong political support' for Ukraine in line with the adopted self-image and community values. This led to the hasty signing of the political provisions of the AA in March 2014 and the continued rhetorical support for Kyiv ever since. On the other hand, the EU has become increasingly frustrated with the Ukrainians' dithering in terms of both implementing the Minsk Accords and engaging in significant domestic reforms. Political support for a more committed neighbourhood policy rests on a shaky basis. In a referendum, organised in April 2016, the Dutch voters rejected the EU Association Agreement with Ukraine by a clear margin. Although the Agreement was later adopted, the continued Russian destabilisation combined with the chronic economic and political weaknesses of Ukraine itself has made the prospects for a positive development in the country slim indeed. As a result, the EU is in danger of being locked into a situation where it must assume significant political and fiscal responsibilities over Ukraine, with a declining political will in the member states and weak perspectives in achieving any major success. This is probably part of Russia's game plan in the conflict where Moscow hopes that by overstressing its capacity to engage Ukraine, the EU might in future be more easily persuaded to strike a 'Grand Bargain' on the future of the country which goes over the heads of Ukrainians after all (Lo, 2015: 111).

The EU's geopolitical role in the Ukraine conflict was thus rather complex and accidental, rather than based on straightforward imperial logic (Haukkala, 2016). The EU ignored the warning signals and failed to understand how seriously Russia took attempts to neglect its traditional role in its nearby areas, while the Kremlin started to exaggerate the EU's role in the neighbourhood and attribute negative intentions to its anti-Russian character (MacFarlane and Menon, 2014; Casier, 2016). As Tom Sauer (2017: 90) has put it: 'the crisis has not much to do with Russian imperialism let alone Western imperialism. It has to do with lack of strategic long-term thinking...' Although the EU wanted to build a 'ring of friends', it focused in the East on the 'low politics' issues rather than 'hard security'. The policies, once set up, were driven by the European Commission and there was no effective strategic coordination with the 'high politics' driven by member states. In that way, the EU inadvertently generated geopolitical side-effects through its policies (Gehring, Urbanski and Oberthür, 2017).

In sum, although the EU did bear some responsibility for the outbreak and aggravation of the crisis in Ukraine, it is too sweeping a statement to explain the conflict as stemming from the imperial nature of the EU. First of all, the explanation borders on tautology in the sense that the imperial nature of the EU is first inferred from its expansionist policies in the East, and the policies are, in turn, explained by this imperial nature. Secondly, the Ukraine crisis also shows that the EU has been much more reactive and hesitant in expanding its presence in the East than the imperial metaphor suggests. Its ability to govern its neighbourhood has been limited, and mostly related to economic issues rather than traditional core areas of state sovereignty.

## 6. Conclusions

This chapter has looked at the EU's alleged imperial conduct in its eastern neighbourhood, with the aim of assessing how apt the metaphor of 'empire' truly is. EU policy has consisted of enlargement as well as partnerships with countries which are not necessarily aspiring to join the Union. The argument has been that the imperial metaphor only partially applies to the role of the EU in the East. First, the EU has been an 'empire without an emperor'. In other words, Brussels has not formed a power core with strategic leadership, but EU policy has been conducted by a number of agencies and networks and shaped by the member states. Moreover, the policy impact of the EU has been rather limited and mainly economic in nature, without a military or normative hegemony. Furthermore, the EU has often been rather hesitant and reluctant to expand its presence in the region, and its key policy decisions have been slow and reactive. Thus, the problems with the EU's policy towards Ukraine were not a result of its imperial nature but the discrepancy between seeing itself as a normative power and its inability to drive the agenda through by economic means, let alone military. At the same time, the economic policies advocated by the EU contributed to the underlying problems as much as they were able to solve them. In this sense, the Ukraine crisis and the confrontation with Russia is not a story of two geopolitical empires competing over their limes, but a much more complex interplay of path-dependencies.

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