From Structure to Agent: EU Strategic Agency

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Abstract

This chapter argues that Russia has systematically treated the European Union as a latent strategic actor while simultaneously working to degrade its agency. Through targeted information campaigns, elite capture, espionage, and sabotage, Moscow has exploited the Union's structural and decisional constraints – vetoes, unanimity, and consensus-driven paralysis – rendering it rhetorically assertive but materially impotent. At the same time, the EU possesses dormant instruments capable of strategic effect: TEU 31(1), TEU 44, crisis procedures, reverse qualified-majority voting, and financial levers that could enforce compliance and coordination. Framed within the paradigm of next-generation warfare, these mechanisms could enable the Union to act collectively without radical treaty change. By mapping Russian interventions against EU institutional weaknesses, the chapter also demonstrates a conscious yet immobilised Europe, performing weakness while nonetheless remaining capable of mobilisation. It concludes that deliberate, audacious activation of existing tools, including coalitions of willing member states, conditional funding, and operationalised crisis powers could awaken the Union as a coherent strategic actor, one that can defend its interests, counter external subversion, and translate its normative authority into tangible geopolitical influence, creating the conditions for a more confident and self-directed European strategic posture.

Introduction

Josep Borrell, former Vice-President of the European Commission and High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, called for a renewed European "geopolitical awakening" in the aftermath of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This same Borrell was humiliated a year earlier, in February 2021, with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov berating the Union as "illegitimate" and an "unreliable partner" to his face in Saint Petersburg (Herszenhorn and Barigazzi, 2021). However, in the previous decades, Russia saw many of its former satellites in Central and Eastern Europe rush to join the Union as soon as they achieved independence, and European flags were waved at Maidan in 2014 in support of EU accession. Before Maidan, NATO was presented as the sole source of confrontation by Moscow, yet after Maidan and especially today, Europe is treated more inimically than any other actor. In 2014, Europe could counter Russian influence, and it could continue to do so in 2025. However, the prevailing discourse in Europe seems to be inverted, recognising the Russia threat yet downplaying the Union's potential to counter it.

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In response, calls for strategic autonomy have been outlined at the national and institutional levels to face Russia and other global challenges, noting that 'military capability development cannot be reduced to the interests and values of a single member-state' (Brøgger, 2025) and that the Union 'has become increasingly mature especially as a crisis management actor, finding new and innovative ways to overcome the institutional limits linked to its hybridity' (Riddervold and Rieker, 2024). However, this autonomy – in whatever form it takes – presupposes strategic agency, 'how political actors use their ideas, experiences, and beliefs to advance their political goals' (Dura, 2024, p. 556), that is, their ability to act in order to achieve their strategic objectives.

This chapter, therefore, will argue that Russia has and continues to treat the European Union as a latent strategic actor armed with next-generational warfare capabilities. While the Union recognises its own role and deficiencies, it remains shackled by perceptions of its institutions and procedures. These institutions and procedures, however, provide the necessary means to achieve a strategic agency – short of next-generation sovereign actorship – that is critical for the Union's continued survival and prosperity in the fraught contemporary geopolitical environment.

First, an articulation of next generation warfare will be presented and how the Union fits into this paradigm. Next, European decisional constraints will be presented, compared with states ambitions within European public statements and policy documents. These will be contrasted with Russian active measures that have moved to degrade the Union's strategic agency. Finally, the chapter will conclude with measures that the Union can take to strengthen its strategic agency using the instruments already at its disposal.

An Actor of Next Generation Warfare

As a post-modern, post-sovereign organisation, the European Union is often not treated as a strategic actor in its own right, let alone an actor of next generation warfare. However, through its member states it has many of the potential instruments of next generation warfare. Vladimir Slipchenko's articulation of 6th Generation Warfare assumes two main additions to the previous generations: precious strike capabilities and an apparatus for informational warfare (Gareev and Slipchenko, 2007). Drawing on the examples of the United States during the Gulf War and the Yugoslav War, this was viewed as the ability to effect regime change without boots on the ground (Bartles, 2022). In a looser, more circuitous way, Gerasimov stresses the more practical implement of how these effects would be achieved in terms of force ratios between conventional and non-conventional capabilities, including state or institutional power (Gerasimov, 2013; Johnson, 2019). From the perspective of the People's Republic of China, Qiao and Wang presuppose the interlaced and coordinated aspects of all spheres of state action in relation to their understanding of next generation warfare (Qiao and Wang, 2015). The generations to come are nebulous, the unknowable future of future warfare, but seem to revolve around the potentiality of integrating AI into achieving these strategic goals.

Slipchenko, Qiao and Wang, and even Gerasimov wrote their analyses of next-generation warfare not as prescriptive courses of action for their own states but as descriptions of primarily American but broadly Western foreign policy following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although these authors cannot be treated as representative voices of the strategic cultures of their respective states, there is good reason to situate their impact on forming the opinions and thinking of the decisionmakers in contemporary Russia and China – meaning that the United States, or more broadly NATO or even the European Union, were viewed as practising this mode of warfare.

Slipchenko's typology of generations focuses primarily on the most technologically advanced capabilities and how they work in concert in order to achieve strategic goals; the whole-of-government approach is not absent, but it is implicit in that the resources would need to be used synergistically. In Qiao and Wang, it is active, conscious coordination of all instruments of state power for the achievement of strategic goals. Regarding other understandings from the United States, it is a mix of multi-domain operations, next-generational technological integration, and an assumption of the hybridity of the conflict (Spencer et al., 2018; Fox, 2021). For more precision, this chapter privileges a composite definition based on Slipchenko and Qiao and Wang, that next-generation warfare constitutes these precision-strike and informational capabilities used in concert with the synthesis of all instruments of government to achieve strategic goals. What this dynamic demonstrates is that as next generation warfare expands to realms not purely related to defence and security as they have been previously, those competencies that the Union had previously developed become all the more relevant for the achievement of strategic goals.

Of course, the European Union lacks its own direct ownership over the instruments of previous generations of warfare, including but not limited to its own armed forces. Simultaneously, its individual member states maintain their own armed forces and capabilities, including nuclear, that they use in the pursuit of their own national interests. Nevertheless, its institutions taken together with its Member States have the capabilities that Slipchenko outlines: France, Germany, Spain, and Italy already have precision-strike complexes, potentially autonomous through domestic GNSS receiver industries such as Safran and Thales, and strong domestic electronics bases such as Airbus and Hensoldt, as well as joint cooperation in Galileo PRS. The informational dimension is less coordinated; however, the Union has been able to foster affective relationships even if not consciously for the achievement of any strategic objectives. In comparison with other great powers, the European development of AI capabilities is only behind the United States and China (*The 2025 AI Index Report*, 2025). This consciousness of effort, this unified agency, is therefore what the Union is currently missing in material terms. Therefore, through its member states, the Union has these autonomous precision-strike capabilities, it has the ability to build affective ties in the populations of foreign states and only lacks the agency to tie these capabilities together – but can it develop such an agency?

European Decisional Constraints and Strategic Ambitions

While capabilities are not bound to the Union and have arisen primarily from the defence procurement, development, and policy lines of the individual member states, this affective dimension has stemmed primarily from the heritage of 'normative power Europe' (Manners, 2002), in which the Union transcends typical realist self-interested state behaviour while exporting its own values and ethical frameworks through non-coercive means. As such, the normative foundation continues to function as both internal nomos and external justification. While militarisation does not necessarily affect the normative dimension (Manners, 2006), much of this potential militarisation, or at least forays into security matters that have remained almost completely the sole competence of the member states as TEU 31(4) precludes any security or defence related discussions without full consensus. Attempts at changing this status quo are not even made as this is seen as a threat to European cohesion. Even discussions about the use of EU troops in Ukraine were met with complete dismissal (Lunday, 2025).

This consensus is one of the main limiting factors of the Union. Elite capture in a smaller Member State is all that Russia needs to block any strengthening of institutional authority or purview through several low-investment ventures in bribery or disinformation campaigns. In a sense, the Union has within it its own version of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's *Liberum Veto* in which even the most destitute member of the *Szlachta* could be bought off by an adversarial foreign power to block any executive decisions by the state; this paralysis is what eventually led to the dismemberment of the Commonwealth in 1793. The issue of non-imposition of new sanctions packages, limitations on the purview of current sanctions packages, and the struggle over the continuation of sanctions have epitomised this dynamic. While there have been continued threats and statements to cut out regressive and blocking Member States in the voting process through Article 7 procedures, these threats have not been acted upon due to the requirement of unanimity (*Timeline – Article 7: the story so far*, 2025). Potential veto in the Council continues to dominate European thinking on the realm of possibilities in terms of its own agency.

This weak agenda-setting with nominal commitment to normative considerations, the predominance of mediation in the face of antagonistic member states, and a lack of political dirigisme mark the main drivers of this paralysis. Weak agenda setting means not having the requisite military capabilities, and this mediation of exclusive interests is impossible with the antagonistic actors, wherein negotiation and consensus is a definitional possibility. None of these premises regarding the Union's constraints are novel, and this 'combination of strategic cacophony and capacity gaps', paired with unilateral vetoes or threats of veto, has led to a situation in which 'Europeans are currently not in a position to autonomously mount a credible deterrent and defence against Russia' (Meijer and Brooks, 2021, p. 42).

The Strategic Compass for Security and Defence first brought to the forefront this will to military and geopolitical agency that would allow the Union to mount a credible deterrent and defence, detailing at the Union-level a need for strategic autonomy and sovereign agency ('A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', 2022). However, what was outlined therein was little more than a collective ambition and call to action: position without implementation, which would be a competency of the Commission and Council, and no fiat. This represented naught but a continued leaning on normative considerations with at least a recognition of the necessity of strategic agency.

The strategic defence initiative, Readiness 2030, formerly and fractiously named ReArm Europe (*Press Statement by the President on the Defence Package*, 2025), does nothing to alleviate the issue of the lack of a dedicated EU military as a tool of power as the Union continues as it did previously, engaging with a certain principle of subsidiarity with the Member States. This responsibilisation of duty to the Member States leaves it up to them to spend – in whatever way they see fit – this money on defence. The issue is similar to that of NATO during the Hague Summit – this dual use infrastructure may not quantitatively increase defence or security, only working to fulfil domestic political promises or renovations – but would still be calculated as such to fulfil official quotas within the calculation standards. Therefore, this right of activating the national escape clause of the Stability and Growth Pact risks the same outcomes. Without any consequences for non-compliance with capability goals, desires to achieve deterrence and defence translate into repaving rural roads, building bridges, or paying military pensions. As the ReArm Europe was paired with an implicit responsibilisation of 1.5 percent of Member State GDPs to be spent on defence, including 150 billion of loans to Members States for investment in defence in 'pan-European capability domains' and the mobilisation of private capital to the tune of 800 billion EUR, this additionally risks 'creative' implementation from those member states that do not perceive any sort of imminent threat to their security. In an idealised paradigm, Commissioner for Defence and Space Andrius Kublius would streamline this process and ensure its efficacy; however, the Commissioner's current purview straddles a blurred line between policy proposal and implementation, tending more toward the former.

Russia's Actions towards European Instruments

Russia has continuously pushed back at the Union's claims of speaking from a universal normative position. In discursive terms, from the early 2010s, the term *Gayropa* began to surface prominently in both Russia and international media discourse. In institutional terms, Russia's response to the 2013 ECHR Markin Case on gender equality as well as Russia's increasing adoption of anti-Gay propaganda laws in the early 2010s represented an early overt challenge to European normative claims regarding human rights. These discourses, at the same time, plays into a more direct challenge of the Union's normative legitimacy, both its legitimacy in speaking on behalf of those norms and the those norms *per se*. Queer rights and gender equality are but a signifier of the European conceptualisation of human rights, and more fundamentally, these human rights signify one of the main vectors of the Union's influence over global normative frameworks.

One explanation is that this was naught but a development in Russia's own domestic 'cultural turn' in which its own exceptional cultural values were to be reinforced (Robinson, 2017). However, billions of roubles were invested annually in these informational apparatuses specifically targeted to spread anti-establishment views amongst European domestic audiences, with RT, RT France, RT DE, RT en Español and Sputnik International in several targeted European languages, such as Polish, Swedish, Czech, and Romanian. Even in the context of the full-scale invasion, when Russian spending on social welfare and human capital has decreased by 16 percent (Wiśniewska, 2024), funding to state media has remained stable or even increased since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, demonstrating its perceived utility even in a time of resource prioritisation. It has been a consistent investment even from before the 2014 invasion of Ukraine, going back to the early 2010s.

Through these informational channels, as well as targeted support towards Eurosceptic and anti-establishment parties through financing and other means, Russia has attempted to effect elite capture in some member states that would be aligned with destroying consensus within the Union, having some sort of an internal, implicit veto in the European Council. This capture has led to the blocking of additional sanctions packages as well as even the discussion of accession procedures. At the same time, this continued self-limitation stems from continuing to view consensus as a necessary component of any Union-level policy direction. Other than Russia fostering its relations with anti-establishment forces in the Union, the aforementioned Borrell visit exemplified this dynamic of delegitimising the Union; days after having debased Borrell in front of the world, Lavrov respectfully engaged with Finnish President Niinistö (Porre, 2020), showing that any engagement with Russia would be reduced to bilateral relations and that Brussels would be cut out of any part of this process.

Espionage and sabotage, also well within the parameters of those Russian actions targeted at EU instruments, work in concert with these informational and influence efforts. This comes both in the form of political espionage – exemplified by the case of Tatjana Zdanoka, a Latvian member of the EU legislature who worked as a FSB asset in the European parliament (Dobrokhotov, Weiss, and Grozev, 2024), as well as Novica Antic, a Serbian national and active FSB asset who met with MEPs in Brussels to curate Russian narratives in the European Parliament (POLITICO Staff, 2024b). Russia spyware was also found the work phones of several MEPs (POLITICO Staff, 2024a). At the same time, although events from before the 2022 full-scale invasion were evident – such as the Czech ammo depo destruction in 2014 (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2024) – Russian sabotage against European industry was ramped up significantly, with Russian plausibly deniable attacks on the defence industry across the Union (Edwards, 2025; Jones, 2025). While this could be interpreted as attempts to undercut capability to furnish Ukraine with the capabilities that it needs to continue fighting against Russia, these actions nonetheless undercut the Union's own ability to produce those capabilities in order to stand on its own.

In short, Russian actions since the early 2010s – even before the 2014 invasion of Ukraine – targeted the Union's potential levers for achieving strategic agency. Norms were dismissed as illegitimate, Eurosceptic parties were targeted in order to destroy Union cohesion and potentially buy off elites for veto privileges, espionage as engaged with to disrupt the Union from within its institutions, and sabotage was employed to erode the material capabilities of the Union's member states. It displays a constant, targeted effort in order to make sure that the Union cannot achieve any active, coordinated posture in terms of the Common Foreign and Security Policy more specifically or its strategic goals more generally.

Strengthening Strategic Agency

Russia has treated the Union as a strategic competitor and has done everything possible to degrade its agency as such. At every possible opportunity and with little investment of resources, Russia's returns are incredibly high: through the time-tested application of *divide et impera,* Europe remains in a state of split personality, split being. While it desires to act upon its strategic potential – and attempts to achieve this 'awakening' that Borrell had promised in 2022 – Europe is in a profound state of sleep paralysis, fully conscious but unable to move.

What is required to awaken, therefore, is the political will to set the agenda from the level of the Commission and Council. Its task is not to create consensus but to demand it. This would be akin to, but an advanced form of, the example provided by 'the leadership of Juncker and Mogherini, and among member states… to re-state the EU project and show political unity' drawing upon 'EU integration as the most effective course for collective action in defence' through 'their diverse 'usages' of Europe' (Béraud-Sudreau and Pannier, 2021, pp. 11–12). Even after 24 February 2022, the Commission and Council was able to 'put the EU in a favourable position to actively shape the complex economic response' through sanctions (Helwig, 2023, p. 26). Therefore, whenever the Commission and Council decide to take a proactive role in agenda-setting, to will certain competencies into existence.

The constraints on decision-making, however, provide the instruments for their reformation. There already exist the mechanisms for bypassing unanimity latent within the EU's legal architecture. TEU 31(1) allows for stated abstentions in the place of veto and the transfer of such competencies to qualified majority voting (*EUR-Lex – 12016M031 – EN*, 2016). In the spheres of strategic agency, Article 31(3) *passerelles* limited to sanctions, cyber, or hybrid – treated in a broad, conceptual, and primarily developmental and economic form – should be forwarded by the Council in order to make them the most palatable to the member states and move these competences toward future qualitative majority voting (QMV) in order to make position and implementation more streamlined in the case of future crises – the 'military and defence implications' stated in TEU 31(4) should be muted. In such a framework, abstentions should be incentivised while vetoes should be punished. Crisis declaration by QMV would also frame from decision to implementation of position. After a set period, implementation of positions set during the crisis declaration could only be reversed by QMV. Although this would be the least feasible, it could be done in those areas agreed upon for the *passarrelles*. TFEU 122, which relates to the disbursement of funds to those Member States 'seriously threatened with severe difficulties caused by natural disasters or exceptional occurrences beyond its control' (*EUR-Lex – 12008E122 – EN*, 2008) can be used as a chassis for these strategy-adjacent measures adopted by QMV to blur the lines between economy and strategic agency and tighten these incentive structures.[1]

Article 44 allows for 'the implementation of a task to a group of Member States which are willing and have the necessary capability for such a task'. While TEU 44 is treated as a foundation of smaller coalitions (*EUR-Lex – 12016M044 – EN – EUR-Lex*, 2016), there is no necessity that it be articulated in such a way; a group could be the entirety of the Union, barring one or two member states who represent the most obstinate and antagonistic parties. With positions set by the Council and Commission, implementation criteria for these tasks can be set as well, paired with a compliance scorecard for the member states for implementation; persistent non-alignment with CFSP positions as would triggers automatic, formulaic budget offsets as financial regulation runs under the aegis of QMV. Access to EU defence and resilience funds, as well as MFF top-ups would become dependent alignment with agreed CFSP acts within this tightened paradigm, as these general financial rules would also be under the aegis of QMV.

Within such a position, automatic deduction mechanism for Union funds would be the consequence of non-alignment. This metric would allow for a more quantitative approach of measuring for sanctions under Article 7, but more importantly, a metric for positive incentives for implementation. To this effect, a law under the Defence Industrial Single Market Act (114/173) with reverse QMV disbursement rules for capability development. This would be paired with enhanced cooperation under TEU 20/TFEU 329(2) in those matters of the CFSP that are not strictly security related (*EUR-Lex – 12016E329 – EN – EUR-Lex*, 2016), that is, those competencies that would be slowly accrued through the usage of TEU 31(1). The concert of these dynamics allows for a recursive process: QMV in a growing set of competencies related to strategic agency through TEU 31(1), positive monetary incentives for meeting implementation criteria and punishments for not meeting them, and almost Union-wide tasks through TEU 44 and TEU 20/TFEU 329(2).

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[1] Under TEU 48(7), any national parliament may veto a proposed *passerelle* within six months of notification.

Such a push has not been lobbied for previously as those vetoes have traditionally acted as protection against a perception of larger state dominance and concerns of a creeping federalisation, alongside the ‘scepticism in Central and Eastern Europe against ideas of strategic autonomy that go beyond EU efforts in support of member-state and alliance policies’ (Helwig, 2023, p. 26). Nevertheless, the neo-mercantilists and neo-liberals have united in seeking ‘to reduce a whole range of external dependencies in relation to defence and security questions, raw material supply, international monetary arrangements, and wider industrial issues’ (Lavery, McDaniel and Schmid, 2022, p. 74) and the *passarrelles* could be justified exactly under this logic. This would not be a response to the crisis, but a response to the weaknesses that the crisis has uncovered.

Domestic ratification politics have meant that there has been a high political risk associated with changing the treaties and using *passarrelles* as procedural tools, but constructive abstention, liberal use of Article 44, and reversed QMV in broadly-security adjacent budgetary instruments allow for change *without* opening treaties. Despite the fact that Eurosceptic and so-called populist parties have historically mounted the most pressure against any sort of tightening of decisional power, nevertheless, ‘many populist parties do not fully exclude the possibility of some form of international cooperation’ even within the Union, and ‘if the preferences of populist and non-populist parties across Europe to address a particular security concern overlap’, the likelihood of cooperation increases (Henke and Maher, 2021, p. 401). At the same time, the precedents of the post-COVID fiscal measures, NextGenEU, energy solidarity, and joint procurement have at least somewhat softened elite and public resistance, and the EU budget, RRF funds, and defence-industrial subsidies can act as new material incentives to both groups. The instrumental use of inefficiency to extract concessions in the past will not be as effective now, as paralysis carries higher and material given an increasingly anarchical international system and deepening domestic polarisation.

Therefore, the reason that none of these changes had been implemented in the past was that the Union was fearing potential cracks in cohesion and her Member States were acting rationally under the previous structural incentives and lack of political will. Cohesion is now more threatened by inaction or the perception that the Union cannot act, and those incentives have shifted due to the crisis precipitated by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, making a centralisation of certain competencies newly plausible under the current circumstances. This crisis provides that exact opportunity to strengthen the Union's strategic agency, as 'when serious and immediate security concerns are involved, data suggests that the priority changes in favour of EU security' even if the new direction contradicts previous Union norms and procedures (Rieker and Riddervold, 2022, p. 469). The Costa proposal shows that there are such formats of finding creative workarounds for moving toward QMV, where there is the will to do so (Fortuna, 2025).

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that that Russia has and continues to treat the European Union as a latent strategic actor armed with next-generational warfare capabilities. It has placed itself within the ongoing debate of if and how the Union might achieve its ambitious self-realisation of strategic autonomy – and even more foundationally, strategic agency – amid deep crises. By analysing the concept of next generation warfare, going through the perceived decisional and institutional constraints of the Union and how it articulated its ambitions in policy documents and statements, as well as how Russia has consistently taken actions to degrade and ignore this agency. It has also highlighted how the Union can achieve a higher degree of strategic agency while using the instruments and competencies that it already has in place. By sequentially implementing measures led by the Commission, from moving toward more security and defence related positions being moved under the aegis of TEU 31(1), to Defence Industrial Single Market Act (114/173) under reverse QMV, to compliance scorecard from TEU 7 considerations, to TEU 44 missions, to crisis implementation competencies being applied thorough TEU 31(1), a roadmap for achieving this strategic agency was presented. At the same time, while this development of strategic agency does not fully allow the Union to act as a completely sovereign actor of next-generation warfare in terms of capabilities, it nevertheless allows for a more streamlined process regarding both decisions, competencies, and implement of position from the side of the Union.

Strategic agency does not mean strategic autonomy *per se* or a break in the Transatlantic security relationship. Nonetheless, the Union requires this strategic agency either for a renewal of the liberal international order in which it was forged or for its continued survival and flourishing in the world to come. Achieving this higher degree of agency will make the Union a more impactful Transatlantic ally and give it the ability to push back against undue pressure and domestic meddling. The current lack of strategic agency is something that Russia has leveraged in its attempts to break apart the Transatlantic relationship; claiming that Europe is weak yet bellicose, it tries to present itself as strong and resolute to the United States. The Union must prove that the opposite is true.

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