

COMMENTARY

What's 'left' for a 'geopolitical Europe'?

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Abstract

How can political geographers bring their critical tools to questioning the EU's 'geopolitical turn'? This commentary challenges the narrative of an EU-wide 'Zeitenwende', pointing out some of the limitations of a 'geopolitical Europe' as it is being envisioned currently, while also noting the divided geographies of Europeans' support for continued military assistance to Ukraine. In closing, the piece points to some of the perils of the rhetoric of 'no alternative' in EU geopolitics, noting how it risks leaving the discursive space open to illiberal political forces.

KEYWORDS

EU, geopolitics, Ukraine

1 | INTRODUCTION

Why have political geographers struggled to 'find their voice on Ukraine' (p. 3) (Klinke, 2023)? Geographers' relative lack of engagement in public discussions of the war is surprising – especially considering that the war has unleashed a flurry of geopolitical punditry, with the terminology of classical geopolitics now wielded by even the most unlikely of suspects.¹

I will centre my response on the EU specifically, asking how European geographers can bring their critical tools to this moment, beyond 'the classification of discursive formations', as Klinke writes. Critique of prevailing geopolitical discourses is an important first step, and colleagues have commented on the perils of the geographically determinist (if not directly 'civilisational') narratives framing the war (see Toal, 2022, 2023 and the contributions in Lizotte et al., 2022). Russia's brutal aggression clearly marks an epochal break in the European security order. Nevertheless, inscribing the war in civilisational categories – as a battle for Europe, a battle for democracy, a battle for the survival of the liberal order – risks playing directly into Putin's own playbook of absolutist geopolitical categories. It is our role then, first of all, to bring critical attention to what such absolutist and abstract spatial imaginaries entail in terms of their very real, murderous material effects on Ukrainian territory and bodies.

Beyond critiquing the geopolitical narratives inscribing the war itself, however, geographers should also be attentive to unpacking the categories within which we understand the role and response of 'the West', which is in no way a singular actor, as too avoiding a conflation between NATO and the West, NATO and the EU, and indeed any reading of the EU itself as a unitary and united actor. In addition to a 'critical geopolitics of Atlanticism' that Klinke calls for, we also urgently require a critical geopolitics of a 'geopolitical Europe'. In the paragraphs below, I first unpack the broader narrative of 'Europe's geopolitical awakening' and its (highly problematic) assumptions, then move on to assess the divided geographies of EU citizens' support for continued military assistance to Ukraine.

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2 | A 'GEOPOLITICAL EUROPE'?

'[W]e Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be'. (Borrell, 2020)

While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has, in the words of the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell, given the EU no choice but to 'learn to think geopolitically', appeals for the EU to become 'more geopolitical' have been building already over the past decade. As Borrell and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have repeatedly affirmed, the COVID-19 pandemic first and now the Russian invasion of Ukraine have necessitated an 'awakening' of the EU to the 'true' challenges of a perilous world that no longer permit it to *not* act 'geopolitically'.²

This sort of determinism is problematic not only in assuming a sole possible global role for the EU (and presuming that it should necessarily have one), it also directly replicates US neoconservative narratives of the early 2000s, dismissing the EU as a 'soft' and unwilling geopolitical subject, unable to properly perceive the true nature of the 'dangerous world out there' (Elden & Bialasiewicz, 2006). Hearing High Representative Borrell refer to the EU repeatedly over the course of the past year as a 'sleeping beauty' that needs to 'wake up' and 'learn the language of power' also occludes Europe's longer imperial legacies. Borrell in fact has traced a highly problematic geography in his calls for a 'geopolitical Europe' – a Europe that is 'a "garden" that must be protected from the "jungle" beyond, a jungle against which "no wall is high enough"' (as he noted in his much-contested inaugural speech to the European Diplomatic Academy – Borrell, 2022). Alongside condemning such remarks by the High Representative as replicating the worst of European colonial geopolitics,³ geographers should also pay heed to the wider material shifts accompanying the discursive ones. Borrell's imperialist geographical imagination is indeed just a small (albeit highly visible) element of a much more substantial shift in how EU leaders have begun to re-imagine the Union's 'proper' place and actorness in the world.

The steps to a common EU defence capacity have been long in the making, but the speed and scale of enhanced investment in military capabilities across most Member States over the past year has been unprecedented. We need to question the narrative of 'no alternative' in this rush to arms, and the proclamations of a *Zeitenwende* (not only in Germany, but across the continent). We should also question what this shift means for the European project, which was built on entirely different assumptions and principles. What does moving the EU to a 'war economy' entail (a phrase increasingly used by both EU and national politicians) – and are European publics supportive of such a move? Neither EU leaders nor national ones have been able to offer convincing arguments in this regard – nor have they paid sufficient attention to EU citizens' concerns. Yes, there have been attempts to shield Europeans from rising energy prices – but these have been highly unequal across the EU, like other support measures meant to mitigate the very real economic effects of the war. What is more, these effects have only acted as a multiplier for existing regional economic divides across the continent, the result of previous crises, from the financial crises of the 2000s, to the effects of the pandemic. This is the second set of geographical transformations brought by the war that we need to examine critically.

Invoking the EU's 'geopolitical moment' without considering the Union's divided political economies carries serious risks – not only economic but also political. There is widespread concern for the dangers of a Republican presidency in the USA to continued support for Ukraine, but I believe we are facing a similar danger in a number of European contexts.

3 | PRECARIETY AND GEOPOLITICS

I would like to highlight several vignettes, from France, Italy, Ireland, Austria, and Poland to draw attention to how questions of political economy are being directly entangled with geopolitical imaginaries.

Through spring 2023, mass protests against President Emmanuel Macron's controversial pension reform set aflame French cities, contesting the heavy hand of the government in forcing through neoliberal reforms (also at the cost of suppressing rights – including the right to protest). The pension reform was, however, just one spark driving the protests in an increasingly divided French society where economic fractures have grown even more pronounced over the past year, as a rising percentage of the population found itself struggling to purchase basic food stuffs.⁴ Some commentators have gone as far as characterising the spring pension protests as 'hunger riots', noting the 'Ukrainian epicentre of the French crisis' (Pilkington, 2023). While it would be much too simplistic to pin the blame for the protests on rising disparities worsened by the economic effects of the war, they are being partially understood as such by those on the streets who have felt the disproportionate effects of galloping food prices. Such narratives have been fed by opposition politicians on both the right and the left who have made economic precarity a key part of their critique of the policies of the Macron government, discursively binding growing economic disparities to the effects of the war and the choices of the government to

re-tool the French economy to a ‘war economy’, thus tying domestic economic questions directly to geopolitical choices. The narrative has been successful with at least a part of the population: as an editorial on the *Financial Times* in the midst of the protests noted, even in ‘a culture so steeped in hard power’ as the French one, much of the electorate appeared to ‘still prefer butter to guns’, finding the government’s justifications for increased defence spending in a moment of growing economic precarity simply ‘insufficient’ (Ganesh, 2023).

We can consider another EU state where the preference for ‘butter to guns’ is even starker. In Italy, a national context marked by one of the lowest percentages of citizen support for the provision of military assistance to Ukraine, Italy’s engagement in the war has provided a foil for a variety of competing claims, from the right as well as from the left. Just as in the French context, it is too simple here to discount such widespread opposition to military support for Ukraine as resulting from direct financial ties to Putin’s regime (demonstrably the case for parties of the right such as the Lega) or historical ideational proximity (for part of the left and centre-left). In Italy, as in France, geopolitical choices have been tied directly to questions of economic precarity in the public debate. One widely reported example is illustrative: on 17 February 2023, the Rome transport agency ATAC (along with the one in Milan) announced a one-day strike, citing as their second request (following higher salaries) ‘the halt to military spending and the sending of arms to Ukraine, [focusing] rather on essential public services’ (ATAC, 2023). The strikes reflect, however, a more widespread geographical imagination as Italian sociologist Ilvo Diamanti (2023) recently remarked: for many Italians ‘Russia is an increasingly far-off “Other” – but so is Ukraine’.

In different EU national contexts where support for military assistance to Ukraine continues to remain more robust, it is Ukrainian refugees in Europe that have become the focus of protests orchestrated by right and far-right forces. Right behind frontline Central and Eastern European states and Germany, Ireland is the EU state that has received the highest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita, with wide societal support.⁵ And yet also in February 2023, around the time of the Rome transport strike, Ireland witnessed highly visible protests in Dublin and several other cities against continued support to Ukrainians, blaming the new arrivals for the growing housing crisis. Clearly Dublin’s housing crisis can in no way be reduced to the effect of refugee arrivals, but as an editorial on *The Irish Times* (2023) noted, unless the government was able to respond adequately, the protests would continue, putting at risk not just the Irish state’s migration response, ‘but also social cohesion’.

Ukrainian refugees have also become an easy scapegoat in Austria. The regional elections in March 2023 saw the triumphant return of the far-right FPÖ in both Carinthia and Lower Austria. The FPÖ has long been vocal in its disagreement with Austrian and EU support to Ukraine, and in these elections played both the economic and identitarian cards: denouncing cost of living increases provoked by the war while also proposing new legislation to ensure that Ukrainian refugee children spoke ‘proper Austrian German’ in school playgrounds. As an analysis of the elections in the Viennese daily *Der Standard* noted, ‘traditional parties [especially the social-democratic SPÖ] simply had no answer to citizens’ fears regarding the precarity of their economic condition as well as the international context’ (Rachbauer, 2023).

The last example that I would like to cite here is Poland: without a doubt Ukraine’s most fervent supporter in the EU, pushing from the very start of the war for increased military as well as civilian and economic assistance; it is also the state that has received the highest number of Ukrainian refugees. Setting aside Poland’s geopolitical self-representation as ‘protector-in-chief’, both of the EU’s Eastern flank and of those fleeing the war,⁶ it is important to note that here, too, the ‘war economy’ has opened up a series of political claims that have challenged the ruling right-wing PiS coalition. In spring 2023, Poland, together with Hungary, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania (all of the latter marked by the lowest rates of support in the EU for continued military assistance to Ukraine), moved to restrict imports of Ukrainian grain following mass protests by farmers, blaming Ukrainian imports for a grain glut that sent prices plummeting.⁷ The European Commission persuaded the five states to drop the unilateral measures, which were in violation of EU trade law, stipulating that Ukrainian grain would only transit through the countries, and provided a compensation fund of 100 million euros. These measures have proven insufficient: in summer 2023, Polish farmers’ associations called for an extension of the import ban also to strawberries and other seasonal foodstuffs. The PiS government relies heavily on the farmers’ vote and, facing elections in autumn 2023, was quick to respond, noting that if the European Commission would not move to extend the ban, ‘we will do it ourselves’, as Prime Minister Morawiecki pronounced: ‘we will be tough, determined and we will certainly defend the Polish farmers’ (cited in Minder et al., 2023).

I note these brief examples to highlight how beyond grand affirmations of ‘European unity’ on both military as well as civilian and economic assistance to Ukraine, the EU’s engagement in the war has actually brought to the fore a wide range of conflicting political-economic concerns. Going beyond the vignettes above, the Eurobarometer survey published in March 2023 (Eurobarometer, 2023) offers an indicative mapping of citizens’ preoccupations across the European Union – and how far removed these are from the geopolitical narrative of ‘no alternative’ in enhanced military spending

(and continued military assistance to Ukraine) of EU leaders. The most important concerns for citizens across the EU are: (1) rising prices/inflation/cost of living; (2) the economic situation; and (3) energy supply (the first ‘geopolitical’ concern, phrased as ‘the international situation’, comes in at no. 7).

What is more, and as noted above, support for continued military assistance to Ukraine continues to be highly differentiated across the EU, and the difference cannot be mapped onto a simple East/West divide. It is the countries in Europe’s South and South-East that are marked by the lowest rates of support,⁸ in part reflecting those areas of the EU hardest hit by successive crises. In two of the examples cited above, Italy and Austria, a significant percentage of those polled ‘totally disagrees’ with military assistance to Ukraine: 46% in Austria and 39% in Italy (the figure is 59% in Greece).

4 | OTHER GEOPOLITICAL STORIES

Why should geographers pay attention to such divided geopolitical imaginations across the EU – and to the ways in which support for Ukraine has been made the object of a variety of political contestations and claims within EU member states? First, because they put into question the appeal of the grand narratives professed by EU leaders: this war is clearly *not* ‘a battle for Europe’ for many EU publics, and these publics also do not see the EU’s shift to a ‘war economy’ as either desirable or inevitable. But while most EU citizens remain unconvinced by the geopolitical stories told by the European Commission, they are nevertheless concerned about the effects of the war on their daily lives, as the latest Eurobarometer and other national surveys indicate. As a result, some are being drawn to other accounts of the current condition, such as the conspiratorial geopolitical narratives proliferating in this moment across the EU, fed by extremist parties and movements – and this is a second important reason for geographers to pay heed.⁹ It is too simple to discount these as only products of Russian disinformation. We should ask, rather, why so many European citizens are drawn to the geopolitical stories they tell, stories that in highly simplified terms give an account of a Europe rapidly changing before their eyes (geopolitically but also economically) – and, especially, locate blame.

Anthropologist Didier Fassin (2021) has argued that we should take conspiracy theories seriously as ‘they do not only belong to the realm of delusion’ but are also ‘indexes of social relations, political tensions, cultural disquietude, and moral uneasiness’. Today’s conspiracist accounts of the war offer highly effective geopolitical ‘failure stories’ (Moffitt, 2016) for a variety of political forces, on both the far-right and left. When assessing responses to the war in Ukraine, geographers need to take such accounts seriously for they serve as extremely useful mobilising narratives across a range of national contexts, building support for illiberal politics. As Lizotte (2022) has argued, writing of the response of the US far-right to the war, we cannot assume that ‘we have cornered the market on the criticism of the state from either an ethical or a political perspective’.

In closing, I want to return to the example of the striking Rome transport workers, for it illustrates the power of such ‘other’ geopolitical stories. As a front-page editorial of the Italian daily *Il Foglio* asked on the day of the strike, ‘since when do bus drivers occupy themselves with foreign policy?’ (Merlo, 2023). What are the geopolitical narratives that link Italian arms transfers to Ukraine and broken-down Rome buses? As the editorial noted, apart from the countless craters in the roads that drivers must navigate in vehicles that have not been maintained for decades, no direct link seems apparent between the war and the streets of Rome. But in the geopolitical stories told by the political forces supporting the striking ATAC drivers, the connection is there – and the narrative of ‘no alternative’ proffered by both the Italian government and EU leaders is simply unconvincing. It is also a narrative that is increasingly unconvincing to Polish farmers.

Why does this matter? Perhaps EU and national leaders will be able to ensure continued military support to Ukraine for a few more months still. But it will be very difficult to sustain this support when we come to reconstruction efforts: how will you convince the Rome bus driver that rebuilding the Kiev metro is in no way a ‘trade-off’ for investment in his own crumbling infrastructure?

As Klinke (2023) writes ‘the problems that arise from viewing the world through the eyes of classical geopolitics are well-understood by geographers’ (p. 3). In the current moment, it is our role to draw attention to the perils of the rhetoric of ‘no alternative’ in pushing for a more muscular and militarised EU, a rhetoric that draws directly on the tropes and terms of classical geopolitics that we hoped were long abandoned. If we do not, we leave the discursive space open to political forces that will do so from a different ethical and political perspective – and that will certainly foreclose any further support (also economic and humanitarian) to Ukraine, forces that are already turning against Ukrainian refugees in Europe.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This commentary was written during a fellowship at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen, Vienna: thanks to my IWM colleagues for their critical comments on a previous version of this piece. Some of the considerations on the perils of an EU geopolitics are the fruit of longer-standing discussions initiated at ‘The trouble with EU geopolitics’ workshop sponsored by the Amsterdam Centre for European Studies in February 2023 – thanks to my co-organisers Hans Kundnani and Roderick Parkes as well as all the participants for a critical discussion of whether ‘another EU geopolitics’ was possible.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

This article is exempt from the Data Availability Statement requirement as there is no original research or data being reported here.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Including those previously committed to anti-militarism and a feminist foreign policy, such as the German Greens.
- ² I have described this shift in detail in Bialasiewicz (2022).
- ³ Following a formal letter of protest signed by students and lecturers at the College of Europe, myself included, Borrell offered a non-apology under the title, ‘On metaphors and geopolitics’: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/metaphors-and-geo-politics_en. [Accessed 17th April 2023]
- ⁴ As reports of the French statistical institute INSEE (2022) have highlighted.
- ⁵ See the report of Ukrainian Action Ireland: <https://www.ukrainianaction.ie/research-2/ukrainian-action-survey-of-ukrainians-in-ireland-2023>. [Accessed 19th July 2023]
- ⁶ It is a representation that only partially reflects the actual role of the Polish state: as I have outlined elsewhere, it is Polish cities, citizens, and civil society that have provided the bulk of this much-lauded reception – see Barszcz and Bialasiewicz (2022).
- ⁷ See <https://www.ft.com/content/7bbd9ba2-81e4-463c-a6e2-67362a4d10a8>. [Accessed 19th July 2023]
- ⁸ Surveys carried out by the European Council on Foreign Relations in January 2023 confirm a similar mapping: though ECFR divides EU states into ‘the northern and eastern hawks’, ‘the ambiguous west’ (France falls here), and ‘the southern weak links’ (Italy is firmly placed here) (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).
- ⁹ In both Italy and Austria, anti-vaccine groups have directly transitioned into mobilising against the EU’s engagement in the war, weaving the two crises into one seamless narrative: in Italy under the slogan ‘guerra, pandemia – stessa strategia’ (‘war, pandemic – one single strategy’).

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How to cite this article: Bialasiewicz, L. (2023) What's 'left' for a 'geopolitical Europe'? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 48, 826–831. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12636>