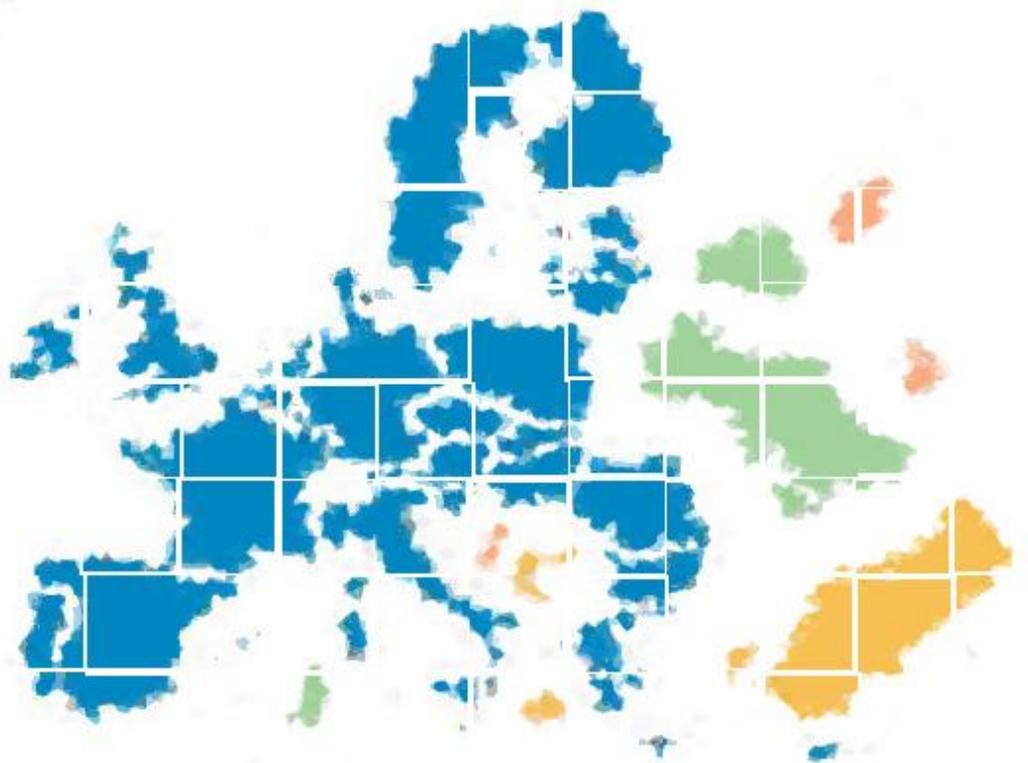


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EU Actorness and the Ukraine Crisis: A social
constructivist approach

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EU Actorness and the Ukraine Crisis: A social constructivist approach

Introduction

The current Ukraine crisis and the Russian annexation of Crimea in February 2014 is portrayed as a fundamental breach of international law and the greatest challenge of the established world order since the end of the Cold War¹. Voices are being raised all across Europe demanding a unified response of the EU towards the Ukraine crisis and especially towards the assertive behavior of Russia. The crisis is seen as a test for the EU to demonstrate whether it is capable of responding to the crisis as a credible international actor and whether it will live up to its identity and values.

The aim of this paper is to study to what extent the EU is constrained or enabled to respond to the Ukrainian crisis as an actor. To do so, I will adopt Bretherton and Vogler's social constructivist framework² to assess EU Actorness. They distinguish three interrelated processes which shape the EU's ability to act as an actor: *Opportunity*, *Presence* and *Capability*. After a short introduction to their theoretical considerations and the realities of the Ukraine crisis, I will then apply the three categories established by the authors to assess EU Actorness with regard to the crisis. At the time of writing, the crisis is still ongoing and far from being solved, especially in Eastern Ukraine. I will therefore focus on the period from the onset of the crisis in November 2013 until the conclusion of the Geneva Agreement in April 2014³.

I will argue that to assess what enables or constrains EU Actorness, we have to go beyond the mere analysis of the internal *Capacity* of the EU to make a decision and utilize its policy instruments, since the latter is closely intertwined with processes in the Union's external environment. The EU's *Presence* in the international system and its eastern neighborhood as an economically prosperous community but especially as a normative actor triggers some sort of responsibility to respond to the Ukraine crisis in line with those normative values and identities it exudes in an ongoing discourse with its external environment. However, its *Presence* is challenged by Russia

¹ See e.g. DeYoung, "Obama speaks with Putin;" Ignatzi, "breach of international law;" NATO, "statement on situation in Ukraine;" Patrick, "At Stake in Ukraine."

² Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*

³ The Geneva Agreement had been reached between representatives from the United States of America, the EU, Russia and Ukraine in order to deescalate the situation in the Ukraine and all parties committed to refrain from any violent or provocative actions which could further destabilize the situation in the region.

(The joint statement can be accessed via the following link:
http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2014/140417_01_en.pdf).

and pro-Russian and anti-European sentiments. Even though there are different interpretations of whether solely Russia or the EU as well can be blamed for the Ukraine crisis, the event is construed as the EU's *Opportunity* to prove its ability to act as an actor and response to the crisis in an effective way. The Russian *Presence* as well as the different storylines of who is responsible for the crisis complicates decision-making at the European level of how to react to the crisis in an appropriate way. On top of that, the Union's *Capability* to act as an actor is furthermore constrained through the divergent external dependencies of the member states and their different political and economic interests when it comes to tougher sanctions and drastic measures towards the Kremlin. Those interests run counter to the moral obligation as a normative power to act. However, the more the crisis is escalating it seems like the EU's sense of duty to live up to its normative values is slowly increasing and improves the EU's response as an actor; nonetheless it continues to move at a slow pace.

Conceptual framework: a social constructivist approach of EU Actorness

The deepening and widening of the EU has increased the EU's impact on the outside world e.g. through its trade and development policies or its military actions and its presence at international negotiations⁴. Simultaneously, research on the EU's external relations increased, trying and struggling to conceptualize and assess the unique nature of the Union's foreign policy behavior by moving away from the traditional state-centric view. Sjöstedt⁵ was in 1977 one of the first scholars who construed the existence of the EU in the international system and its relationship with the outside world as an international actor. Thereby he introduced the notion of EU Actorness, which he defines as "the capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system"⁶. Since then a rich literature on this theoretical concept has developed⁷, dealing with "the Nature of the Beast"⁸ and the fundamental questions of whether the EU's foreign policy behavior can be compared to that of nation states. Similar to Sjöstedt's approach, Actorness constitutes according to Hill 1) the delimitation of an entity from its environment; 2) the autonomy of a unit to make its own laws and rules and 3) the availability of certain structural capabilities which enables it to act and interact in the international system, such as diplomatic structures or a legal personality⁹. Hill furthermore introduces the influential concept of what is referred to as the "capability-expectations gap"¹⁰, dealing with what limits EU Actorness. He argues that the EU's capabilities are not able to

⁴ Chebakova, "Theorizing the EU as a global actor," 5.

⁵ Sjöstedt, *External Role of the EC*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ See e.g. Ginsberg, "Conceptualizing the EU"; Groenleer and Van Schaik, "United we stand?"; Hettne, "EU as a Global Actor," 3f.; Jupille and Caporaso, "States, Agency and Rules"; Rosamond, "EU model of governance"; Wunderlich, "a post-Westphalian actor."

⁸ Risse-Kappen, "the Nature of the Beast."

⁹ Hill, "Capability-Expectations Gap", 309.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*.

meet what the Union promises and what third parties consequently expect the EU to deliver with regard to its engagement in the field of external relations. As a result third parties do not recognize the EU as a fully political actor.

The added value of a social constructivist approach to study the potentials and limits of EU Actorness in the field of foreign policy is that it does not solely focus on the internal, material ability or disability to act (nor does it neglect them), but it tries to capture the meanings and perceptions certain actors give to them¹¹. From this point of view, Actorness is not just enabled or constrained by internal capabilities to act, but also by the reality it is embedded in. In the constructivist view, reality is socially constructed and reproduced through social interactions¹². Do the ideas and understandings third parties have of the EU and the interpretation of an event hinder or enable EU Actorness? And, vice versa, what consequences does the behavior of the EU, e.g. its willingness or unwillingness to act, the lack of cohesion or policy instruments, have for the identity and meanings others attribute to the EU and the way they recognize the EU as an actor?

The conceptual framework of Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler¹³ tries to capture and conceptualizes how social interactions shape the ideas and meanings actors attribute to global politics, the EU and events in the international system, and which impact the EU's ability to act as an actor¹⁴. Their definition of an actor is "an entity that is capable of agency; of formulating and acting upon decisions"¹⁵. The authors therefore consider both internal and external factors which impact on the EU's ability to act¹⁶. On the one hand, the EU is thus embedded in a socially constructed international structure of relations between different regional, national and international actors and of different norms, values and ideas. These structures "provide 'action settings' or distinct patterns of opportunity and constraint within which agency is displayed"¹⁷. This includes how third parties perceive the EU and whether they acknowledge it as an actor and thereby frame the EU's identity. On the other hand, Actorness is also shaped from within the EU, for example whether the EU has resources at hand and the political willingness to react to opportunities revealed by the international structure. The authors emphasize that agency and structure are closely intertwined and cannot be considered and studied without referring to how they are related the others processes.

Their theoretical conceptualization is based on the notions of *Opportunity*, *Presence* and *Capacity*, which frame Actorness and which are interrelated.

¹¹ Chebakova, "Theorizing the EU as a global actor," 4ff..

¹² Rosamond, *Theories of European Integration*, 171f..

¹³ Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16ff..

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

- *Presence*¹⁸ is understood as whether the EU has an impact on third parties by its mere existence as an institution in the international arena. It thus "combines the understanding about the fundamental nature, or identity of the EU and the (often unintended) consequences of the Union's internal priorities and policies"¹⁹. The existence of the EU, its identity and its successes as well as failures can thus raise or lower expectations of third parties regarding certain EU actions²⁰.
- Bretherton and Vogel²¹ define *Opportunity* as ideas or interpretations of events in the external environment which frame and thus impede or enable Actorness. The authors try to capture how events in the international system or the ideas third parties have about the role of the EU frame its action and shape its identity.
- With *Capacity* they finally refer to the internal process of the EU agency which shapes EU Actorness. With this they mean whether the EU is able to react to the situations brought forward by *Presence* and *Opportunity*, thus whether the EU and its member states have the political willingness, shared priorities and policy instruments at hand to act collectively²²

By choosing the conceptual framework of Bretherton and Vogler I do not want to disqualify other approaches to study EU Actorness. With regard to the EU relations to Russia and the event of the Ukraine crisis, however, different ideas and narratives about the EU, Russia and their impact on their shared neighborhood as well as different storylines and interpretations of the event of the Ukraine crisis are circulating within and outside the EU. The chosen framework is a perspective which highlights those processes and gives us the tools at hand to assess their impact on EU Actorness. It enables us to outline and examine how the ideas and meanings certain parties attribute to actors and events are closely intertwined with the ability or inability of an entity to act as an international actor, and vice versa. Hence, EU Actorness is shaping *and* shaped by processes in its external environment²³.

EU Actorness in response to the Ukraine crisis

The Ukraine crisis erupted in November 2013 when the then Ukraine President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the over years negotiated EU Association Agreement at the Vilnius Summit. Instead, he turned towards Russia, which offered a package of 15 Million Dollar aid for Ukraine²⁴and

¹⁸ The authors build upon the concept of "Presence" developed by Allen and Smith, "Western Europe's presence."

¹⁹ Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*, 24.

²⁰ Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak?," 377.

²¹ Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*, 24f.

²² *Ibid.*, 29ff.

²³ Chebakova, "Theorizing the EU as a global actor," 5.

²⁴ Averko, "Blame Game."

pressured Yanukovich to consent to the Russian Eurasian Union, a proposed customs union of several post-soviet states²⁵. As a consequence, thousands of Ukrainian citizens took to the streets in protest against the current regime. Violence escalated on February 18, 2014 at the Maidan in Kyiv when the government reacted aggressively towards protestors, whereby several people died²⁶.

What started as a student protest striving for closer links to the EU turned into a more general anti-regime protest against the unpopular, authoritarian government of Yanukovich. Other than that, the problems addressed and the demands raised by the different groups opposing the regime are diverse. While some protest solely for democratic values and the protection and strengthening of the rule of law, others demand closer ties with the EU. Another group, which attracts increasing attention, is the right-wing nationalist sector, whose claims are quite contradictory to those of the other two positions²⁷. Moreover, especially in the eastern part of Ukraine, pro-Russian movements prevail²⁸.

The turmoil resulted in a highly instable and insecure situation in Ukraine, right at the border of the EU. The USA and the EU as well as its member states intensified their diplomatic efforts in order to ease the crisis. Shortly after an agreement between the Ukrainian government and the leaders of the opposition had been reached on February 16, Yanukovich fled to Russia and asked the Russian government for an intervention into Ukraine. The then announced interim-government under Arseniy Yatsenyuk was accused by Russia to threaten the rights of Russian minorities living in Ukraine, especially on the Crimean peninsula²⁹. Thereafter, Russia occupied Crimea, in order to protect its "Russian citizens" and initiated a referendum on whether it should be incorporation into Russian territory. The following declaration of the annexation of Crimea by Russia on March 18, 2014 is highly disputed and deteriorated the relationship with "the West". The latter sees the annexation as a violation of international law and the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine.

The Ukraine crisis is an illustration of the clashing objectives of the two major regional players, Russia and the EU, in their shared neighborhood. By deepening its economic and political relationships with the eastern countries, which historically belonged to the Russian sphere of influence, through the European Neighborhood Policy, the EU tries to ensure its influence and interests as well as the regional stability and security at its borders. At the same time Russia seeks to exploit the situation in order to re-establish itself

²⁵ Emerson, "testing red lines," 2; Meister, "After Vilnius."

²⁶ McMahon, "Ukraine in crisis"; Paul and Filipchuk, "Ukraine in deadlock."

²⁷ Darden and Way, "Who are the protestors?"

²⁸ It is furthermore highly controversial whether the protests represent the attitude of the general public (see Darden and Way, "Who are the protestors?").

²⁹ McMahon, "Ukraine in crisis."

as a global power and its influence on its neighborhood³⁰, like in Georgia in 2008³¹. This competition for the sphere of influence in their shared neighborhood is often seen as a zero-sum-game whereby an increase of influence of one party results simultaneously in the decrease of influence of the other³².

From a constructivist point of view, reality is socially (re-)constructed in an ongoing and dynamic discourse. It does not neglect that reality exists, but is interested in how actors reproduce and react to reality depending on their understanding, interpretation and knowledge of it. The current situation in Ukraine is perceived as a crisis. But what and whose crisis is it? There are different ways this crisis can be understood.

Many label the Ukraine crisis as an identity crisis³³: The example of Ukraine illustrates the constructivist's claim that identities are fluid and contingent very clearly. Especially since the fall of the Soviet Union the question is asked what it means to be Ukrainian. Is it the language or the Ukrainian citizenship? Due to diverse linguistic, ethnical and historical background of the Ukraine population the Ukraine identity is perceived in a different way by its elites and citizens. Is Ukraine part of "the West" or the former Soviet Union? Is it both or neither of the two? This identity problem plays an important role in Ukraine's foreign policy as we can observe during the Ukraine crisis³⁴.

The crisis can also be understood as a Russian identity crisis or a Russian attempt to re-construct its identity through its behavior towards Ukraine. The international recognition of Russia as a "great power" has suffered since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian interfering in the domestic affairs of Ukraine and the domination of its sphere of influence can be seen as an attempt of Russia to regain and underline this self-image of a "great power". Furthermore, what is Russia's understanding of "Russian" when it comes to population and territory? Does Russia perceive Crimea or even Ukraine as "Russian" and can this explain its interference in this region and the annexation of Crimea³⁵?

The Ukraine crisis can also be seen as a crisis of the international law³⁶. International law is socially (re-)constructed as well, through the behavior of nation states by complying with these collective norms³⁷. With the violation

³⁰ Dias, "EU and Russia," 268.

³¹ During the Russian-Georgian-Crisis Russia conducted a military intervention to the Georgian provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to support secessionist movements, after the Georgian military attacked several Russian military bases in order to regain control of the region.

³² Ibid.; Bretherton and Vogler, "Global actor past its peak?," 152.

³³ See e.g. Buckley, "Identity Crisis;" D'Anieri, "Ukrainian Foreign Policy;" Proedrou, "Ukraine's foreign policy," 452f.; Sherwin, "Ukraine's multiple identity."

³⁴ D'Anieri, "Ukrainian Foreign Policy," 42f.

³⁵ Ibid., 43f..

³⁶ See e.g. Sachs, "Crisis of International Law."

³⁷ Brunnée and Toope, "Constructivism and International Law."

of the international law through the Russian annexation of Crimea and the meddling with the Ukraine domestic affairs, the norms of the international law as well as the geopolitical order and the sovereignty of Ukraine, which had long been taken for granted, are now undermined and challenged by the Russian behavior.

In the following sections I will assess with the above outlined analytic framework whether the Ukraine crisis enables or impedes the EU to react to the instability in the eastern neighborhood as an actor.

a) Presence

The EU's *Presence* and thus "the ability to shape the perceptions, expectations and behavior"³⁸ of third parties in the EU's eastern neighborhood increased after the end of the Cold War, when the EU's external environment changed rapidly³⁹. With the prospect of accession offered to certain nation states of the former Soviet Union, such as Poland or the Czech Republic, the EU had a significant influence on the transformation of the political and economic system of the respective states, by using the tool of conditionality. The establishment of the EU Eastern Neighborhood Policy (ENP) was an attempt of the EU to maintain this influence on its new eastern neighborhood states, such as Ukraine or Belarus, even though the prospects of membership had been explicitly excluded. Studies⁴⁰, however, questions whether the incentives provided by the ENP are as effective as the tool of conditionality provided by the "accession-carrot". Hence, it can be argued that the influence of the EU on its eastern neighborhood decreased with the EU's "enlargement fatigue" after the big accession of 2004 and 2007.

An important part of the EU's *Presence* is its identity, which is evolving in a complex and constant discourse within the EU in interaction with the external environment. The EU's identity comprises "shared understandings [...] about what the EU is, in terms of its character and its values, and what it should (or should not) do, in terms of its external policies and actions"⁴¹. The values the EU represents are those of human rights, democracy and good governance, which is why the EU is often referred to as a "normative power"⁴². These values are unintentional diffused from the EU to other parts of the world which others then voluntarily adopt in a similar way⁴³. A similar concept trying to explain the EU's appealing force for the outside world is that of the EU as a "civilian power"⁴⁴. Thereby the EU is described as an actor using "smart" and "soft power" instead of "hard" or

³⁸ Bretherton and Vogler, "Global actor past its peak?," 377.

³⁹ Rohrbacher and Jenicková, "Attractiveness," 36.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Kelley, "New Wine in Old Wineskins"; Litra, "EU's Conditionality"; Wolczuk, "Implementation without Coordination".

⁴¹ Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*, 38.

⁴² Manners, "Normative Power Europe."

⁴³ Rohrbacher and Jenicková, "Attractiveness," 37.

⁴⁴ Telò, "A Civilian Power?"

"military power"⁴⁵. Telò states that from the EU's normative values and its historic experiences derives what he calls a "historical"⁴⁶ or "international political responsibility"⁴⁷ to demonstrate third parties the path the EU itself followed from war and authoritarian regimes to a community characterized by solidarity, freedom and prosperity.

Existing narratives of the EU as a "security provider" and a "democratizer and spreader of good norms"⁴⁸ are part of the EU's identity and can trigger the expectation within and outside the EU that it should live up to it and take action along those lines.

The problems addressed and the demands made by the protestors during the Ukraine crisis are diverse and partly contradictory. They are based on different understandings and narratives of the cause of the crisis, the role of the EU and Russia as well as the Ukraine⁴⁹. However, one important narrative, which shaped the protests on the Maidan considerably, is the pro-European narrative. It expects a better future for Ukraine by deepening the relationship with the EU and results among other things from the dissatisfaction of Ukraine citizens with the current political and economic situation in their country. In 2013, 67% of the population was of the opinion that developments within their country are going the wrong way⁵⁰. Moreover, we can observe that citizens are increasingly striving for a strengthening and protection of the rule of law, democracy and the realization of human rights⁵¹. Since the EU is standing for all those values, the adherents of those narratives hope to achieve them by forging closer ties with the EU. This can be considered as an unintended effect of the EU's *Presence*, triggered by the normative values it radiates⁵².

However, the attractiveness of the EU as a normative power should not be overestimated. There are instrumental, materialist factors which explain the appealing force of the EU as well. The economic success of the EU and the creation of the single market as well as the introduction of the common currency play an important role and strengthen the perception of EU *Presence* in its neighborhood. With closer ties to Brussels, to the EU member

⁴⁵ This can also be explained by the EU's historical memory: The EU was able to learn from the tragedies of the two world wars and refers to its achievements to stabilize and civilize a war-torn Europe. This is why the EU is preferring "soft power" to "military power" (see Telò, "A Civilian Power?," 223f.).

⁴⁶ Telò, "A Civilian Power?" 241f.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁴⁸ Nițoiu, "Narrative Construction," 244.

⁴⁹ This again shows how intertwined the processes, explained by the conceptual framework, are. Which identity someone attributes to the EU has consequences on how he or she interprets the event of the Ukraine crisis (*Opportunity*). Furthermore, the way the different actors in the international system will respond to the crisis (*Capacity*) can change the perception and identities of the actors by third parties (*Presence*) as well as the way they interpret the event and its cause (*Opportunity*).

⁵⁰ Jarábik and Yanchenko, "democratic transition."

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Rohrbacher and Jenicková, "Attractiveness," 43.

states and their customs union, the EU neighbors expect advantages like prosperity and economic stability⁵³.

From those normative values and economic prosperity the EU is representing, and which the pro-European movement in return tries to embody in Ukraine, can eventually derive the opinion that the EU has a duty to take action along those lines to support the Ukrainian pro-European attempts. The pro-European narrative outlined above, triggered by the EU's attractiveness for its neighbors, is translated by Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Parliament, into some kind of responsibility of the EU to react: According to him, the protestors at the Maidan "know that Europe is not just the land of opportunity in terms of economic development [...] but also because Europe is the promise of hope and freedom. And I think the European Union has the right and the duty to stand by the people of Ukraine in this very difficult moment"⁵⁴. This shows how *Presence* triggers responses and expectations by third parties and in return the responsibility of the EU to react which in the end can lead to actual actions decided and undertaken by the EU (see *Capability*).

According to Bretherton and Vogler⁵⁵ the EU's *Presence* is to a great extent based on its success, solidarity and unity⁵⁶ as well as the normative values radiating from it, which are then reflected beyond its borders. Its *Presence* in the eastern neighborhood and especially Ukraine is, however, not uncontested. Another substantial part of the Ukraine society perceives the EU as "unfriendly and having its own problems"⁵⁷, like the current financial and economic crisis, the inability to cope with increasing immigration flows and demographic change, which it struggles to solve efficiently. The Euro Crisis led not just to an intense focus of EU officials on the problems within the EU while simultaneously neglecting their duties and responsibilities beyond its borders; it also uncovered the EU's disunity, weakness and architectural flaws. Within and outside the EU officials and the wider public began to question the exemplary character of the EU, simultaneously doubting the capability as an actor within the international arena and the eastern neighborhood⁵⁸. As a consequence, this perception of a lack of efficiency and cohesion (*Capacity*) leads to a decreasing *Presence* of the EU in the international system and its eastern neighborhood.

Furthermore, many argue that the EU ever since the establishment of the European Neighborhood Policy and the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP), was not able to fulfill its goals and the expectations it raised within

⁵³ Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak?," 377; Rohrbacher and Jenicková, "Attractiveness," 43f..

⁵⁴ Barroso, "Statement of President."

⁵⁵ Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak?," 377.

⁵⁶ The *Presence* of the EU is thus closely linked to its inner cohesion, which is an important element of the EU's *Capability* (see 3.c).

⁵⁷ Korostelina, *Constructing the Narratives*, 200.

⁵⁸ Bátorá and Navrátil, "Security Community Building," 24; Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak?," 378.

and outside the EU⁵⁹. Nițoiu⁶⁰ states that “the EU seems to be unwilling to back its ambitious rhetoric with political commitment. A large discrepancy arises between the normative/idealistic Union’s discourse and its practical policy outcomes, which in the end hinders the paths towards democracy of the countries in question”⁶¹. This again illustrates clearly how *Presence* and *Capacity* are intertwined: The lacking political willingness and inability of the member states in the field of the EU’s external relations and neighborhood policy to decide and act unitarily (*Capacity*) can shape the perception of third parties as to whether the EU is capable to react as an international actor to international crises. This, as a result, can decrease the EU’s *Presence*.

In addition, the *Presence* of the EU within its eastern neighborhood is not just challenged by its inner-disunity and lacking political willingness, but also by the *Presence* of another major player in the region: the Russian Federation, which claims its influence by invoking its historical bonds and its “firmly-established economic and cultural ties”⁶² with its neighbors, and especially Ukraine. Like the EU it can be understood as a “gravity center”⁶³ which offers a certain set of values and “governance standards”⁶⁴. Hence, the pro-European narrative is just one of many movements and political attitudes of the Ukraine population. To draw a full picture of the Ukraine crisis and the prevailing sentiments and identities, also the pro-Russian narrative has to be considered⁶⁵. The latter favor closer ties with Russia and the future Eurasian Union over the EU. To go a step further, the “pro-Soviet-narrative”, according to Korostelina “embraces a future that promotes a return to Soviet order, values and customs” and is “optimistic about the future of Ukraine if it develops strong connections with Russia and returns to the ideals of Soviet Ukraine”⁶⁶. The pro-Russian demonstrations in Eastern Ukraine and especially in Crimea are a reflection of this eastward looking narrative, which shows that it is not just the EU which is *present* in the region and has a magnetic effect on its neighbors.

Moreover, the *Presence* of an actor, in this case the EU, cannot just trigger reaction from third parties because they are attracted, but also because they are aggrieved by it. A large part of Eastern Ukraine feels threatened by the increasing influence of the EU on the region. It can thus be argued that the attempt of the EU to further bind Ukraine to the EU upset Russia and pro-Russian movements within the shared neighborhood and triggered the reaction of Russia to protect its influence⁶⁷.

⁵⁹ Nițoiu, "Narrative Construction," 244f.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 246.

⁶¹ This is also discussed in the idea of the EU "Capability-Expectations Gap" (see Hill, "Capability-Expectations Gap.")

⁶² Batora and Navrátil, "Security Community Building," 25.

⁶³ Emerson and Noutcheva, "Gravity Model."

⁶⁴ Batora and Navrátil, "Security Community Building," 25.

⁶⁵ Korostelina, *Constructing the Narratives*, 225.

⁶⁶ Ibid..

⁶⁷ Speck, "EU Failed."

The *Presence* of the EU in its eastern neighborhood and especially Ukraine should thus not be taken for granted. It is challenged by the inner divide of the EU, its lacking political willingness and especially the vast presence of Russia, first and foremost in the eastern part of Ukraine. Especially the latter demands a cautious approach of the EU to not further annoy Russia and especially the Ukrainian citizens in the east and makes the decision-finding-process more complicated (*Capability*). Nevertheless, the EU's *Presence* in Ukraine is, without doubt, existent and triggers the responsibility many Ukraine citizens perceive the EU should live up to in one way or the other. Voices are raised that it is the EU's duty to react, derived from the values and principles it claims to represent as a normative actor and "value leader"⁶⁸. This shows that *Presence*, even though challenged by other forces, in return can trigger the perception of EU responsibility to re-act to the crisis in one way or the other.

b) Opportunity

The social constructivist approach analyzes how actors give meanings to and have different understandings of the realities and the events happening. The international structure the EU is embedded in is thus socially constructed⁶⁹ in an ongoing and dynamic discourse which attributes the EU different roles and identities⁷⁰.

To study this social construction of reality and the interpretation of unfolding events in global politics is an important element of Bretherton and Vogler's social constructivist approach⁷¹. The following section will thus deal with the question how and whether the discourses and understandings of the events in Ukraine, which attribute the EU specific roles and identities, provide an *Opportunity* for the EU to act as an actor.

The event of the Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea are perceived as the greatest challenge of the established world order since the end of the Cold War⁷². National border demarcations, which had been taken for granted for decades, are now challenged and not just a few are asking whether this conflict will turn out to be "a new Cold War"⁷³. A new "east-west-mentality"⁷⁴ is emerging, that many assumed we had moved away from ever since the idea of a "multipolar world" perceived after the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

⁶⁸ Rohrbacher and Jenicková, "Attractiveness," 40.

⁶⁹ Constructivism is not denying the existence of a material reality. Whether reality and events however provide an opportunity for an actor depends on how the actor and others interpret events, based on their subjective understanding and knowledge of reality (see Chebakova, "Theorizing the EU as a global actor," 5.)

⁷⁰ Chebakova, "Theorizing the EU as a global actor," 3.

⁷¹ Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*, 24.

⁷² See e.g. DeYoung, "Obama speaks with Putin;" Ignatzi, "breach of international law;" NATO, "statement on situation in Ukraine;" Patrick, "At Stake in Ukraine."

⁷³ Wintour, "new cold war."

⁷⁴ Kuhnhehn, "Obama urges Europe to retrench."

This understanding is now increasingly dominating the framing process and interpretations of the international structure and the events in Ukraine.

The outbreak of the Ukraine crisis and the assertive reactions of Russia triggered a wide-ranging and polarizing debate about who is to blame for the crisis. The question is whether the Kremlin is the only one to blame or whether the Russian reaction is somehow justifiable since the EU is not entirely innocent in this scenario. Two storylines shape this "blame-game" and give a different meaning to the events in Ukraine.

The most common interpretation of the crisis in the "western world" paints a picture of an aggressive Russia, trying to re-build its Soviet sphere of influence by imperialist power-politics. Joschka Fischer, former foreign minister of Germany, describes the Kremlin's action as "nineteenth-century concepts of international order, based on zero-sum balance-of-power considerations and spheres of interest" which is "threatening to supersede modern norms of national self-determination, the inviolability of borders, the rule of law, and the fundamental principles of democracy"⁷⁵. Adherents of this storylines consider Putin's action thus as inexcusable, which makes "any sympathy for the move unacceptable"⁷⁶.

However, there's another interpretation of the event. They take the view that the EU is at least partly to blame for the onset of the crisis. This understanding is most common in Russia and is spread via the Russian media⁷⁷. The Foreign Minister of Belarus, Uladzimir Makey, states that the EU, by pressuring Kyiv to decide between "the West" and "the East", should not be surprised by the Yanukovych's decision to choose the more convincing Russian offer, which ultimately triggered the pro-European student protests⁷⁸. This attitude, however, is not just adopted in "the East": The former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt declares that the Russian reaction "is entirely understandable"⁷⁹. Bonnenberg furthermore claims that the roots of the political crisis can be traced back to the EU's Eastern Partnership, which is, according to him, a "Western European attempt to strip these countries of their historical ties with Russia"⁸⁰. By extending the EU's sphere of influence it aggrieved Russia and thus created a destabilized region. In his opinion it is thus the EU, which is "responsible for Europe's most recent conflict"⁸¹.

Regardless of which storyline one supports, most of the scholars and officials⁸² in "the West" are of the opinion that it is the EU's responsibility to

⁷⁵ Fischer, "Putin's Reality Check."

⁷⁶ Neukirch, "Sympathy Problem."

⁷⁷ Spiegel Online, "The Opinion-Makers."

⁷⁸ Salanovich, "Foreign Minister Makey blames EU."

⁷⁹ Schmidt cited by Neukirch, "Sympathy Problem."

⁸⁰ Bonnenberg, "EU's Eastern Partnership."

⁸¹ Ibid..

⁸² See e.g. Balfour, "new post-Cold War era"; Barroso, "Statement of President;" "European Politics and Policy, "Crimea referendum."

react collectively to the Russian assertive behavior in one way or the other. Those holding the former view tend to demand a stricter approach, e.g. by imposing economic sanctions, while the others require the EU to be more cautious in its response, for instance by intensifying its diplomatic efforts.

Some sort of consensus exists⁸³ that portrays the crisis as an opportunity for the EU to prove that it is capable to respond to the crisis as a credible actor and to live up to its values as a security provider and normative actor⁸⁴. This is furthermore underlined by the invitation from several external actors, especially from the US⁸⁵ and politicians of the Ukraine opposition, to the EU to intervene and mediate the crisis⁸⁶. Bretherton and Vogel⁸⁷ state that "the conduct of regional relations [...] will have profound implications for the fundamental character of the Union, its physical borders and its reputation as an actor". This is of course even more the case regarding the EU's reaction to the major event of the Ukraine crisis. A similar opportunity in the very neighborhood of the EU opened up during the Balkan crisis in the 1990s. The failure to react efficiently to the so-called "hour of Europe" hung like a sword of Damocles over the EU ever since then and shaped the idea of the "capability-expectations gap"⁸⁸. The way the EU will react to the Ukraine crisis will thus not just reshape its relationship with the eastern neighborhood, but also the EU's reputation and identity as a global actor for the years to come (*Presence*)⁸⁹. The question is thus, like Balfour phrases it, whether the political crisis in its close neighborhood will "push Europe to take a leap as an international actor" and whether it can be "interpreted as a 'fall of the Berlin Wall' moment which will drive the EU to take a strong lead in foreign policy"⁹⁰.

The different meanings the two storylines give to the events in Ukraine are shaping the context which in turn frames EU's action against the Russian aggression. The discourse over the interpretation of the Ukraine crisis goes thus hand in hand with the debate whether it is the EU's responsibility to act. While the EU's *Presence* and identity as a normative power triggers the responsibility to act, the Ukraine crisis is furthermore perceived as offering a historical unique⁹¹ "window of opportunity" for the EU to respond to the crisis along those normative lines and to prove its ability to act as a global actor. The EU's decision-making on certain measures is, however, complicated by the vast *Presence* of Russia in the region as well as the different storylines of who is responsible for the onset of the crisis. The following chapter will

⁸³ Balfour, "new post-Cold War era"; European Politics and Policy, "Crimea referendum."

⁸⁴ This again illustrates how the EU Presence and its identity as a normative power are intertwined with how an event is interpreted as the EU's Opportunity to act.

⁸⁵ Salem and Freeman, "Obama warns EU;" Spetalnick and Grove, "Obama seeks unity."

⁸⁶ Independent, "Ukrainian Opposition Asks for EU's Help."

⁸⁷ Bretherton and Vogler, *EU as a Global Actor*, 137.

⁸⁸ Hill, "Capability-Expectations Gap."

⁸⁹ Ivan, "EU sanctions."

⁹⁰ Balfour, "new post-Cold War era."

⁹¹ See e.g. Balfour, "new post-Cold War era"; European Politics and Policy, "Crimea referendum."

finally focus on how material conditions within the EU impede or enable EU Actorness as well.

c) Capability

Bretherton and Vogler⁹² consider the EU's *Capacity*, thus the Union's internal ability or inability to find decisions and utilize policy instruments, as an integral part in shaping EU Actorness. A lacking "vertical coherence" across the member states external dependencies can seriously constrain the EU's ability to act as an actor. This is particularly the case in the field of CSDP, a very sensitive area for the member states sovereignty, where decisions in the Council are taken unanimously. If member states' interests and external dependencies diverge or are even opposing, it is difficult to take a common stance or adopt policies which go beyond the smallest common denominator, if any. This impedes the union's performance as an actor.

The differing political and economic interests of EU member states with regard to Russia can be traced back to the divergent economic interdependencies of member states on Russia, their geopolitical situation as well as historic experiences. This makes any consensus on measures, like sanctions, against the Russian behavior difficult to achieve. Of particular importance is the dependency of several countries on Russian oil and gas. 30 percent of the EU's gas and 35% of its oil is provided by Russia. Matters are complicated by the fact that 50% of the Russian gas consumed in the EU is supplied via the North stream pipeline through Ukraine. Insecurity in this region could endanger the European energy supply⁹³. While states like Portugal, Spain and the UK are not obtaining any Russian gas, especially the eastern member states, like Lithuania and Latvia are highly dependent, up to 100%, on gas supply from Russia⁹⁴. The latter group fears that restrictive measures against the Kremlin would aggravate Russia which then in return could punish them with gas cuts or an increase in gas and oil prices.

Special attention is being paid to Germany, which forges close economic links with the Russian Federation⁹⁵. In terms of volume, Germany is importing most of Russian energy in the EU⁹⁶. With a supply of 36% on gas and 39% on Russian oil, German dependency is considerable⁹⁷. When restrictive measures were discussed, German industry raised concerns⁹⁸. Similarly, also France, Italy and Hungary have strong ties with Russia, which consequently

⁹² Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak?," 381f..

⁹³ Westphal, "Russian Energy Supplies," 2; Behrens and Wiczorkiewicz, "Russian gas cuts," 3.

⁹⁴ Meister, "Lessons of Crimea."

⁹⁵ Nițoiu, "Narrative Construction," 249.

⁹⁶ Ahtonen, "Russian belligerence."

⁹⁷ Ibid.; Westphal, "Russian Energy Supplies," 2.

⁹⁸ Karnitschnig, "German Businesses Urge Halt;" Smale and Hakim, "Minimize Russia sanctions;" Wagner and Rinke, "German industry steps up drive."

prefer "keeping an open dialogue with Moscow"⁹⁹ instead of aggravating it with sanctions¹⁰⁰.

The western parts of the EU, with a greater geographical distance to the crisis and less dependency on the eastern neighborhood, feel "no historical connection to Ukraine and no obligation to help it reform"¹⁰¹. Hence, they feel less direct pressure to ease the crisis and lack the motivation to stabilize the region through sanctions towards Russia or economic incentives for the Ukrainian interim-government.

In contrast, in the eastern post-Soviet member states prevails fear not just for their energy supply and economic ties to Russia, but because of their historical experiences with Moscow and geopolitical proximity to the continuing unrest in their direct neighborhood. Especially Latvia and Estonia, which have, just like Ukraine, ethnic Russian minorities, urge the EU to tighten the pace and stem the Russian aggressive acts more efficiently in order to de-escalate the situation and ease the crisis¹⁰².

The prevailing lack of political willingness of those member states highly dependent on Russian energy supplies and those with a greater geographical distance constrain an effective approach of the EU as an actor towards Russia. This did not change until they had to realize that the deal achieved in February between the opposition on the Maidan and the Yanukovych regime did not solve the political crisis, but that the situation further escalated and peaked in the Russian annexation of the Crimean peninsula.

In order to respond to the Ukraine crisis, the EU has several policy instruments at hand. Bretherton and Vogler differentiate between "political (diplomacy/negotiation), economic (incentives/sanctions) or military"¹⁰³ instruments the EU can fall back on in order to positively influence a situation outside its borders it disapproves.

The possibility to use military instruments to ease the political crisis in Ukraine had been ruled out from the very beginning¹⁰⁴. This is consistent with the Union's identity as a "soft power" and normative actor¹⁰⁵, and illustrates clearly how the EU's *Presence* and identity as a normative power influences the EU's *Capability* to act. By precluding military interventions, the EU is re-constructing and thus underlining its normative identity. However, lately the governments of the UK, Sweden and Poland recommended that the EU should nevertheless consider an EU mission to

⁹⁹ Balfour, "new post-Cold War era."

¹⁰⁰ Paul and Filipchuk, "Ukraine in deadlock."

¹⁰¹ Shumylo-Tapiola, "Does Ukraine Matter."

¹⁰² Ibid.; Easton, "heat from Crimea"; Paul and Filipchuk, "Ukraine in deadlock."; Saytas and Krutaine, "Ukraine crisis."

¹⁰³ Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak," 385.

¹⁰⁴ Ivan, "EU sanctions."

¹⁰⁵ Gebert, "Shooting in the dark," 1.

Ukraine¹⁰⁶. Since the national unrest continues, also the interim-government in Kyiv asked the EU to contemplate a military mission to Ukraine¹⁰⁷. A military mission, however, requires unanimity within the Council. Due to the different economic interests of the member states, consensus will be very hard to achieve. Furthermore, concerns are being raised that this would further aggrieve Russia and provoke even more intrusive measurements¹⁰⁸. At the time being, a military mission is unlikely.

The probably "softest" external policy tools to promote EU objectives with regard to third parties are diplomatic efforts, which are in line with the EU's normative values. For such matters the position of the High Representative (HR) of the EU had been established, currently held by Lady Catherin Ashton, and supported by the newly established European External Action Service. However, for the first important diplomatic attempt initiated by the EU in February to mediate between the Maidan opposition and the Yanukovych regime and to negotiate a deal, not Lady Ashton was sent to Kyiv, but the foreign ministers of Germany, Poland and France¹⁰⁹. The still remaining importance of single member states in the EU's external policies is also underlined by the fact that third parties, e.g. the governments of the government of the United States or members of the Ukrainian pro-European opposition maintained bilateral talks with single member states in order to ask for their support, rather than addressing the little-noticed HR of the EU, which fades into the background. The presence of the HR in mediating the crisis is, however, not only challenged by the governments of the member states, but also by the Presidents of the Council and the Commission, Herman van Rompuy and Manuel Barroso respectively. This lack of "institutional coherence"¹¹⁰, also called institutional "turf-wars", undermines the position and acceptance of Lady Ashton as the external representative of the EU and shows that the member states are not truly willing to give up their foreign power to the EU¹¹¹. Only recently, when the crisis further erupted, the HR herself started taking the center stage and is playing an increasingly proactive role: in contrast to the diplomatic talks of the trio of EU foreign ministers in February, during the Geneva peace negotiations in April with Russia, Ukraine and the US the EU was represented by Lady Ashton. The EU is thus more likely to be perceived as a single actor.

Given its lack of political willingness of the EU as a "soft power" to offer military aid, restrictive measures such as asset freezes or visa and travel bans are a very important external policy instrument to promote "peace, democracy and the respect for the rule of law, human rights and

¹⁰⁶ Rettman, "EU police mission."

¹⁰⁷ KyivPost, "EU mission."

¹⁰⁸ Rettman, "EU police mission."

¹⁰⁹ Balfour, "new post-Cold War era."

¹¹⁰ Bretherton and Vogler, "global actor past its peak?," 383f..

¹¹¹ The representation of the EU by the HR is not a requirement for Actorness, the position, however, increases the likelihood that third actors recognize the EU as an actor (see e.g. Groenleer and Van Schaik, "United we stand?" 976).

international law"¹¹². Restrictive measures implemented by the EU as a single actor, have of course more weight, impact and symbolic power than it would have if only single member states conduct them. To implement them, however, unanimity within the Council is needed. This bears the risk that measures will be diluted in order to achieve consensus. This problem can be observed with regard to the Ukraine crisis. Even though sanctions had been discussed from the very beginning, they haven't been decided until the violence on the Maidan in February further erupted and several protestors died. The EU's foreign ministers implemented sanctions against officials and oligarchs close to Putin and the then Ukrainian president Yanukovich. With the Russian annexation of Crimea eventually a three-step-sanction plan had been decided upon in March. The first step consists of the suspension of the bilateral visa talks with Moscow as well as the Russian participation at the G8 summit. The second phase covers travel bans and asset freezes for several individuals close to Putin. With the first two already in action, the third step will contain economic sanctions like trade barriers and will come into force if Russia should continue meddling in Ukraine in a destabilizing way¹¹³. Especially the latter one had been criticized by the industry in certain member states which foster tight relations with Russia¹¹⁴. Although Russia is after the Geneva Agreement still trying to de-stabilize the region, the third stage has not been activated yet. This can be traced back to the very different political and economic interests of the member states, as explained above.

Another measure the EU implemented to stabilize the region and to react to the pro-European movements in Ukraine was to offer the new interim-government again to sign the EU Association Agreement. Thereby the member states took an unusual common stance by offering Ukraine economic incentives and the EU entered the stage as a unified and resolute actor. Compared to the actual economic sanctions on Russia, the Association Agreement is less aggravating for Moscow and the economic ties of single member states with Russia are thus not endangered.

The EU's performance to effectively react to the Russian aggression and decide upon sanctions or to engage in constructive diplomatic talks as an actor had been evaluated differently. Many argue that the sanctions imposed "were far too weak to coerce or seriously constrain the activity of the Russian leadership"¹¹⁵ and the general reaction of the EU as an actor to the fast pace actions of Russia constantly remained one step behind. Especially during the first months of the crisis the EU was lacking a strategic approach towards Russia, due to the divergent economic and political interests as discussed above¹¹⁶. The inter-institutional competition, furthermore, weakened the performance and thus the international recognition of the EU as an actor. The competing *Presence* of Russia in the eastern neighborhood as well as the

¹¹² European External Action Service, "EU restrictive measures," 1.

¹¹³ Ivan, "EU sanctions."

¹¹⁴ Westphal, "Russian Energy Supplies," 1.

¹¹⁵ Ivan, "EU sanctions."

¹¹⁶ Paul and Filipchuk, "Ukraine in deadlock"; Speck, "EU Failed."

interpretation of the events as caused by the Union's "imperialist attempts" is thus not the only reasons for the EU's reluctance to act: The vast contrast between the EU's normative obligation¹¹⁷ and the material interests of the member states hinders the EU to act according to the former. However, with the crisis escalating and the international pressure increasing, the EU seems to show more unity than expected and acts as an actor along the lines of its normative identity¹¹⁸.

Conclusion

The social constructivist framework to assess EU Actorness draws the focus not just on the Union's internal ability or disability to find decisions and utilize policy instruments and eventually act as an actor; it also stresses the importance of the external environment in shaping ideas and narratives of the EU, as well as interpreting events in a certain way, which impacts the EU's Actorness as well. The case of the Ukraine crisis illustrates this very clearly. EU's ability to act as an actor is not just constrained or enabled by its *Capacity*--the political willingness of member states to take a common stance or decide upon certain measures--but also by its *Presence* in the international system and the interpretation of unfolding events as *Opportunities*.

The *Presence* of the EU in the international system influences the perception citizens and elites in the eastern neighborhood have towards the EU. The mere existence of the EU triggered (unintentionally) inter alia two opposing movements in the Ukraine, which are based on pro-European and pro-Russian sentiments. On the one hand, the values the EU promises and the economic desirability it exudes, attracts a considerable part of the Ukrainian population and shapes the pro-European narrative. On the other hand, however, the aggressive behavior of Moscow as well as the pro-Russian movements, which felt aggravated by the increasing influence of the EU on the region, can be understood as a consequence of the EU's *Presence*, too. With the continuing escalation of the crisis, voices are raised ever more loudly that it is the EU's duty to respond, which derives from its identity as a normative actor. This prevailing perception of the EU's responsibility enables EU Actorness. At the same time, the competing Russian *Presence* and pro-Russian narratives in the eastern part of Ukraine make matters more complicated for the EU to decide upon certain measures to react, since a cautious approach is needed to not tear the country apart.

The Ukraine crisis has furthermore prompted a "blame-game", which is characterized by two storylines portraying the cause of the event in different lights. Nevertheless, it is seen as a new momentum and thus as an *Opportunity* for the EU to prove whether it is capable to react to the crisis in a credible and efficient way as an international actor.

¹¹⁷ This normative obligation derives from the EU's *Presence* as a normative action and the interpretation of the events as an *Opportunity* for the EU to act according to these norms and values.

¹¹⁸ Techau, "Strategic Europe."

The Russian *Presence*, the opposing sentiments in the Ukraine population as well as the different storylines of who is responsible for the crisis complicates decision-making at the European level. In addition, the Union's *Capability* to act as an actor is furthermore constrained through the divergent interests and external dependencies of member states, their different historical experiences with Moscow and the proximity to the trouble spot that make a common stance difficult. These interests conflict with the EU's normative values which would require a more pro-active and united response of the Union. Especially during the first months of the crisis the EU reacted only very reluctant to the opportunity and the calls for the EU to take the lead. With the situation further escalating, the EU finally entered the stage more often as a unified actor in a pro-active way, represented by the High Representative. The Geneva Agreement as well as the three-step-sanction plan are indicating this move towards EU Actorness. However, the fact that the third step of sanctions is still not activated shows the reluctance of member states with a high economic dependency on Russia to aggravate the latter. The EU is still moving on a very slow pace.

To assess what enables or constrains the EU's ability to act as an actor, we have to go beyond the mere analysis of the internal *Capacity* of the EU to take a common stance and make decisions. It is closely interrelated with the *Presence* of the EU, thus the prevailing ideas about the EU in the international system, as well as the interpretation of events which can provide an *Opportunity* for the EU to act. The way the EU will respond to this "new hour for Europe" which opened up in its direct neighborhood will shape in return its identity as well as reputation as a credible actor in the international system for the years to come.

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