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## The Geopoliticisation of the EU's Eastern Partnership

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### ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the idea that the EU and Russia are engaged in a geopolitical contest over their common neighbourhood and that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is Brussels' instrument in this context appears 'common sense'. Yet, the reality of the EaP as a policy programme hardly corresponds to such representation, whether in its original purpose, actual content or effects on the ground. To unpack this discrepancy, this article presents a genealogy of what is conceptualised here as the geopoliticisation of the EaP, a notion set forth to designate the discursive construction of an issue as a geopolitical problem. While Russia's actions in Ukraine certainly contributed to deepen and reinforce this dynamic, the article shows that the geopoliticisation of the EaP was neither merely exogenous nor simply reactive. It was also carried forward from within the European policy community by a discourse coalition which, based on its own political subjectivities and policy agenda, came to frame the EaP as an endeavour aimed at 'winning over' countries of the Eastern neighbourhood and 'rolling back' Russia's influence.

Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, the notion that the EU and Russia are engaged in a geopolitical contest over their common neighbourhood and that the Eastern Partnership (EaP) is Brussels' instrument in this context appears 'common sense'. Moscow's zero-sum approach and hard power projection in its 'near abroad' have certainly been apparent; they are well documented and abundantly commented upon. Several analysts have also recently denoted, however, a growing—albeit non-comparable—tendency on the part of the EU to adopt a geopolitical posture towards its Eastern neighbourhood (Kazharski and Makarychev 2015; Nitoiu 2016; Youngs 2017). In a recent study investigating both the EU's reaction to the Ukraine crisis and the impact of the crisis on EU foreign policy, Richard Youngs (Youngs 2017, 6–7) finds that EU support for certain political values and reforms is increasingly “pursued as a geopolitical comparative advantage over Russia” and “superimposed with a layer of geo-strategic diplomacy”. In documenting the same pattern, other scholars have notably pointed to Brussels' relaxing, in an apparent bid to compete with Moscow's influence, of its conditionality towards Ukraine to incentivise Viktor

Yanukovich to sign the Association Agreement (AA) (Kazharski and Makarychev 2015, 334–35) and of its benchmarks of engagement with Belarus by lifting its sanctions in February 2016 in spite of a lack of progress on the human rights front (Charap and Colton 2017, 119–21; 175). What is more, the EaP itself is now, in fact, routinely represented as a containment policy in the Western press: the AA with Ukraine is described as a “bulwark against Russian aggression” (Robinson 2016) while the visa-free regimes with Ukraine and Georgia are presented as ways “to help [countries of the post-soviet space] as they try to move away from Moscow’s orbit” (Baczynska 2016).

This evolution in the self-understandings and media narratives around the EaP begs question as neither in its original purpose, actual content or effects on the ground does the reality of the policy correspond to such representation. Two established experts on EU external relations concur in stressing that the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), of which the EaP is the Eastern branch, was “stripped of any geo-political considerations” in its design and that it “has not been a geopolitical power projection project in the crude sense of the term” (Haukkala 2016, 6; Howorth 2017, 6; see also: Youngs 2017, 50–64). The ENP hardly amounts, indeed, to a policy consciously seeking—or able—to project hard power and was not created based on a logic of competition for territories. Quite simply, if the EU really did want to ‘take over’ countries of the post-Soviet space, it would offer them membership. Yet the ENP and EaP have precisely been engineered above all as *alternatives* to enlargement (Dannreuther 2006). In addition, paradoxically, what analysts generally reproach to the EU in the context of the Ukraine crisis is, actually, to have failed to appreciate the geopolitical dynamics at play in the Eastern neighbourhood and the potential repercussions of the EaP in this context (Auer 2015, 760; Howorth 2017, 8; Haukkala 2016, 7; MacFarlane and Menon 2014; House of Lords 2015). They point, in other words, to the EU’s *lack* of geopolitical thinking in this context. How to account, then, for the aforementioned evolution in the representation of the EaP? How to explain, in particular, the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the geopolitical framing of the EaP in public discourses and, on the other hand, the non-geopolitical content of the policy and absence of geopolitical contingency planning in its implementation? What are the implications and consequences of this ‘geopoliticisation’ of the EaP?

The traditional explanation advanced in both academic and policy debates is that EU policies in the Eastern neighbourhood have become geopolitical because Russia has perceived, denounced and responded to them as such (see for instance: European Commission 2014). While certainly accurate in its characterisation of Moscow’s reception of—and reaction to—the EaP (Gretskiy, Treshchenkov and Golubev 2014), this explanation is insufficient to fully account for why the policy has been framed as geopolitical by European actors themselves. First, there is a difference between acknowledging that your interlocutor sees your mutual

interaction as a gunfight and starting seeing your own hand as a gun. There is a difference between recognising that Russia's reactions to the EaP (and to the EU–Ukraine AA in particular) has turned EU–Russia interactions in the Eastern Neighbourhood as a geopolitical contest and representing the EaP as a geopolitical instrument in this contest. Second, one would need to explain why this pattern of exogenous speech act (or externally transposed meaning) happened in that instance and not others: why would European actors adopt Moscow's characterisation of their own policies in the case of the EaP but not, let's say, of the war in Kosovo, the situation of Russian speakers in the Baltic states or the Maidan revolt? Such transposition is particularly difficult to explain in the case of the EaP when one agrees that Russia's protestations against this policy were often "disingenuous" and hardly "withstanding serious scrutiny" (Haukkala 2016, 660). Third and most crucially, the traditional explanation overlooks the fact that, as this article shows, enunciations of the geopolitical storyline on the EaP can be traced in European discourses *before* the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis (late 2013) and, even, before the launch of the EaP (May 2009).

With a view to advance a more complete and more accurate explanation, this article purports to unpack the geopolitical storyline and analyse its elevation as a prevalent narrative in European public discourse when referring to the EaP—what is conceptualised here as the *geopoliticisation* of the EaP. Directly drawing on that of securitisation (Waever 1995), this notion is set forth to designate the discursive construction of an issue or policy as a geopolitical matter. Relying on discourse analysis theories from the International Relations literature, but also engaging with critical geopolitics to some extent, this article aims to denaturalise the geopolitical narrative around the EaP by contextualising the discursive practices that have underpinned it and by shedding light on the conditions that have favoured its emergence and prevalence. I argue that the geopoliticisation of the EaP was not simply exogenous, but also carried forward from within the European policy community by discourse entrepreneurs who, based on their own political subjectivities and policy agenda, came to frame the EaP as an endeavour aimed at 'winning over' countries of the Eastern neighbourhood and at 'rolling back' Russia's influence. The concept of discourse coalition (Hajer 1993; Howarth et al. 2000; Howarth and Torfing 2005) is called upon to designate, and integrate in the analysis, both these entrepreneurs and the main storylines they promoted.

It is important to stress that the geopolitical storyline on the EaP was never taken up as such in EU official communications. This, however, should be read more as a manifestation of the EU's traditional ambiguity than as a mark of the narrative's total irrelevance in Brussels. As emphasised by Merje Kuus (2015), who shows that EU foreign policy is characterised by a

“variegated practical use of [geopolitical] concepts”, the neutrality of the official narrative often serves the function of patching up variations in the dispositions and agendas of European policy professionals. I argue in fact that, because it was enounced by actors with significant social capital within the European political community (notably foreign ministers from EU member states) and as EU foreign policy discourse cannot be summed up to that of its institutions, it contributed to shape the structure of signification in which EU policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood were articulated and implemented. This article thus sheds light, through the case of the EaP, on the broader pattern of geopoliticisation of EU–Russia relations that has started to receive attention in relation to other issue areas, such as energy (Casier 2016). It also provides some elements of understanding on Europe’s internal debates over the on-going “discursive competition between the various actors within the post-Soviet geopolitical field over the reworking of longstanding Cold War categories” (Toal 2017, 41).

The argument is developed in four successive steps. The first section presents the analytical framework employed and its two central concepts of discourse coalition and geopoliticisation. In a second step, the rationale, content and effects of the EaP are briefly analysed, with a view to emphasise their essentially non-geopolitical nature (provided that one adopts a minimalist definition of geopolitics, as this article does). The third section constitutes the bulk of the empirical contribution of the article. It unpacks the geopoliticisation of the EaP in European policy discourses by focusing on two specific contexts: national discussions in EU member states before the launch of the EaP in May 2009 and pan-European debates before the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013. For the first context or arena, I focus on the cases of Poland and the Czech Republic, two countries that have played an important role in pushing for the EaP initiative and in promoting it at the EU level. Although the activism of the former is the one that has been the most decisive in that regard, I actually focus on the latter above all as the facts that the Czech Republic is less geopolitically exposed than Poland and that its Eastern policies underwent salient changes in the period studied both render geopoliticising moves more visible there. The years around the launch of the EaP constituted a period important and rich in terms of discursive articulation as Czech and Polish policy-makers had to ‘sell’ the EaP both to their domestic constituencies and to other member states.<sup>1</sup> In studying their articulatory practices, I rely on the qualitative content analysis of public speeches and of private, semi-directed interviews with diplomats and policy-makers.<sup>2</sup> The goal here—and in discourse analysis more generally—is not to pretend to reveal what policy-makers ‘really believe’ but to trace which codes and organisational metaphors are used when speaking about the EaP and identify which chains of connotations and storylines are shared and reproduced throughout. The second context studied is that of European and

transatlantic policy debates on the EU's AA with Ukraine and on EU-Russia relations in the common neighbourhood more generally. There, I focus more precisely on two metaphors redundant in policy-makers' declarations and think tanks productions from *before* the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. The conclusion discusses the consequences and implications of this geopoliticisation of the EaP for EU external relations.

### Discourse Coalition and Geopoliticisation: An Analytical Framework

Discourse theory understands discourse as being constitutive of social reality rather than a mere reflection of it.<sup>3</sup> As emphasised by Lene Hansen, “policy discourses are inherently social because policymakers address political opposition as well as the wider public sphere in the attempt to institutionalize their understanding of the identities and policy options at stake” (Hansen 2006, 1). Discourse provides the context in which these policy articulations are set (Diez 2014, 320). The notion of articulation refers here both to the act of formulating a policy and of endowing it with meaning, for instance by relating to certain markers of political culture or national identity (Weldes 1999, 98–103; Laclau and Mouffe 2001). By ascribing meaning, discourse makes the world intelligible and creates interpretative dispositions for actors, but it also “operationalizes certain regime of truths while excluding other possible mode of identities and actions” (Milliken 1999, 229). In that sense, discourse contributes to set the limit of legitimate, meaningful and practicable policy: it enables certain choices while disabling others (Diez 2014).

Meaning is neither immanent nor fixed, but constantly established, negotiated and contested through political struggle (Diez 2014; Hansen 2006; Larsen 1997). This leads discourse theories and poststructuralism in particular to underline the contingency and precariousness of politics and, as such, to seek to denaturalise and problematise the present. In this context, the discourse analyst's task is to “plot the course of these struggles to fix meaning at all levels of the social” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 24) and, in particular, to study the “rhetorical strategies inherent in discourses [that] contribute to the way social facts are perceived” (Carta and Morin 2014, 296; See also: Howarth et al. 2000, 3; Foucault 2014). This article relies on discourse theory in as much as it seeks to unpack the struggles around the ‘fixing of the meaning’ of the EaP and to unveil, in particular, the ‘rhetorical strategies’ of discourse entrepreneurs in that context.

In studying the production, reproduction and contestation of meaning, discourse analysis stresses its relational dynamic. As emphasised by Jutta Weldes,

Meaning is created and temporarily fixed by establishing chains of connotations among different linguistic elements. In this way, different terms and ideas come to connote or to summon one another, to be welded into associative chains that make up an identifiable whole. [...] The chains of association established between such linguistic elements [...] are socially constructed and historically contingent rather than logically or structurally necessary. (Weldes 1999, 98)

Such chains of connotations can be identified in European policy debates on Russia and the post-Soviet space. For instance, characterising a policy through ‘linguistic elements’ belonging to the ‘associative chain’ (or structure of meaning) of the Cold War discourse amount to ‘connote’ Russia as an adversary and the common neighborhood as theatre for the rivalry between two blocs.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, speaking of the Baltic states as “frontline states”—as the discourse entrepreneurs studied below have tended to do since the 2000s—amount to indirectly frame Russia as an enemy and EU-Russia relations as a conflict, since if there is a front then there must be a conflict and an enemy. Thus, discourse theories invite to pay attention not just to term uttered but also to the non-uttered terms and ideas associated to it (Neumann 1996; Walker 1993).

This conception of meaning production, which is embraced by many IR discourse analysts but also by several scholars of critical geopolitics, thus invites placing the analytical focus on actors, their discursive practices and their rhetorical strategies. To designate social actors and their positions, the Essex School set forth the concept of discourse coalition, which refers to “the ensemble of a set of storylines, the actors that utters these storylines, and the practices that conform to these storylines, all organized around a discourse” (Hajer 1993, 47; For an overview of the Essex School’s approach, see: Howarth et al. 2000). Linguistic elements such as representations, storylines or organising metaphors (in Essex School’s parlance: ‘nodal points’) glue political subjectivities and it is around them that discourses are articulated.<sup>5</sup> The discourse coalition framework reveals itself particularly useful to map the various political subjectivities in the EU context: James Rogers (2009), for instance, linked the advent of the notion of Europe as a ‘global power’—which came to replace that of ‘civilian power’ in the definition of EU Grand Strategy—to the action of a discourse coalition of “euro-strategists”. Similarly, Kuus (2015, 47; see also: Kuus 2014) places the emphasis on the agency of policy professionals, which lies in the “gradual collective crafting of phrases, agenda and lines of reasoning”, and posits that the “terminology that circulates in EU settings reflects in part the power among them”. The EU constitutes, indeed, an “open and heterogeneous discursive environment” which can be studied either by analysing “the main features of the EU discursive field” or the “contiguous discursive practices” of actors (Carta and Morin 2014, 303, 307). This article focuses on the latter, though not so much at the level of EU institutions but at that of the “wider semantic field

[that] includes the member states' politics" (Carta and Morin 2014, 307). More specifically, it places the spotlight on member states' representatives, politicians, media and think tanks. Both IR discourse analysts (Hansen 2006; 7; Diez 2014, 330) and scholars of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail and Agnew 1992, 194; Toal 2017, 39–41) tend to favour a large analytical angle when it comes to studying actors' discursive practices.

This article studies how the discursive practice of a specific group led to a 'geopoliticisation' of the EaP. That notion directly draws on that of securitisation, developed by the Copenhagen School and based, to a large extent, on the theoretical foundations presented above. Understanding security as a *speech act*, Ole Waever defines a securitising move as one by which an issue is discursively framed as a security problem and, thereby, removed from the sphere of normal politics (Waever 1995, 67). Its success is mediated by factors that are internal ("following the grammar of security") as well as external ("features of the alleged threat" and "social capital of the enunciator") (Buzan, Wæver and De Wilde 1998, 33). The notion of geopoliticisation is thus used here to designate the discursive construction of an issue or policy as a geopolitical matter. It can refer both to the discursive practices framing a policy in geopolitical terms and to the resulting outcome in terms of crystallisation of meaning. As for securitisation, the success of a geopoliticising move is seen as being mediated by the speech's internal adherence to the 'grammar' and 'dialects' of geopolitics and by the position of authority of the geopoliticising actor. Its concrete operationalisation requires, however, to specify what is meant by geopolitics.

### Tracing the 'Geopolitical' in the EaP's Rationale, Content and Impact

The notion of geopolitics has been used and abused—but rarely specified—in reference to EU-Russia relations in the post-Soviet space. It has come to mean anything, and everything, related to power politics, realpolitik, influence, hard power, imperialism or conflict. Though not confined to this context or issue-area (see: Deudney 1997, 93; Sloan and Gray 1999, 1), this indeterminacy is particularly problematic in that case. First, while its use in the context of the Ukraine crisis itself, to refer to the annexation of Crimea or the conflict in the Donbas, appears rather straightforward, its applicability to the ENP and the EaP is less evident and should be qualified. Second, the term geopolitics has been heavily connoted in these debates and often invoked to criticise Russia's—but also the EU's (See for instance: Boedeltje and van Houtum 2011)—policies in the neighborhood. Just as the term 'normative' lost some of its conceptual value in the analysis of EU foreign policy after becoming somehow associated with "doing good" (Sjursen 2013), the term 'geopolitics' has been increasingly associated with 'doing bad'.



Geopolitics can refer to a body of theories, to the academic discipline of political geography or to a set of state practices (including discursive ones) in international affairs. The latter aspect, of concern here, is also the most difficult to operationalise: the term is abundantly used outside of the scholarly community and, even there, its contours can be broad. The most encompassing conceptualisation includes the practice by which states and their representatives spatialise international politics, order the space at their border and define relations with their neighbours. This definition is favoured in particular by the critical geopolitics scholarship, whose ontological and epistemological positions are, as briefly evoked, close to the ones adopted by the present article, except that the latter's theoretical framework borrows from the international relations literature rather than from political geography. For instance, if one refers to Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992) seminal article and to the key notions it introduced, geopoliticisation can be understood as a form of 'practical geopolitical reasoning' and discourse coalitions as being composed of 'intellectual of statecrafts'.<sup>6</sup> The present article is not just concerned with geopolitics as mode of reasoning or writing however, but also with geopolitics as a *policy character* attributed to the EaP. Thus, when unpacking the latter, a minimalist definition of geopolitics is favoured, one that allows to better grasp possible differences between the content of EaP policies and their framing, and thereby emphasise possible geopoliticising patterns more clearly.

In this understanding, a geopolitical endeavour is one that displays the following features: projecting or seeking to deter *hard power*; reflecting objectives or concerns related to *territoriality*; and consisting in actions taken against, or at least decided in consideration of, *other powers*.<sup>7</sup> A first criteria pertains to the *type of power* deployed and draws in particular on Luttwak's classic differentiation between geopolitics as a competition for territories and geoeconomics as a competition for markets (Luttwak 1990). Extrapolating on this, Wigell and Vihma conceptualise geopolitics and geoeconomics as two different geostrategies that mobilise different means (military vs economic), proceed according to different logics (confrontation vs selective accommodation), and provoke different reactions (counterbalancing or bandwagoning vs under-balancing) (Wigell and Vihma 2016; Vihma 2018; For a critique, see: Sparke 2018). A second criteria relates to the *territorialised* setting of the competition or power projection endeavour. A policy that seeks or amounts to control or integrate an external territory can, by essence, be regarded as geopolitical. In that sense, the EU enlargement *is* a geopolitical process under this criteria.<sup>8</sup> A third criteria concerns *external actors*: a policy can be considered geopolitical when it is decided or designed not just in relation to the territory where it is deployed, but also to external powers that may be present or influential on this territory or bordering it.

Neither in their rationale, content or effects, the EaP and the ENP display evident geopolitical features as defined above. Launched in 2004, the ENP aims to foster the “economic integration and political association” of states of the neighbourhood (East and South) with the EU (European Commission 2004; see also: Whitman and Wolff 2010; Schumacher, Marchetti and Demmelhuber 2017). Security considerations were in part driving this new policy: the underlying rationale was to attempt to stabilise the periphery rather than risk seeing it destabilise the EU (Rupnik 2007). However, the kind of threats against which the EU wanted to guard itself by investing in the ENP was above all non-military and de-territorialised (Christou 2010). As these threats were often striving on governance failures, encouraging and supporting state reforms in the neighborhood was seen as a way to enhance the EU’s security and, in this endeavour, Brussels sought to reproduce the transformative power it successfully yielded in the enlargement process—yet *without* offering membership. Membership was not explicitly excluded, as ambiguity allowed to maximise incentives for neighbours and accommodate those EU member states rooting for further Eastern enlargement, but in reality it was largely excluded by the time the EaP was launched in 2009.<sup>9</sup> The EaP’s does partly proceed from a geo-strategic rationale, namely stabilising the periphery (Browning and Joenniemi 2008), but it can be regarded as geopolitical only in the maximalist understanding of the term, not in the minimalist definition adopted here.

To foster domestic reforms, the EaP offers a set of incentives that can be summed up by the so-called ‘three Ms’: Markets (sectorial access to the EU internal market), Money (financial aid and loans), and Mobility (visa facilitation). Thus, it is best described, in our view, as a structural power endeavor<sup>10</sup>—the concept of ‘soft’, ‘normative’ or ‘civilian’ power are also sometimes used in the literature, yet never that of ‘hard power’. The will to shape domestic markets towards the approximation of EU norms and standards partly reflects a desire to make them more amenable for EU businesses; thus the EaP does entail an offensive component in that sense, but a geo-economic one. It is above all internal drivers and dynamics have been key in bringing about the EaP: path-dependency on the part of EU institutions (Kelley 2006) and the will to increase their agenda-setting capacity in Brussels for the member states who promoted it (notably Poland, see below).<sup>11</sup> As such, at least in the form in which it was designed by EU Commission and adopted by all EU member states, in its content the EaP is not geared *against* other powers—if anything, analysts tends precisely to reproach this policy with neglecting the role of other regional powers, such as Russia or Turkey (Auer 2015; Beauguitte, Richard and Guérin-Pace 2015).

Similarly, the impact of the EaP has been largely undirected and unspecific, which makes it difficult to use it instrumentally. Concrete empirical studies find that the EU did manage to foster some degree of compliance and convergence in the Eastern neighbourhood, but that this change is above all policy-specific and largely uncorrelated with membership prospects or the level

of interdependence with the EU (Langbein and Börzel 2015). More than geopolitical association with either the EU or Russia, domestic actors' preferences, calculations and decisions remain the key mediating factor accounting for sectorial reforms and policy change (Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk 2016). Furthermore, the sources of EU transformative power are multiple and not all Brussels-controlled (e.g. donor organisations, multinational corporations, national governments) and Russia, while having most often prevented the kind of domestic policy change advocated by the EU in the Eastern neighbourhood, has actually also facilitated it in some specific instances by pushing, out of considerations for its own agenda and benefits, local actors to adopt EU norms and standards (See: Ademmer 2016; Tolstrup 2014). All this speaks against the prevailing images of EU–Russia relations in the Eastern neighbourhood as a 'geopolitical clash between two blocks' or of the EaP as 'geopolitical instrument' in this battle (Cadier 2014).

### **The Geopoliticisation of the EaP in National and Pan-European Contexts**

Yet, both have become increasingly represented as such in European policy debates. The section below represents a first, and necessarily incomplete, attempt at undertaking a genealogy of this geopoliticising discourse. In order to be as representative as possible, it focuses on two different contexts (understood here both as setting and time period): national discussions in two EU member states around the launch of the EaP in May 2009 and pan-European debates before the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis in late 2013.

#### ***Geopolitical Argumentations on the EaP in EU Member States: The Cases of Poland and the Czech Republic***

I first look at domestic discourses in Poland and the Czech Republic, notably in the years before and around the launch of the EaP. Although the involvement and influence of the former has been most substantial in shaping the EaP, the empirical focus is actually placed on the latter, for three reasons. First, albeit not comparable to that of Warsaw, Prague's contribution has nonetheless been meaningful, and yet received little attention. The Czech Republic has, for instance, produced a non-paper on the Eastern dimension of the ENP in 2007 and it was in Prague, during its holding of the rotating Presidency of the EU Council, that the EaP was launched in May 2009 (Tulmets 2014, 205–8). Second, a clear variation in Czech Republic's policies towards the Eastern Neighbourhood can be identified: while the region was largely absent from its foreign policy radar until the mid-2000s, a new focus and activism is notable from that period onwards (Weiss 2011; Tulmets 2014; 167). This marked policy change allows to reflect on the factors that

prompted it as well as on the discursive practices of the actors who promoted this new preference. Third, contrary to Poland, the Czech Republic does not share any borders with the post-Soviet space (at least since Czech Republic's separation from Slovakia in 1993) and its historical relationship with Russia has been less recurrently and profoundly conflictual than in the case of Poland. In principle, the geostrategic imperatives being less pressing, one could hence expect Czech diplomats' default discourse on the EaP to be less geopolitically tainted than that of their Polish counterparts, and thus for geopoliticising moves to be more visible.

### **Poland**

Poland has undeniably been the main shaper behind the EaP initiative: its first proposal to develop EU policies towards the post-Soviet space dates back from 2003 (that is, even before its own accession to the EU or the creation of the ENP) and what came to be known as the 'Polish-Swedish proposal' of 2008 eventually constituted the backbone of the EaP ('Polish-Swedish Proposal on the Eastern Partnership' 2008). As such, Poland's self-understanding of this initiative, and its successful efforts in promoting it at the EU level, have been abundantly studied (see for instance: Copsey and Pomorska 2014; Kaminska 2014; Natorski 2007). Hence, they will only be briefly reflected upon here.

Geopolitical thinking has been central to Poland's investment in EU Eastern policies and common to both its political and foreign policy elites. The Eastern neighbourhood is, indeed, regarded in Warsaw as zone of vital importance for national security: a Ukraine free from Moscow's influence has long been considered a cardinal and necessary protection against the potential revival of Russia's imperialism (Natorski 2007, 80; Kuzniar 1993). The investment in the Eastern dimension of the ENP also proceeded, more generally, from a desire to have stable, peaceful and reformed states at its immediate border.<sup>12</sup> Combined, these two objectives have translated into Poland's support for the European integration of its two Eastern neighbours, Belarus and especially Ukraine, "sometimes more determinedly than the neighbors themselves" (Szczepanik 2011, 63). In this context, a Polish diplomat, who was heading the EU department at the Polish MFA at the time of the launch of the EaP, described the initiative's goal as being to "prepare these countries for [approximating] the *acquis communautaire*" and thus "help them to get ready" for accession.<sup>13</sup> Beyond policy objectives, the EaP was also articulated at times with markers of Poland's national identity: in a speech to the Polish Parliament in 2008, the then Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski presented it as a way to "fulfill the legacy" of the Jagiellonian era (cited in: Szczepanik 2011, 55; see also: Sikorski 2013), during which the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth administrated parts of contemporary Ukraine and Belarus.

In summary, the Polish discourse on the EaP was at least partially articulated around geopolitical metaphors: the initiative was occasionally framed by policy-makers and diplomats as a buffer against a feared resurgence of Russia's neo-imperialism, as a way to domesticate the space at Poland's borders and a mean to prepare countries of Eastern neighborhood for EU membership. Casting the light on these geopolitical storylines does not amount to claim that Poland's investment in the EaP was strictly and only engineered *against* Russia: it was also certainly conceived *for* the Eastern neighbourhood countries at its borders and *for* Poland itself. Warsaw was, indeed, pursuing to a great extent intra-European objectives, namely carving out for itself a niche of specialisation in EU structures and increasing thereby its agenda-setting capacity in Brussels. Nevertheless, the geopolitical framing by Polish officials of the proposed EaP initiative contributed to shape its meaning—to the extent that the proposal had to be adjusted so as to be 'sold' at the EU level and accepted by all member states. Nathaniel Copey and Pomorska (2014, 439–40) show indeed how, in an endeavour to de-politicise the initiative and infuse it with a dose constructive ambiguity, Poland deliberately toned down the rhetoric at the EU level and set, for the EaP, modest bureaucratic and administrative goals.

### *The Czech Republic*

Czech Republic's involvement and influence in shaping the EaP has been less substantial than Poland's. Nevertheless, it represents an even more instructive case for the approach specifically developed in this article.

As in Poland, intra-EU objectives explain, to a significant extent, Prague's investment in the EaP in the mid-2000s: it was regarded by Czech diplomacy as a pathway towards future Eastwards enlargement (one of its priorities at the time, see: Government of the Czech Republic 2006), as a way to cultivate a "market niche" at the EU level and as an ideal flagship policy for its Council Presidency (Kratochvíl and Horký 2010, 77). This change was, however, also more specifically impelled from within the Czech foreign policy elite by a distinct group, based on the agendas and worldviews of its members. This group reunited two main sociological profiles: the former dissidents, who were advocating a stronger Czech involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood based on their democratisation agenda (Cadier and Mikulova 2015, 84–87), and the 'Atlantists' (or 'hawks'),<sup>14</sup> who saw it as a way to contain Russia's regional influence. The latter group was especially dominant in Czech foreign policy structures in the second half of the 2000s as testified by its holding of key positions in the MFA and by a number of atlantist decisions taken in that period, but also by the fact the atlantist discourse had acquired quasi-hegemonic status.<sup>15</sup> This group can be characterised as a *discourse coalition* in the sense that its member's political subjectivity are articulated around a set of distinctive storylines, metaphors, and narratives - the concept is thus

used below to refer both to the group and to these discursive positions. Several of these storylines and metaphors are of a geopolitical texture and, as such, stood out in the Czech political discourse. As noted by Petr Drulák (2013, 98), who studied the discursive practices of this group with reference to another policy area, namely missile defense, but whose insights are equally valid for the case of the EaP, “the Atlantist foreign policy elite which came to power in 2006 had in general been more sensitive to the Russian threat than its predecessors and more open to geopolitical argumentation”.

The Atlantist discourse coalition played a decisive role in putting the Eastern Neighbourhood on the agenda of Czech foreign policy and in framing it in geopolitical terms. Its leading figure, Alexandr Vondra, who around that time held the positions of Minister of Foreign Affairs (2006–2007) and of Deputy Prime Minister for European Affairs (2007–2009), called on in 2006 to “reinforce the country’s diplomatic presence” in the Eastern neighbourhood, depicting the region as a “natural geographic priority” (Vondra 2006) even though, as mentioned, it had been absent from Prague’s radar until then. Mr Vondra and his collaborators were active in promoting this preference inside and outside the foreign policy system (Kratochvíl and Tulmets 2009, 81). As such, they articulated this policy around specific symbols and self-understandings that are central to the Czech political culture, thereby endowing the EaP with certain meanings and providing a script to refer to it. These articulations and script were apparent in the discursive practice of diplomats and policy-makers.<sup>16</sup> In the content analysis of speeches and interviews, three storylines were identified in particular.

First, the investment in the EaP was often presented as made necessary by Russia’s return to the canons of power politics in the post-Soviet space since the mid-2000s. In making this point, a diplomat invoked Czech Republic’s historical “sensitivity to signals that Russia is trying to re-create its geopolitical ambitions, if not imperial position”.<sup>17</sup> The image of the return evokes a continuity between the USSR and Russia as well as in the essential nature of their policies: the correlated securitisation and essentialisation of Russia is, indeed, one of the landmarks of the Czech atlanticist discourse (Cadier 2012). For instance, a former foreign minister argued in private that Russia’s long-term policy was to “re-establish the Soviet empire” while the Chief of Staff of another foreign minister asserted that “there is only one Russia”.<sup>18</sup> In this containment narrative, the theme of energy security was also often invoked: it is, at the same time, a domain where Russia policies have been heavily securitised in European debates (Ciută 2010, 130–31) and an argument set forth by Czech advocates of the EaP (Vondra 2008).

Second, the EaP was sometimes framed as a *rollback* policy of Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space. In the words of a diplomat, who directly contributed to the drafting of the aforementioned 2007 Non-paper and who explicitly presented himself as belonging to the atlantist group, the objective

of this initiative was to “disconnect” EU policies towards the Eastern neighbourhood from those pertaining to Russia, since colliding the two was amounting to “pushing [EaP countries] in the arms of Russia”. In this context, he described the EaP as an attempt to “change the situation of these countries” and explained Moscow’s negative reaction by the fact that this policy might lead the EU to “take EaP countries away from Russia, while they [Russia] still think that it’s theirs”.<sup>19</sup> More crucially, this representation of the EaP as a tool in a regional battle for influence also somehow transpired in some of the declarations of Karel Schwarzenberg, the Foreign Minister at the time. In February 2009, he warned Belarus that the recognition of (Russia-occupied) Abkhazia and South Ossetia would jeopardise its chances to be included in the EaP initiative to be launched three months later (Lobjakas 2009). Similarly, pointing to one of the Minister’s declaration on (non-aligned but undemocratic) Azerbaijan (Schwarzenberg 2008), Petr Kratochvíl and Ondřej Horký note some “highly ambiguous statements” on the Eastern neighbourhood on the part of Czech diplomacy, which they explain by the conflicting aim of erecting a “protective belt of countries between the Czech Republic and Russia” and of promoting democracy in the region (Kratochvíl and Horký 2010, 77).

Third, the investment in the EaP was represented as a pathway towards the European integration of post-Soviet states. The need to work towards this integration was not only articulated with the containment narrative presented above but also, more profoundly, with Czech Republic’s own geostrategic position and national identity. A mental map whereby the country is depicted as being on the “edge” of Europe and constantly risking to “fall” into an abyss was often mobilised in advocating further enlargement as well as the EaP.<sup>20</sup> This abyss was traditionally characterised as the ‘East’, which in the Czech political discourse refers less to a geographical space than to ontological categories defining the alienated past of the Czech Republic (i.e. communist, non-democratic and satellised to Russia)<sup>21</sup>—in other words to the meaning the notion had acquired in the ‘Return to Europe’ narrative. In this context, supporting the political and economic transformation as well as geopolitical emancipation of post-Soviet countries through the EaP was represented as a way to further ‘push back’ the East and thus consolidating Czech Republic’s ‘Return to Europe’ (Cadier 2012).

In summary, in the discourse of the Czech Atlantist coalition, the EaP was at least partially articulated as policy of *containment* of Russia’s geopolitical ambitions in Central Europe, of *rollback* of its influence in the Eastern neighbourhood, and of *preparation* of post-Soviet countries accession to the EU. As for Poland, pointing to these geopolitical storylines should not lead to oversimplify Prague’s position: the Czech Republic, too, was pursuing intra-EU objectives and its discourse on the EaP was also articulated with non-geopolitical markers, such as the country’s national role conception

(democracy promotion), historical identity (successful post-communist transition) or national identity (Western). In addition, it is important to take into account the specific context in which this geopoliticising discourse was uttered. On the one hand, it should be recalled that some of these EaP debates happened in the wake of the Russo-Georgian war of August 2008, an event that boosted politicians' and media attention towards the Eastern neighbourhood and often led them to apprehend the region first and foremost through the prism of Russia's foreign policy behaviour. On the other hand, the promoters of the EaP were pursuing an internal agenda of generating support for a new preference—namely a greater Czech involvement in the Eastern neighbourhood—and as such there is always a possibility that they might have been tempted to instrumentalise the Russia question to advocate this preference. The mere eventuality of advocacy motives does not invalidate the argument developed here, however, since the point is not to pretend to unveil Czech policy-makers' thinking on the EaP—let alone to dispute their interpretations of regional politics—but to stress that, regardless of intent, these articulatory practices contributed to shape the structure of meaning in which this policy was formulated and implemented.

Several intermediary conclusions can be drawn from the analysis—and comparison—of the Czech and Polish cases. First, instances of geopolitical framing of the EaP were unveiled in both national contexts, including in the period preceding the official launch of the EaP (i.e. before May 2009). Further comparative research on the situations in other EU member states would be welcome, but this finding is already significant in itself as the two countries played an important role in conceiving and promoting the EaP. In considering additional cases, it would notably be useful to investigate whether and to what extent there is a correlation between the geopolitical framing of the EaP and national positions on Russia. It would be interesting, for instance, to determine whether there has been a similar tendency to geopoliticise the EaP on the part of policy-makers from Western member states such as the UK or Sweden, who do not share Central European countries' geopolitical situation or Cold War history, but that have nevertheless adopted similar (i.e. critical) positions on Russia at the EU level.

Second, although enunciations of the geopolitical storyline on the EaP was denoted in both national contexts, the comparison between the Polish and Czech cases also revealed differences in how it emerged and was promoted, which calls for contextualised analysis of each Central European state's positions on the EaP and Russia, rather than lumping them together in a single, homogenous category.<sup>22</sup> In Poland, geopolitical reasoning around the EaP has been pervasive and featured at both the practical and formal levels—to the extent that it was difficult to link geopoliticising practices to a specific and distinct discourse coalition. In the Czech Republic by contrast, whose territory is less exposed from a geo-strategic point of view and where



geopolitics had in fact generally *not* featured prominently in political thinking (Drulák 2013, 2006), geopolitical argumentation featured mainly at the practical level and could be attributed to a distinctive discourse coalition. In this context, the concept of geopoliticisation revealed particularly useful to capture and integrate in the analysis the articulatory practices of this coalition as well as their implications in terms of meaning production.

### ***Pan-European and Transatlantic Debates on the EaP and on the Signing of an EU Association Agreement with Ukraine***

Instances of geopoliticisation of the EaP have not been confined to the Polish and Czech contexts—nor to the time period around the launch of the initiative—but appeared in broader and latter contexts. This second sub-section traces enunciations of the geopolitical story line in transatlantic and pan-European debates in the year preceding the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. It does not pretend to be able provide a comprehensive, systematic and definitive analysis of such a wide and diverse array of debates. Rather it focuses on two illustrative signposts, the ‘*Europe Whole and Free*’ metaphor and the ‘*Battle for Ukraine*’ narrative, which are denaturalised and contextualised. These two signposts have often been mobilised by the members of a broader, pan-European and transatlantic discourse coalition that encompasses, among others, the groups studied in the Czech and Polish contexts. This coalition is mainly composed of state representatives, policy-makers, think tank analysts and journalists who coalesce around certain political subjectivities and policy objectives, such as the normative attachment to strong security and political links with the US, the support to democracy promotion policies and a critical attitude towards Russia (On this group, see for instance: Mikulova and Simecka 2013; Schaller 2005). They share a number of discursive practices that have been articulated, maintained and reproduced on the occasion of public speeches, participation to policy conferences, op-eds or declaration to the press. As witnessed in the case of the Czech Republic, their discourse on the Eastern neighbourhood tends to be marked in particular by a correlated securitisation of Russia and geopoliticisation of the EaP.

The first signpost is the chain of association regularly established between the EaP and the ‘*Europe Whole and Free*’ metaphor. Coined by the US President George H. Bush in May 1989, this programmatic slogan was largely meant to counter Gorbachev’s ‘*Common Home*’ motto and embody Washington’s political vision for the European order (Hoagland 1989). More specifically, the phrase “rearticulated in positive terms a longstanding Cold War aspiration to roll back the Soviet Empire on the European continent” (Toal 2017, 5). Later on, under the Clinton Presidency, this leitmotiv was elevated as a parable for NATO’s enlargement, which was presented as creating the institutional architecture to realise this vision. John O’Loughlin (1999) points, for instance, to a 1997 report from the US State Department

where, in advocating NATO enlargement to the US Congress, the Department describes this enlargement as serving the “broader goal of a peaceful, undivided and democratic Europe”.

In 2013, American members from the aforementioned discourse coalition have been invoking the same motto in voicing their support to the EaP, which they presented as a natural continuation and incarnation of this historical dynamic, and Russia as a spoiler attempting to prevent its advent. For instance, in a hearing to the US Senate, the Executive Vice President of a Washington think tank influential on European affairs declared:

The EU’s Eastern Partnership initiative and future NATO enlargement do not necessarily overlap, but they can be mutually reinforcing just as NATO and EU enlargements have been in the post-Cold War period. Indeed, the Eastern Partnership is the latest instrument of a common transatlantic grand strategy [...] After 45 years of Cold War, we forged a bipartisan US policy to fulfill our original national aims of 1945. We nearly achieved our goal, with NATO and EU enlargement, the twin instruments of this strategy to secure a Europe whole, free, and at peace. [...] At the same time, the United States and the EU should anticipate and counter possible Russian efforts to derail these nations’ move toward Europe.<sup>23</sup>

This association between the EaP and the ‘Europe Whole and Free’ metaphor was stable enough to be invoked in similar terms by the US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs as well as by a Senior Democrat member of the Committee on Foreign Relations.<sup>24</sup> The invocation of slogans and symbols in an endeavor to generate support for policies is obviously quite common. It remains that the articulation of the EaP around a metaphor associated with US-URSS rivalry in Europe and NATO enlargement amount to connoting the policy geopolitically.

The second signpost relates to the framing, in the months preceding the Ukraine crisis, of the EU-Russia geo-economic competition in the shared neighbourhood as a geopolitical one. From Spring to Fall of 2013, tensions were mounting between Brussels and Moscow around the signing by Ukraine of an AA with the EU: after several years of negotiations, the Ukrainian President seemed suddenly ready to pull the plug on the process, out of domestic calculations and because of Russia’s pressure.<sup>25</sup> In this context, various commentators and notably members of the studied discourse coalition, characterised the situation as a geopolitical ‘battle’ for Ukraine in which the EaP was the EU’s ‘weapon’. For instance, in June of that year (i.e. before the imposition of trade restrictions by Moscow), the Lithuanian foreign minister, whose country was to hold the EU Council Presidency and host the EaP Summit in November, described it in the following terms:

This is a geopolitical battle for Europe, if I may, and we should win Ukraine. We can continue intellectual debates about human rights and things like that but we will find ourselves on the side of losers (cited in: Peach 2013).

Similarly, in a press article from early August, a journalist and columnist with substantial experience and visibility on matters related to Central and Eastern Europe characterised Ukraine's decision to sign an AA with the EU as being about "countering Russia's influence" and insisted that, as such, it "mattered to Europe" (The New York Times 2013). In that article, the Lithuanian foreign minister is also cited on its depiction of the EU Agreement with Ukraine: it is "not just technical negotiations with just another partner; it is a geopolitical process". In the following months, as Russia rhetorical and coercive pressure on Ukraine intensified and as EU–Russia tensions grew contingently, the mainstream European press often resorted to geopolitical metaphors borrowed from the lexicon of the Cold War to characterise the situation<sup>26</sup>: "bloc"; "win over Ukraine"; "geopolitics unfolding in real time"; "Yalta"; "drawing Ukraine away from Russia's sphere of influence"; "going west" (Chaffin 2013; The Economist 2013b, 2013c). Relying on comparable framing and making similar recommendations, some think tank analysts called on the EaP to take a "bolder strategic direction" in the "geopolitical contest with Russia" so as to avoid seeing countries of Eastern Europe becoming "puppets of the Kremlin" (Techau 2013). These three illustrative utterances of the 'battle for Ukraine' narrative are both representative of the variety in profiles of its enunciators (policy-makers, journalists and think tankers) and symptomatic as regard the period of their utterance (i.e. *before* the outbreak of the Maidan movement and Russia's military intervention).

Without amounting to a full fledged radiography of the pan-European and transatlantic debates on the EaP, the focused analysis of these two specific signposts shed light on the occurrence of geopoliticising practices in this arena as well. It also revealed a proximity, in terms of storylines mobilised and meaning conveyed, with what was observed in the primary empirical case study devoted to the Czech Republic and Poland. This could somehow be interpreted as the mark of an increased influence of Central European member states on EU policy debates on Russia, which has been documented elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> More profoundly though, what this rhetorical proximity actually reveals is that the geopoliticisation of the EaP cannot be summed up to an uploading, at the EU level, of Central European foreign policy elites' practical geopolitical reasoning: this geopoliticisation has been promoted and sustained by the discursive practices of a broader, transatlantic discourse coalition that relied on much more extensive resources in terms of knowledge production.

## Conclusion

The practical geopolitical reasoning around the EaP has been articulated, promoted and reproduced within the European polity by an identifiable

discourse coalition, as early as in the year of the launch of the initiative and the months preceding the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. The strength of this geopoliticising move—a notion set forth in this article to characterise the discursive construction of an issue as a geopolitical problem—has stemmed from its adherence to the ‘grammar’ of geopolitics (reproducing the dialect of the Cold War in particular), from the ‘social capital’ of its enunciators (state representatives up to the level of foreign ministers and commentators with significant policy and media visibility), and from the ‘feature of the threat’ (geopolitical texture of Russia’s own objectives and foreign policy behaviour). In addition to the impact of the Ukraine crisis and of Russia’s actions in that context, this geopoliticising discourse and its effects constitute a complementary explanation of the growing EU tendency to approach its Eastern neighbourhood through a geopolitical prism. At the very least, this pre-existing discourse enabled this tendency, endowing it with meaning as well as with a script and a certain degree of legitimacy.

Through the case of the EaP, this article complements previous studies on the broader political framing of EU-Russia relations. As noted by Tom Casier, this framing is increasingly characterised by “one-sided negative geopolitical reading obfuscating underlying complexity” and tends to produce, as such, “abstract enemy-like structures” (Casier 2016, 773). From a theoretical point of view, thanks to its emphasis on actors’ discursive practices and to its understanding of meaning as being relational, a discourse analysis lens, built around the notions of articulation, geopoliticisation and discourse coalition, allowed to shed light on how these structures emerge and are maintained and reproduced. The notion of geopoliticisation provided a conceptual link between discursive practices and policy implications while that of discourse coalition permitted to integrate actors in the analysis and explanation, without falling in the pitfalls of, either, generalising indiscriminately about a national or regional policy community (as is sometimes done about Central Europe) or of denouncing a ‘cabal’ of individuals (as conspiracy theories tend to do). More specifically, the concept of discourse coalition allowed both to distinguish discourse entrepreneurs within a national context—namely that of the Czech Republic—and to study their links or integration with actors beyond that context. From an empirical point of view, the case of the EaP showed a tendency on the part of European actors to geopoliticise not just Russia’s behaviour but also, to some extent, the EU’s own policies. As such, it permits to account, at least partially, for the notable discrepancy between the “defensive nature” of the ENP and the “wildly ambitious rhetoric” that accompanied its Eastern branch in particular (Haukkala 2016, 5).

The geopoliticisation of the EaP has implications for how this policy has been implemented and for regional politics more broadly. It is important, however, not to misrepresent these consequences or to over-inflate them to the extent of denying the impact of other factors or the

agency of other actors, as is sometimes done in the debates on the Ukraine crisis. In emphasising that patterns of discursive geopoliticisation of the EaP pre-date the outbreak of this conflict, this article has argued that this discourse cannot be interpreted simply as a reaction to Russia's coercive actions in Ukraine. What it has *not* argued, though, is that this discourse has, alone and in itself, *caused* the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. Indeed, this crisis cannot be summed up to a mere and mechanical externality of the EU-Russia geo-economic competition in the post-Soviet space or to its geopoliticisation in some European quarters, although this competition and this discourse certainly played a role of incubator. Counter-factual reasoning is useful to illustrate this point: if Yanukovich had signed the AA but remained in power Russia would probably not have annexed Crimea; if he had not signed the AA but the Maidan had not happen, the EU would have probably looked the other way. It was above all dynamics internal to Ukraine and Russia that led the crisis to escalate and take the dramatic proportions we know. The dysfunctional and corrupt nature of Ukraine's state structure led internal divisions and disagreement over the AA to escalate into a revolt and to the fall of the government. Prompted in great deal by this fall, Russia's military intervention was also itself driven by strategic objectives and domestic drivers unrelated to the EaP (Allison 2014; Cadier and Light 2015). Similarly, while it might have been partly influenced by it, it's hard to see why Russian policy-makers' perceptions and interpretations of the EaP would have been solely determined by the geopoliticising discourse presented in this article: they have also been exposed, indeed, to EU official communication as well as to other (i.e. non-geopolitical) discourses on the EaP while, in addition, idiosyncrasies specific to the Russian domestic context—such as the shift in Russia's ideational representation of the EU and the growing tendency to characterise the latter as an 'ontological other'(Makarychev and Yatsyk 2015; Neumann 2016)—might have played a role in shaping these perceptions.

It remains that the actual and specific consequences of the geopoliticisation of the EaP are nonetheless significant, yet often overlooked. First, it provided ample rhetorical ammunitions to Moscow's denunciation of the EU's alleged 'expansionism' and to its framing of the EaP as a 'sphere of influence' policy: some of the geopolitical utterances transcribed above have, in fact, been explicitly showcased by Russian officials (see for instance: Deutsche Welle 2009; Pop 2009). Second and most crucially, the geopoliticising discourse sent the wrong signal to local elites in the Eastern neighbourhood, about an EU determination to 'prevail' over Russia in 'winning over' these states (which was not confirmed when the conflict escalated militarily), but also more problematically about Brussels' willingness to lower or even set aside the EaP's

conditionality criteria and benchmarks for reform in order to do so. During the pivotal weeks of Fall 2013, this went beyond simply conveying an impression at the level of public discourse in fact, as proponents of the geopolitical storyline invoked it in EU decision-making deliberations: during a series of crucial meetings, “Poland and Lithuania persuaded other member states—most crucially Germany—to drop the conditions attached to the [Association] agreement [with Ukraine] as Russia’s success in enticing Yanukovich away from the EU became clear” (Youngs 2017, 118). In that context, the “main motivation for Lithuania [and, arguably, for Poland] was geopolitical: it saw 2013 as a crucial moment for preventing Ukraine’s fall into Russia’s sphere of influence” (Raik 2016, 247). Yet, abandoning the EaP’s conditionality criteria out of geopolitical thinking undermines EU policies in the region and deserves their long-term objective of promoting reforms, not least as it feed the partial reform equilibrium in these countries and allow local elites to use the EU-Russia contest to divert attention away from reforms (Cadier and Charap 2017). Tellingly, as early as April 2013, a prominent Ukrainian expert, asked about how the EU could help her country, called on Brussels to “agree a pause in the enlargement debate”, “deliver a clear message to Ukraine” and “stop with the unnecessary rhetoric about competition over Ukraine with Russia” (Shumylo-Tapiola 2013; see also: Kudelia 2013). Third, one can only wonder to what extent the essentialist script articulated by the geopoliticising discourse coalition fed into the EU’s relative blindness regarding both the evolution of Russia’s foreign policy and the strategic implications of the EaP. It is rather paradoxical indeed that while securitising Russia as a dangerous and immutable geopolitically-driven foe, this coalition did not anticipate or warned against Moscow’s potential geopolitical reaction to the EaP. Whether the EU has a strategic interest or moral imperative in confronting Russia geopolitically over the orientations of the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood is a political question to be settled by member states and their representatives. In any case, regardless of the ends actually agreed upon, framing as a geopolitical mean in that competition a policy (the EaP) that is not equipped for such use appears un-strategic. In sum, this article has thus provided a theoretical and empirical account of a pattern of geopolitical thinking that has the potential to somehow weaken, rather than strengthen, the EU’s strategic posture in its Eastern neighbourhood.

## Notes

- 1 As emphasised by Kuus (2015, 47, 36), “geopolitical argumentation [is a] politicised form of analysis crafted for specific reasons in specific places”. Hence, claims about the

world are to be “studied in terms of where they are produced and where they circulate”, which calls for “empirically detailed case studies”.

- 2 Most of the interviews cited have been conducted in Prague and Warsaw during two main periods: early 2009 and Spring 2013. More profoundly, the article draws on a more extensive, year-long empirical fieldwork conducted in Prague by the author in the year 2008–2009.
- 3 What is presented here is only a very brief account of a rich, dense and diverse literature. It places the emphasis in particular on what is often designated as the post-structuralist branch of discourse analysis. For a detailed overview of discourse analysis theories and methods, see for instance Carta and Morin (2014), Dunn and Neumann (2016), Jørgensen and Phillips (2002), and Milliken (1999).
- 4 The Cold War can, indeed, be understood as a configuration defined by a “particular discursive structure [where] the East–West relationship is constructed as one of hostility and clash of political, economic and social orders” (Risse 2011, 599).
- 5 As defined by Frank Fisher (2003, 87), storylines “function to condense large amounts of factual information inter- mixed with the normative assumptions and value orientations that assign meaning to them”.
- 6 Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, 194) distinguish practical geopolitical reasoning (that of practitioners, statespersons, politicians) from formal geopolitical reasoning (that of strategic thinkers and public intellectuals). While the latter tend to have “highly formalized rules of statement”, the former relies on “narratives and binary distinctions found in societal mythologies”.
- 7 This minimalist definition is close to Deudney’s (1997) ‘realist’ definition (“power competition between major states in peripheral areas”) and to what Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992, 191) designate as the ‘classic’ definition (“actions taken against other powers, such as invasions, battles and the deployment of military force”).
- 8 Kazharski and Makarychev (2015, 334) note for instance that, by integrating Romania and Bulgaria in 2007, the EU became a geopolitical actor in the Black Sea.
- 9 As noted by Hiski Haukkala (2016), rather than an aspirational power projection endeavor, the ENP amounts to an “essentially defensive policy meant to stave off demands, expectations and obligations both from new members and prospective neighbours”.
- 10 In Susan Strange’s (1994, 24–25) classic definition, structural power refers to the “power to shape and determine the structures of the political economy within which other states, their political institutions and their economic enterprises” have to operate. (Strange 1994, 24–25)
- 11 To be sure, the coming into being of the EaP was not totally disjointed from geopolitical events, as it is in the official resolution adopted in reaction to the Russo-Georgian conflict of August 2008 that the European Council asked the Commission to accelerate the set up of this policy (European Council 2008). Yet, this should be less read as a retaliatory move or strategic response to the conflict than as the outcome of intra-European bargaining: the member states advocating the imposition of sanctions against Russia after the conflict accepted to lift their demand in exchange for the acceleration of the EaP initiative.
- 12 Comparing to Germany’s rational in supporting the 2004 EU enlargement, a Polish diplomat, who is said to have been one of the co-author of the 2006 internal MFA document that latter constituted the basis of the Polish-Swedish proposal, emphasised that it was in “Poland’s interest to have civilized states at its borders”. Interview at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Warsaw, May 2013.
- 13 Interview with a Polish diplomat, London, April 2013.

- 14 The label Atlantists is used here as it is the one favoured by Czech analysts (see for instance Drulák 2013) as well as by practitioners claiming their belonging to this group (interviews conducted by the author).
- 15 On this group and its members, their discourse and their influence, see: (Cadier 2012).
- 16 As noted by Drulák (2013, 96–97), the Atlantists’ geopolitical rhetoric was indeed mainly observable in private conversations and off-record discussions with policy makers, but rarely present in public discourse. It featured, in other words, at the level of practical rather than formal geopolitical reasoning.
- 17 Interview at the Security Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, June 2009.
- 18 Interview with a former Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic, Prague, February 2011; Interview at the Minister’s Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, May 2013.
- 19 Interview with a diplomat, Embassy of the Czech Republic to the United States, May 2010.
- 20 Interview at the South-Eastern Europe Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, July 2009.
- 21 Thus, by projecting Czech Republic’s own image onto post-Soviet countries, advocates of the EaP invoked a historical responsibility and moral imperative for Prague to support their transition as well as European integration. (Tulmets 2014)
- 22 For detailed and comparative case studies on other Central and Eastern European EU member states, see Kuus (2007), Raik (2016), and Tulmets (2014). Kirsti Raik (2016, 247) explains for instance that “the Baltic support to European-oriented reforms in the Eastern neighbourhood merged value-oriented and geopolitical motivations” and that this “geopolitical motive to support Eastern neighbors represents continuity in the old existential security problem”.
- 23 “A US Strategy for Europe’s East: Testimony by Damon M. Wilson”, Hearing on *A Pivotal Moment for the Eastern Partnership: Outlook for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan*, US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Subcommittee on European Affairs), 14th November 2013. Available at: [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wilson\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Wilson_Testimony.pdf)
- 24 Testimony by Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland, Hearing on *A Pivotal Moment for the Eastern Partnership: Outlook for Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan*, US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations (Subcommittee on European Affairs), 14th November 2013. Available at: [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nuland\\_Testimony\\_REVISED.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nuland_Testimony_REVISED.pdf) ; Eliot Engel, “United States Must Stand Firm Against Russian Bullying in Europe”, Oped on the Eastern Partnership, available at: <https://democrats-foreignaffairs.house.gov/news/press-releases/engel-op-ed-eastern-partnership>
- 25 To pressure the government in Kyiv, Moscow notably instigated a custom blockade at the Russo-Ukrainian border in August (The Economist 2013a)
- 26 The invocation of Cold War imagery obviously served the purpose of attracting the attention of Western audiences in spite of their lack of acquaintance with the region and of the technical complexity of the EU’s Association Agreements.
- 27 Merje Kuus (2015) cites, for instance, two European policy professionals—one from a (formerly) ‘new’ and one from an ‘old’ member state—who concur in noting that the



member states from Central and Eastern Europe have “strongly influenced” the EU’s position and discourse on Russia, notably towards greater “geopolitical argumentation”.

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