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THE EUROPEAN UNION: FROM A NORMATIVE POWER TO A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR

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THE EUROPEAN UNION: FROM A NORMATIVE POWER TO A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR [1]

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Abstract

The European Union's growing emphasis on defense, economic security and strategic autonomy has revived a central question: could a political project built around rules and cooperation operate effectively in an environment shaped by coercion and military force? This paper argues that the EU's geopolitical turn is best understood as an effort to give its normative commitments stronger material and political foundations. Examining support for Ukraine, defense cooperation, economic security and enlargement, it identifies a significant expansion of instruments alongside persistent weaknesses in collective decision-making, implementation, and external credibility. The central challenge is to connect European objectives with resources, delivery and public legitimacy. A sustainable geopolitical role requires more predictable support for Ukraine, coordinated capability development, selective reductions in strategic dependencies, and credible accession conditionality. It also requires consistent application of international law and partnerships that recognize other societies' interests. For Romania, this agenda creates opportunities to connect Black Sea security, the Republic of Moldova's European integration, and regional infrastructure with wider EU priorities. The Union's effectiveness will depend on its ability to combine strategic resolve with the legal and political commitments that distinguish its international role.

Keywords: European Union, normative power, geopolitical actorness, strategic autonomy, economic security.

[1] This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union faces a demanding strategic task: protecting a political and economic order whose underlying conditions it can no longer take for granted. Military aggression, economic coercion, and competition over critical technologies have brought questions of security into policy areas previously approached primarily through integration and market openness. Decisions about energy infrastructure, industrial investment and access to supply chains now carry implications for Europe's freedom of action.

This changing environment has encouraged a more explicit geopolitical vocabulary. Yet describing the EU as a geopolitical actor raises a practical question: what can the Union collectively decide, finance and deliver when its interests are challenged? Diplomatic declarations matter, but their significance ultimately depends on the instruments and political commitment behind them.

The familiar distinction between a normative Europe and a geopolitical Europe captures part of this change, while obscuring important continuities. The EU's international influence has long rested on a combination of legal commitments, economic incentives and political choices. Enlargement, trade agreements and regulatory standards have always affected the distribution of opportunities and influence beyond the Union's borders. The present transformation concerns the purposes for which these instruments are used, their relationship with military capabilities and the willingness to accept costs in defense of collective objectives.

This paper advances three arguments. First, normative commitments remain central to the EU's international role, but their credibility increasingly depends on the capacity to defend them. Second, geopolitical effectiveness requires coordination across policies and institutions that operate under different decision-making rules. Third, the pursuit of greater strategic autonomy will remain politically sustainable only if it preserves democratic accountability, economic openness and reliable partnerships.

For the purposes of this analysis, geopolitical actorness means the capacity to establish shared priorities, mobilize appropriate instruments and sustain collective action under external pressure. It does not require the EU to acquire all the attributes of a state. It does require the

Union to demonstrate that its collective resources can produce outcomes that individual member states would struggle to achieve alone.

The analysis examines selected developments in security and defense, economic security and enlargement. Official strategies establish intentions and institutional commitments; they do not, by themselves, demonstrate successful implementation. The recommendations therefore focus on the gap between the instruments Europe has created and the results it needs to deliver.

NORMATIVE POWER AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

The concept of normative power offers a useful starting point. In its original formulation, it draws attention to the EU's capacity to shape understandings of legitimate international behavior through its identity, institutions, and promotion of norms. This perspective broadens the assessment of power beyond military capabilities and material inducements. It also invites scrutiny of the principles guiding European action, rather than assuming that every policy adopted by the EU is inherently legitimate (Manners, 2002).

These normative commitments have an institutional basis. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union identifies democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for international law among the principles guiding the Union's external action. A stronger geopolitical role must therefore operate within a legal framework that links European interests to obligations regarding how those interests are pursued (European Union, 2016).

Economic power provides a second foundation. The scale of the single market, the EU's regulatory capacity, and the interests organized around that market help explain why European rules can influence actors beyond its territory. This perspective highlights the material and institutional conditions through which the Union externalizes its standards (Damro, 2012).

The relationship between these foundations is politically significant. Access to a large market can encourage regulatory alignment, while membership prospects can support domestic reform. Such influence nevertheless involves unequal bargaining positions. Governments and societies outside the EU may accept European requirements because they value the benefits attached to them, without sharing every assumption underlying the European project. Effective policy must account for that distinction.

The geopolitical turn should consequently be understood as a reorganization and extension of existing forms of influence. The Union is placing greater emphasis on protecting the conditions that allow its legal, economic and political model to function. Security of supply, industrial capacity and territorial security become part of that effort. This approach also clarifies the relationship between values and force. Supporting a country resisting aggression can serve both strategic interests and international legal principles. Conversely, an ostensibly civilian instrument can undermine European credibility if applied arbitrarily or without regard for its effects on vulnerable populations. The relevant assessment concerns the policy's purpose, legality, proportionality, and consequences.

The EU's comparative advantage lies in combining these dimensions. Its legal commitments can make cooperation more predictable; its economic resources can support implementation; and stronger security capabilities can help protect the space in which cooperation remains possible.

WHY THE GEOPOLITICAL TURN ACCELERATED

Europe's strategic adjustment predates Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The 2016 Global Strategy already linked European security to resilience, strategic autonomy, and a more realistic assessment of the international environment. Its concept of "principled pragmatism" sought to bring the Union's values and interests into a common framework (European External Action Service, 2016). The political ambition became more explicit in 2019, when Ursula von der Leyen presented her incoming executive as a "geopolitical Commission". This formulation signaled an intention to give the Commission's economic and regulatory responsibilities a more deliberate external orientation (European Commission, 2019).

Three pressures have made that adjustment more urgent. First, Russia's war against Ukraine has connected the defense of international legal principles with immediate questions of European security. The informal meeting of EU heads of state and government at Versailles on 10-11 March 2022, two weeks after the full-scale invasion, gave this connection a concrete political agenda. Leaders identified three mutually reinforcing priorities: strengthening defense capabilities, reducing energy dependencies, and building a more resilient economic base. They committed to substantially increasing defense expenditure, encouraging joint procurement,

strengthening the European defense industry, and accelerating military mobility. They also requested an assessment of defense investment gaps by mid-May. On energy, they agreed to phase out dependence on Russian gas, oil, and coal as soon as possible and requested a REPowerEU plan by the end of May. The declaration also addressed vulnerabilities in critical raw materials, semiconductors, health, digital technologies, and food. Versailles therefore brought military preparedness and economic resilience into the same discussion about Europe's capacity to protect its citizens and exercise political choice (European Council, 2022).

The subsequent REPowerEU plan, presented on 18 May 2022, illustrates how this agenda translated into policy proposals. It combined energy savings, supply diversification, accelerated deployment of renewable energy, and infrastructure investment. Reducing dependence on Russia thus became a security objective pursued partly through instruments already associated with the EU's economic and climate policies (European Commission, 2022). For the argument developed here, this connection is particularly significant: the geopolitical turn changed how existing European policy instruments were understood and coordinated, as well as generating demands for additional military capabilities.

The Strategic Compass emerged from a longer process of reassessing European security. Its preparation drew on the first comprehensive EU threat analysis, presented in November 2020 and informed by member states' intelligence services. The underlying motivation was to translate the ambitions of the 2016 Global Strategy into clearer priorities, practical objectives, and implementation deadlines, while developing a more coherent European strategic culture. The Council's May 2021 conclusions already envisaged adoption in March 2022 (Council of the European Union, 2021). A first draft was presented in November 2021; subsequent revisions incorporated Russia's invasion and the deterioration of the security environment. The war therefore sharpened the document's priorities and political urgency within an initiative already underway (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

Adopted by the Council on 21 March 2022, the Compass established an action plan for EU security and defense through 2030. Its four pillars – Act, Secure, Invest, and Partner – connected crisis response, protection against emerging threats, capability development, and international cooperation. Its commitments included the capacity to deploy 200 fully equipped civilian mission experts within 30 days, stronger responses to hybrid threats and foreign information manipulation, and closer cooperation with international partners. These measures

addressed a broader security environment in which military threats coexist with cyberattacks, coercion, and challenges to democratic resilience (Council of the European Union, 2022b).

The Compass also set a 2025 deadline for an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity of up to 5,000 troops, supported by regular live exercises beginning in 2023. These were implementation commitments adopted in 2022, the operational value of which would depend on subsequent delivery. They gave the geopolitical ambition a more concrete test: whether member states could provide the personnel, equipment, readiness, and political agreement required for collective action (Council of the European Union, 2022c).

At the same time, the Compass explicitly reaffirmed the UN Charter, sovereignty, territorial integrity, human rights, and a rules-based international order. It situated stronger European capabilities within cooperation with partners and recognized NATO as the foundation of collective defense for its members (Council of the European Union, 2022c). Read in this light, the document connects the EU's normative and geopolitical dimensions: its principles define the purposes of external action, while stronger capabilities are intended to make the defense of those purposes more credible. The policy challenge is to sustain that connection when protecting those principles requires expenditure, collective decisions, and acceptance of strategic risk.

Second, economic interdependence has become a source of both strategic vulnerability and prosperity. Networks are often organized around a limited number of central nodes. Actors exercising jurisdiction over these nodes may be able to gather information or restrict access, turning economic relationships into instruments of coercion (Farrell & Newman, 2019). This risk was already visible before the invasion. On 27 January 2022, the EU initiated WTO proceedings against China over trade restrictions affecting Lithuania and products from other member states with Lithuanian inputs, while pursuing diplomatic de-escalation (European External Action Service, 2022). The case illustrates how pressure on one member state can spread through the single market.

Third, the transatlantic relationship increasingly requires a more substantial contribution from Europe. At The Hague on 25 June 2025, NATO allies reaffirmed collective defense and committed to annual defense and security-related expenditure of 5% of GDP by 2035: at least 3.5% for core defense and up to 1.5% for areas including infrastructure and resilience, with a review in 2029 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2025). For the EU, this creates a demanding coordination problem: how to strengthen European capabilities while

ensuring that national and European initiatives contribute to a coherent allied posture. These pressures reinforce one another. Defense production depends on technology, energy and finance. Economic resilience depends on secure infrastructure and reliable partners. Diplomatic influence depends partly on the ability to sustain commitments when doing so becomes expensive.

The resulting policy challenge extends across the whole Union. A geopolitical approach must connect external objectives with internal economic and institutional decisions. Without that connection, strategic language risks advancing more quickly than Europe's capacity to act.

WHERE THE TRANSFORMATION IS MOST VISIBLE

Ukraine, defense cooperation and the challenge of delivery

Support for Ukraine clearly illustrates the EU's changing role. Established in 2021, the European Peace Facility (EPF) provides a mechanism for financing military and defense-related action outside the EU's general budget. Member states finance it through contributions calculated according to their gross national income. Its remit includes both the common costs of EU military missions and operations and assistance to partner countries. This institutional arrangement gave the Union a collective financing instrument that could be mobilized when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (European External Action Service, 2025).

On 28 February 2022, the Council adopted two EPF assistance measures totaling €500 million for equipment and supplies to the Ukrainian armed forces, including lethal equipment. This was the first time the EU had decided to finance lethal military equipment for a third country. The stated objectives were to strengthen Ukraine's ability to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and protect its civilian population (Council of the European Union, 2022a). The decision gave the EU's condemnation of aggression a material dimension: collective European resources would help sustain the military capacity of the state whose rights had been violated.

The mechanism subsequently evolved toward more sustained support. On 18 March 2024, the Council increased the EPF's financial ceiling by €5 billion and reserved this additional funding for a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund within the facility. The new fund covered lethal and non-lethal equipment and training, while placing greater emphasis on joint

procurement from European and Norwegian defense industries. The Council also envisaged limiting reimbursement of member states' donations after a transition period, encouraging a shift toward more coordinated procurement (Council of the European Union, 2024a). This connected Ukraine's immediate requirements with the longer-term task of organizing European supply.

Implementation nevertheless remained dependent on further political decisions. On 28 May 2024, High Representative Josep Borrell reported that seven legal acts required to mobilize approximately €6.6 billion were still awaiting approval, despite the availability of resources (Borrell, 2024). This episode illustrates why financial commitments, reimbursement decisions, and equipment deliveries must be assessed separately. The EPF expanded the Union's capacity to support a partner at war, while exposing the dependence of that support on sustained agreement among member states.

The facility also retains explicit normative conditions. Assistance is subject to safeguards regarding human rights, international humanitarian law, and the risk of equipment diversion, with provisions for suspension or termination in the event of breaches of commitments (European External Action Service, 2025). Its credibility therefore depends on both timely military support and effective oversight of how that support is used.

The strategic significance extends beyond the financing mechanism. Support for Ukraine links the principle that borders cannot be changed by force with the practical requirements of resistance: equipment, training, production capacity and sustained political backing. The EU Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) provides a measurable example: on 8 November 2024, the Council reported that the mission had trained 63,000 Ukrainian soldiers on EU territory and extended its mandate until 15 November 2026, allocating nearly €409 million for the extension (Council of the European Union, 2024d). Training already delivered and funding for future activity represent different stages of that commitment.

Defense industrial policy represents a further development. On 15 March 2024, the Commission announced €500 million under the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) and selected 31 projects to expand manufacturing capacity (European Commission, 2024). Adopted in May 2025, the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument provides for up to €150 billion in loans to participating member states, principally to support common procurement and strengthen European defense production. These are repayable loans to

member states, and their strategic value depends on how they translate into capabilities (Council of the European Union, 2025d). By June 2026, the European Council was still calling for faster production, delivery of priority equipment, and implementation of available instruments, including SAFE. It also emphasized coordination between capability requirements and industrial development (European Council, 2026b). These conclusions indicate that implementation remains central to the agenda.

The policy implication is straightforward: funding is an input, while usable capability is an outcome. Governments must move from broad spending commitments to compatible requirements, production contracts, trained personnel, maintenance arrangements and delivery schedules. Procurement decisions taken separately can leave Europe with expensive equipment that is difficult to operate or sustain collectively.

There is also a tension between immediate needs and industrial development. Equipment available quickly from an external supplier may address an urgent gap, while investment in European production may improve supply security over the long term. A credible approach must manage both time horizons. Delaying urgent deliveries can carry strategic costs; neglecting industrial capacity can reproduce dependence.

Ukraine also underscores the importance of linking sanctions to a broader strategy. The 18th sanctions package, adopted on 18 July 2025, added 105 vessels to port-access and maritime-services restrictions, bringing the listed total to 444 at that date (Council of the European Union, 2025e). Targeting the shadow fleet connects financial pressure with shipping enforcement. The number of listings, however, does not measure the reduction in Russian revenue; effectiveness depends on enforcement and cooperation with partners. The June 2026 European Council conclusions explicitly identified implementation and circumvention as continuing concerns (European Council, 2026b).

Economic security and the strategic use of market power

The economic security agenda shows how the geopolitical turn reaches into the Union's established areas of competence. The 2023 European Economic Security Strategy links competitiveness, protection against economic risks and partnerships. It recognizes the need to manage vulnerabilities while preserving the benefits of an open economy (European

Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2023).

This framework changes the questions policymakers ask. A supply chain may be commercially efficient while creating exposure to political pressure. A technology partnership may support innovation while raising concerns about access to sensitive knowledge. An infrastructure investment may generate economic benefits while concentrating control over an essential service. The appropriate response requires discrimination between different types of risk. Dependence becomes strategically significant when disruption would cause serious harm, substitutes are difficult to obtain, and the supplier has the ability or incentive to exploit the relationship. Broad restrictions applied without these distinctions can raise costs and reduce the resources available for security.

Energy policy illustrates the connection between vulnerability and adjustment. The REPowerEU Plan brought together energy savings, diversification, and accelerated clean energy development to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels (European Commission, 2022). The Commission's 2026 stocktake reports that Russian gas fell from 45% of EU gas imports in 2021 to 12% in 2025, while volumes declined from 152 to 36 billion cubic meters (European Commission, 2026a). This documents substantial diversification, although the remaining imports show that dependence had not disappeared. The figures reflect the combined adjustments of public policy, suppliers, and consumers, rather than the isolated effect of a single EU instrument.

The Anti-Coercion Instrument adds a defensive dimension to European market power. Its legal framework provides for responding to economic pressure intended to influence sovereign choices, with Union response measures available as a last resort. It also requires action to remain consistent with international law (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2023). Possessing such an instrument creates an option; it does not establish that deterrence has succeeded. Credibility depends on whether other actors expect the EU to reach decisions, sustain internal solidarity and absorb the consequences of using its powers.

Economic security also has a distributional dimension. The costs of diversification, restrictions or retaliation may fall unevenly across countries and sectors. A collective approach therefore needs mechanisms to identify concentrated losses and support necessary adjustment. Otherwise, external pressure can exploit internal economic differences. The long-term objective should be a European economy capable of maintaining essential functions and

political choice during disruption. That requires a stronger internal market, a broader network of reliable suppliers and focused protection where risks justify it.

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova: Enlargement as Geopolitical Action

The accession negotiations with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova illustrate how the European Union can pursue geopolitical objectives through its established instruments of integration. The formal opening of negotiations with both countries on 25 June 2024 connected their membership aspirations with the EU's response to a deteriorating regional security environment. These decisions established a framework for closer integration while retaining the obligations associated with accession (Council of the European Union, 2024b, 2024c).

High-level diplomacy has helped connect the accession perspective of Ukraine and Moldova with the EU's immediate security priorities. At the EU-Ukraine summit in Kyiv on 3 February 2023, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met European Council President Charles Michel and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. This was the first such summit since Russia's full-scale invasion and Ukraine's acquisition of candidate status. Discussions brought together accession reforms, military assistance, reconstruction and accountability for Russian aggression. Leaders supported the establishment of an International Center for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression in The Hague, while reaffirming that further accession steps depended on Ukraine fulfilling the Commission's conditions. The meeting illustrated how strategic solidarity could coexist with reform requirements and the defense of international law (European Council, 2023a).

Multilateral and trilateral meetings also placed both countries within a wider European security discussion. On 1 June 2023, the Republic of Moldova hosted the second European Political Community meeting at Bulboaca, bringing together leaders from 45 countries, including Ukraine, as well as the presidents of the European Council, Commission, and Parliament. Discussions addressed peace, security, energy resilience and connectivity. Although the European Political Community is a broader forum separate from the EU's accession machinery, hosting the meeting gave the Republic of Moldova a prominent role in continental political coordination (European Council, 2023b). A more focused encounter followed in Kyiv on 21 November 2023, when Michel met Zelenskyy and President Maia Sandu. Their discussions linked Ukraine's defense, the Republic of Moldova's institutional and

energy resilience, and the forthcoming European Council deliberations on opening accession negotiations. Michel explicitly combined support for both countries' membership ambitions with the requirement for continued rule-of-law reforms (Michel, 2023).

A concrete security outcome followed in Brussels on 27 June 2024, when Zelenskyy, Michel and von der Leyen signed the EU-Ukraine joint security commitments on the margins of the European Council. The document brought military equipment, training, defense-industrial cooperation and wider financial and diplomatic support into a common framework. It also provided for consultations within 24 hours, at either side's request, in the event of future aggression. Ukraine's accompanying commitments included defense reform, civilian oversight and greater transparency in the use of assistance. This combination demonstrates how the EU's growing security role remains linked to the institutional standards that underpin accession (European Council, 2024b).

EU-Moldova summit diplomacy similarly connected political reassurance with practical integration. At their first bilateral summit, held in Chișinău on 4 July 2025, Sandu, European Council President António Costa and von der Leyen welcomed the disbursement of €270 million in pre-financing under the Reform and Growth Facility. They also addressed judicial reform, energy independence and protection against hybrid interference (European Council, 2025). Their second summit, in Brussels on 22 June 2026, followed the opening of the fundamentals negotiating cluster and reaffirmed a merit-based accession process. Leaders reviewed practical integration through payments, roaming and transport connectivity, alongside implementation of the Security and Defense Partnership (European Council, 2026c). These meetings suggest that summit diplomacy can sustain political attention and connect reforms, economic integration, and security assistance within an ongoing strategic relationship.

In Ukraine's case, the geopolitical significance lies in connecting support for a country resisting Russian aggression with a longer-term institutional commitment. The accession perspective recognizes Ukraine's agency in choosing its political future and creates a framework through which reconstruction, reform and economic integration can reinforce one another. The €50 billion Ukraine Facility for 2024-2027, politically agreed on 1 February 2024, provided a financial basis for this approach, with €33 billion in loans and €17 billion in grants. Funding was linked to a Ukrainian reform and investment plan, as well as to respect for democratic mechanisms, the rule of law, and human rights (European Council, 2024a). The envelope is a multi-year commitment, not a measure of money already disbursed. Accession

negotiations themselves provide neither membership nor an immediate military security guarantee.

Moldova demonstrates a related dimension of geopolitical action: strengthening a state's capacity to withstand external pressure. The EU Partnership Mission in the Republic of Moldova (EUPM Moldova), established at the authorities' request on 24 April 2023 and launched on 22 May, provides civilian support under the Common Security and Defense Policy. Its mandate focuses on crisis management, cybersecurity, and resilience against hybrid threats, including foreign information manipulation and interference (Council of the European Union, 2023). The mission advises on strategies and institutional arrangements, identifies training and equipment needs, and implements targeted projects. In May 2025, the Council extended its mandate until 31 May 2027, allocated more than €19.8 million for the additional period, and strengthened its strategic advisory role (Council of the European Union, 2025c). Its relevance to enlargement lies in helping Moldovan institutions manage threats that could disrupt public administration, democratic processes, and the implementation of reforms. Through EUPM, the EU gives its commitment to Moldova's resilience a sustained civilian presence and an institutional support mechanism.

The EU-Moldova Security and Defense Partnership, signed on 21 May 2024, provides a broader framework for organizing this cooperation. It establishes an annual Security and Defense Dialogue and oversight through the Association Council, connecting political consultations with practical work on hybrid threats, cybersecurity, defense capabilities, and participation in EU missions and operations. Its provisions identify specific institutional priorities: EUPM support for Moldova's National Cyber Security Agency, assistance with implementing the 2023 cybersecurity law, and support for operationalizing the Center for Strategic Communication and Combating Disinformation. The partnership also links cooperation under the EPF with the modernization and interoperability of Moldova's armed forces. These commitments are explicitly grounded in democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and respect for the UN Charter (European Union & Republic of Moldova, 2024). For this analysis, its importance lies in bringing several instruments into a framework subject to regular review. It connects the protection of Moldova's European choice with the development of institutions and capabilities capable of sustaining that choice.

Assistance through the European Peace Facility gives this security cooperation a concrete material dimension. EU support for the Moldovan Armed Forces began in 2021 and

has included medical, engineering, protective, and air-surveillance equipment. During a visit on 11-12 June 2024, representatives of the EPF Committee witnessed the reception of newly delivered ambulances and medical tents. The Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments also reported deliveries of demining suits, engineering equipment, and protective equipment. These examples demonstrate how European assistance can strengthen practical capabilities, including those needed to protect civilians and respond to emergencies (Service for Foreign Policy Instruments, 2024).

The scope of assistance subsequently expanded. In April 2025, two additional measures totaling €60 million brought cumulative EPF support for Moldova to €197 million. A €40 million measure adopted on 7 April covered light tactical mobility vehicles and command-and-control equipment for integrating short-range air-defense systems. A further €20 million measure financed short-range air-defense launchers and missiles. The Council linked this support to greater operational effectiveness, interoperability, protection of critical civilian infrastructure, and Moldova's capacity to participate in EU military missions and operations. It also explicitly presented the assistance as consistent with Moldova's neutrality (Council of the European Union, 2025b).

On 13 July 2026, the Council approved another €120 million assistance measure to finance a medium-range air-defense system, bringing total EPF support allocated to Moldova to €317 million. This complemented earlier measures for air surveillance and air defense (Council of the European Union, 2026c). The cumulative figure represents approved assistance; it does not establish that all equipment had already been delivered or become operational. Its eventual effectiveness depends on procurement, training, maintenance, and integration into Moldova's defense structures.

For the enlargement policy, the significance lies in strengthening the security conditions under which the Republic of Moldova can pursue its European choice. Better surveillance, mobility, and air defense can help protect the institutions, infrastructure, and population on which a sustained reform process depends. This creates a practical connection between geopolitical resilience and normative integration: the EU supports a candidate country's capacity to withstand external pressure while the accession process continues to require institutional reform. EPF assistance therefore complements the membership perspective through capabilities that address vulnerabilities before accession. Its contribution should be

assessed through both operational results and its ability to reinforce Moldova's capacity to pursue decisions made through its own democratic institutions.

The interaction between geopolitical objectives and normative requirements is particularly visible in the negotiating process. On 15 June 2026, the EU opened the fundamentals cluster with both countries. This cluster covers core areas including the rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration and economic criteria. Progress remains subject to benchmarks, and developments under the fundamentals cluster determine the overall pace of negotiations (Council of the European Union, 2026a, 2026b).

The opening of Cluster 6 – External Relations – with both Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova on 14 July 2026 added a further geopolitical dimension to accession negotiations. At separate intergovernmental conferences in Brussels, held under the Irish presidency of the Council, negotiations opened on Chapter 30, External Relations, and Chapter 31, Foreign, Security and Defense Policy. Coming one month after the opening of the fundamentals cluster, these decisions brought the candidates' international economic relations and foreign policy commitments into the formal negotiating process (Council of the European Union, 2026d, 2026e).

Chapter 30 concerns preparation for participation in the EU's common commercial policy, including alignment with its international trade commitments and policies toward third countries. It also covers development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. Its significance therefore extends beyond access to the European market: candidates must prepare to operate within a shared framework governing economic relations with the wider world (European Commission, n.d.). For Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, this adds an external dimension to economic integration. For the EU, the prospective enlargement of that common framework can strengthen the coherence of its commercial relationships and international negotiating position. These benefits depend on the candidates' ability to implement the relevant commitments and sustain administrative cooperation.

Chapter 31 addresses alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy and participation in its security and defense activities. It encompasses political dialogue, alignment with EU declarations and positions, participation in common action, and implementation of sanctions and restrictive measures (European Commission, n.d.). Moldova provides a measurable example of the convergence preceding the negotiations: at the July 2026 conference, its government reported that alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and

Security Policy had increased from 54% in 2022 to more than 90% in 2025 (Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2026). Such an indicator documents closer alignment of policy positions; assessing implementation also requires examining institutional capacity and enforcement.

For the argument advanced here, Cluster 6 demonstrates how enlargement can translate geopolitical orientation into specific policy commitments. Ukraine and Moldova are progressively preparing to contribute to the Union's external action, alongside receiving European support. Trade alignment can make economic relationships more coherent, while foreign policy alignment can strengthen diplomatic coordination and the implementation of common decisions. The opening of negotiations creates a framework for assessing that convergence. Its strategic value will depend on whether commitments become durable administrative and political practice, supported by the institutional reforms pursued under the fundamentals cluster.

For EU policymakers, the challenge is to maintain momentum while preserving the credibility of accession requirements. Moldova's Reform and Growth Facility provides a concrete mechanism for linking European support to reform performance. Approved by the Council on 18 March 2025, it provides approximately €1.9 billion for 2025-2027, comprising up to €385 million in grants and €1.5 billion in highly concessional loans. Regular payments are linked to the achievement of reforms specified in the agreed Reform Agenda. Their release follows requests from the Moldovan government and the Commission's verification that the relevant conditions have been fulfilled. The arrangement therefore gives the authorities a financial incentive to implement agreed reforms, with progress assessed through a recurring verification process (Council of the European Union, 2025a).

Gradual integration also makes some benefits available before full membership. On 1 January 2026, Moldova joined the EU's "roam like at home" area, allowing Moldovan users traveling in the EU, as well as EU users traveling in Moldova, to make calls, send messages, and use mobile data without additional roaming charges under the applicable rules (Council of the European Union, n.d.). This gives citizens and businesses a directly observable benefit of closer integration. It can make the accession process more tangible during a period when full membership remains contingent on further reforms and negotiations.

These arrangements illuminate the distinction between active and passive leverage. Active leverage concerns the EU's deliberate use of conditionality to encourage reform;

passive leverage derives from the attraction of membership and the benefits of inclusion relative to the costs of remaining outside (Vachudova, 2005). The Reform and Growth Facility is a clear application of active leverage. Roaming integration is also a deliberate policy intervention, and its everyday benefits can reinforce the attraction that underlies passive leverage. Whether such benefits increase public support for accession remains an empirical question; their availability alone does not demonstrate that political effect.

Together, conditional financing and gradual access to European benefits can connect reform obligations with visible improvements before accession. Their geopolitical value lies in making the Republic of Moldova's European orientation more credible and materially consequential. This approach requires predictable rewards for verified progress and a credible route to full membership, alongside EU preparation for the budgetary and institutional consequences of enlargement.

The European Council meeting of 15-16 October 2026 further illustrates the tension between the geopolitical purpose of enlargement and the conditions governing its delivery. Leaders welcomed the opening of negotiating clusters 2 and 3 with Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova on 13 October, but established no accelerated timetable for accession. Instead, they reaffirmed that each candidate advances according to its individual progress and that both the candidates and the Union must be ready for membership (European Council, 2026d, paras. 31, 33, 68–69). For this analysis, the significance lies in the gap between recognizing enlargement's strategic importance and making its outcome predictable. Geopolitical urgency can sustain political attention and accelerate intermediate steps, but it does not automatically produce agreement on when membership should follow. Maintaining reform requirements protects the credibility of the EU's normative commitments. Yet prolonged uncertainty can weaken the accession perspective as an instrument of geopolitical influence, particularly when candidate countries face sustained external pressure. The policy challenge is therefore to combine rigorous conditionality with credible sequencing and tangible intermediate benefits, so that the absence of a guaranteed accession date does not become an indefinite strategic waiting room.

Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova therefore illustrate a central argument of this paper: geopolitical effectiveness can develop through the strategic use of normative instruments. Enlargement gives the Union a means of shaping its neighborhood through negotiated integration and institutional reform. The strength of that approach depends on the

EU's ability to make the membership perspective credible while ensuring that the reforms underpinning it are durable.

THE CONSTRAINTS ON EUROPEAN GEOPOLITICAL EFFECTIVENESS

The expansion of instruments has not removed the political and institutional constraints on collective action. Four are particularly consequential.

The first is the difficulty of sustaining agreement. Member states bring different security concerns, economic exposures and political mandates to common decisions. Article 31 of the Treaty on European Union establishes unanimity as the general rule for decisions under the relevant Common Foreign and Security Policy provisions, alongside specified exceptions and the possibility of constructive abstention (European Union, 2016). These arrangements place a premium on advance coordination and durable compromise. The Ukraine Facility agreement of 1 February 2024 included an annual European Council debate based on a Commission report and the possibility of inviting a review proposal after two years (European Council, 2024a). Such arrangements illustrate how continued political oversight can support consent for a multi-year commitment. Unity requires political maintenance.

The second constraint is the distance between commitments and implementation. Common objectives must pass through national budgets, administrative procedures, industrial decisions, and operational planning. ASAP illustrates the distinction: selecting projects for funding does not establish how much ammunition has been manufactured, purchased and delivered to end users. Assessment should follow the entire chain from political commitment to delivery, including the ability to use and maintain the resulting capability.

The third concerns the meaning of strategic autonomy. Autonomy should be assessed in relation to specific tasks: securing an essential supply, sustaining an operation or resisting coercion. Complete self-sufficiency across all sectors would be financially demanding and could narrow Europe's partnerships. A practical approach identifies where European control is essential and where diversified cooperation offers greater resilience. For defense, this requires clarity about the relationship with NATO and about the different security arrangements of EU member states. European cooperation should improve the capabilities available for collective defense and other agreed missions, while respecting those institutional differences.

The fourth constraint is external credibility. The EU's commitment to international law creates expectations concerning consistency. Its March 2026 conclusions on Gaza reiterated obligations regarding humanitarian access, civilian protection, and international law (European Council, 2026a). The policy challenge is to ensure that declared principles shape decisions and diplomatic practice across different relationships.

Consistency does not require identical measures in every conflict. Circumstances, responsibilities and available instruments differ. It does require clear explanations for those differences and a willingness to scrutinize the conduct of both partners and adversaries. External credibility also depends on how cooperation is designed. Partners have their own development priorities, domestic constraints and views of international order. European influence is more likely to endure when agreements deliver identifiable benefits and allow meaningful participation in setting priorities.

POLICY PRIORITIES: MAKING EUROPEAN POWER MORE EFFECTIVE

The next phase should concentrate on connecting existing commitments with delivery. Six priorities would give this effort a practical focus.

Establish a limited set of collective objectives with clear responsibility for implementation. The European Council should identify a manageable group of priorities for which collective European action is indispensable. The High Representative, the Commission, and relevant Council formations should translate these into responsibilities, resources, and review dates. A concise annual assessment should distinguish among measures adopted, resources committed, and results delivered, and report SAFE procurement contracts separately from equipment deliveries and operational availability. Sensitive operational details may require protection, but public reporting should make clear whether important commitments are progressing. This would help parliaments assess performance and reduce the incentive to treat new announcements as evidence of success.

Make support for Ukraine predictable and connect it with European capability development. Participating member states and EU institutions should coordinate financing, procurement and production planning over several years. Predictability can help manufacturers invest, support workforce development and reduce the disruption created by repeated emergency decisions. Evaluation should connect EUMAM training with the equipment units

receive, while tracking delivery times, availability and sustainment. Where European industrial cooperation serves both Ukrainian needs and European preparedness, programs should make that connection explicit. Decisions should also preserve the distinction between support already provided and resources that remain subject to future implementation.

Use available decision-making flexibility while building broader political consent. Constructive abstention deserves consideration where it can allow agreed action to proceed within the treaties. Member states should also examine carefully defined uses of qualified majority voting permitted by Article 31. Any extension under its third paragraph requires a unanimous decision of the European Council, and its provisions on qualified majority voting do not apply to decisions with military or defense implications (European Union, 2016). Procedural change should be accompanied by earlier consultation and explicit discussion of unequal costs. Faster voting cannot compensate for persistent disagreement about objectives or implementation.

Make economic security selective, reviewable and compatible with competitiveness. The Commission and member states should use a common approach to identifying critical dependencies. Assessments should consider the likelihood of disruption, the importance of the affected activity, available substitutes and the time needed to adjust. Restrictions and support measures should have stated objectives and review points. Wherever possible, policy should favor diversification, innovation and stronger European capacity. This would reduce the risk of permanent protection for inefficient activities under a broad security justification. Costs should be assessed across the single market. Measures that strengthen one national industry while fragmenting European production can weaken the collective response.

Connect enlargement progress with benefits while preparing the Union to absorb new members. The Commission and Council should make the relationship between reform achievements and intermediate benefits more transparent. about the Republic of Moldova's Reform Agenda and the Ukraine Plan provide existing frameworks for specifying what progress unlocks and what failures may delay. Support should strengthen the institutions responsible for implementation, including public administration, judicial systems, and financial oversight. Member states should conduct parallel work on the budgetary and institutional implications of accession. This would make geopolitical commitment more credible for both candidates and existing members.

Treat legal consistency and democratic scrutiny as conditions of effective action. Major external initiatives should include clear legal reasoning, an assessment of foreseeable consequences and appropriate parliamentary oversight. When interests and values create difficult trade-offs, those choices should be explained. Partnerships should identify benefits for the societies involved, including skills, infrastructure and economic opportunities. This can strengthen the durability of cooperation and reduce the perception that European engagement is driven solely by immediate security needs. Together, these priorities would support a more capable Union while maintaining the political consent and institutional discipline necessary to sustain its role.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ROMANIA AND THE BLACK SEA REGION

The EU's 2025 strategic approach to the Black Sea links regional security and resilience with connectivity, sustainable growth and environmental protection. It offers a framework through which regional initiatives can contribute to broader European objectives (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025).

For Romania, the EU's geopolitical turn creates an opportunity to connect national priorities with projects of wider European value. The Black Sea provides a particularly relevant setting because security, trade, energy, and infrastructure intersect there. Therefore, Romania should concentrate its contribution in three areas.

First, **it should develop proposals that connect transport infrastructure, military mobility, and regional economic resilience**. The Solidarity Lanes demonstrate the value of alternative routes: from their launch in May 2022 through May 2026, they enabled approximately 223 million tonnes of Ukrainian exports and 106 million tonnes of imports across the network (European Commission, 2026b). These are network-wide totals, not Romanian throughput. Romania should use this experience to prioritize border, rail and inland-waterway bottlenecks and dependable links with Black Sea ports.

Second, **Romania should combine political support for the Republic of Moldova's European integration with practical assistance for implementation**. On 24 June 2025, the Republic of Moldova's government announced the reallocation of €30.8 million under an EIB financing agreement to the 400 kV Bălți–Suceava line and domestic transmission works

(Government of the Republic of Moldova, 2025). This is a financing decision, not evidence of an operational interconnection. Coordinating construction and electricity-market reforms would make integration more tangible while strengthening Moldova's own implementation capacity.

Third, **Romania should build coalitions around Black Sea priorities with partners inside and outside the region**. The Mine Countermeasures Black Sea Task Group, established by Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye, became operational on 1 July 2024. By 8 July 2026 it had completed ten activations, and the three governments expanded its remit to protecting critical undersea infrastructure (Ministry of National Defence of Romania, 2026). This is trilateral cooperation rather than an EU operation; it nevertheless offers practical experience relevant to the EU's regional security objectives.

Success would require coordination among diplomacy, defense, transport, energy and economic policy. Romania's influence will depend partly on its ability to bring forward credible projects and sustain their implementation. That contribution would reinforce both national security and the Union's capacity to act collectively.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Union's geopolitical transformation is substantial but incomplete. Its growing involvement in defense, economic security, and the strategic management of enlargement demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the resources required to protect European interests. The decisive issue is whether these instruments can be combined into sustained and effective action.

Normative commitments remain part of that task. They provide legal obligations, political direction and grounds for cooperation with partners. Their credibility, however, depends on implementation and on the willingness to apply principles when doing so carries costs. The next phase should place greater emphasis on delivery: capabilities available when required, essential functions protected against disruption, accession commitments supported by reform, and partnerships sustained through mutual benefit. Democratic accountability and consistency in the application of international law are necessary to maintain support for that effort.

The EU's most promising international role is one in which strategic capability strengthens the protection of its principles. Achieving it will require member states and institutions to connect ambition with resources, share burdens more effectively and demonstrate that collective European action can produce dependable results.

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