

Reconfiguring dynamics of bordering/debordering in EU-Eastern neighbours' relations: The EU as locus of resistance

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Maria Raquel Freire

University of Coimbra, Portugal

Abstract

EU relations with its eastern neighbours have been pursued with the goal of building a ‘ring of friends’ contributing towards security and stability-building, through reforms’ implementation and the development of closer relations. This transformative agenda met, however, some criticism and resistance from Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. Russia’s full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 changed profoundly the setting for these relations, including the accession requests coming from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, along with the cut off of relations with Russia and Belarus. The implied debordering and rebordering dynamics taking place show the complexity of material and symbolic bordering practices. Through a critical border studies approach, this paper seeks to unpack these bordering dynamics and how they are reconfiguring the European space, arguing the EU has become locus of resistance for countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia assuring their European identity.

Keywords

European Union, Eastern partnership, security, resistance

Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 constituted a major turning point in European security and politics, straining relations between the EU and Russia, sounding alarms in some post-Soviet states, and bringing back to a full extent the ‘other-as-enemy’ loaded narrative. European Union (EU) relations with its eastern neighbours have been framed within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), and regarding the Eastern dimension more precisely within the Eastern Partnership (EaP) since 2009. The overall goal the EU put forward with this framework was

Corresponding author:

Maria Raquel Freire, International Relations, University of Coimbra Faculty of Economics, Av Dias da Silva 165, Coimbra 3004-512, Portugal.

Email: rfeire@fe.uc.pt

to build a ‘ring of friends’ contributing towards security and stability-building, through reforms’ implementation and the development of closer relations in several areas. The closer the partners would be to the EU ‘ways-of-doing’, through democratisation, economic reforms, legal adaptation, trade, among other, the smoother relations would develop and stability at the EU eastern borders could be pursued. This transformative agenda met, however, some criticism and resistance from Eastern Partnership countries.¹ Issues of conditionality, ‘imposition’ and no membership offer were on the agenda. The wider Europe was changing, and the EU tried to adapt to changes, with bordering practices expressing the contradictory dynamics along the way. The EaP seemed to bring de-bordering processes, while at the same time the policies and procedures implied carried rebordering elements, in both material and symbolic ways. Critical border studies bring in the relevance of looking at bordering practices, with reflex at the local, national and international levels. Besides the traditional look at territorial borders and sovereignty, symbolic borders “can be thought of as an expression of collective identities based on the distinction between ‘self’ and ‘other’” (Sendhardt, 2013: 32), manifesting in constructive or conflictive social interaction. Othering dynamics have played here a fundamental role. The EU enlargement process redraw its map, bringing its external border further East and implying a new configuration of the political, social and economic space by including several new different countries. However, despite the idea that no new walls should be built and no new divides should be created, some EaP countries understood the offer on the table as insufficient, falling short of membership. The discussions about being inside or outside the EU pointed to exclusion feelings and imagined as well as real borders.

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, changed profoundly the setting for EU relations with its Eastern neighbours, including the formal requests for EU membership submitted by Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, with candidate status granted to the first two in June 2022, and to the latter in December 2023. Along with the cut off of relations with Russia and Belarus, the implied debordering and rebordering dynamics demonstrate the complexity of material and symbolic bordering practices taking place in the eastern neighbourhood of the EU. Through a critical border studies approach, this paper seeks to unpack these bordering dynamics and how they are reconfiguring the European space, arguing the EU has become locus of resistance for countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, assuring their European identity. This approach allows to better grasp the power dynamics and their transformative potential in EU-Russia-neighbourhood relations. How do bordering dynamics reflect changes in material and symbolic political options? To what extent do they ingrain power dynamics, and their potential reinterpretation? What do bordering processes mean and imply for the (re)configurations of the European political and security space? The positioning and voice of the neighbouring countries with regard to the EU became stronger, particularly since Russia’s invasion. Their agency has been affirmed in their clear goals and policies, determined to join the EU, understanding this as the return to Europe, where these countries traditionally belong. As analysed, the arguments are not totally synchronised, but the central idea is – the EU constitutes a locus of resistance in face of the Russian aggressor. To put forward this argument, the paper engages with the literature on critical border studies identifying the processes that are activated in these relations and with narrative analysis, bringing in the voices of these different actors and how these have been reframing bordering dynamics and the power understandings there implied.

The paper starts by engaging with the literature on border studies, and how dynamics of bordering have become central to understanding contradictory processes of fluidity and rigidification of borders. Symbolic borders anchored on identity and social relations, for example, are an important dimension of critically looking at the border. Next, the paper looks at EU-Eastern neighbours’ relations, how these have been evolving, focusing then particularly on Ukraine,

Moldova and Georgia to show how narratives have been shifting to a more engaging ‘return to Europe’ approach that functions as a resistance framework, where the everyday of these states and populations might be emancipated from threats of domination and from violence.

Bordering and the EU’s Eastern neighbours: Unpacking the concept

The literature converges in that globalization and the end of the Cold War contributed to a re-vamping of border studies. On the one hand, by promoting higher interconnections and interdependence, globalization was pushing for debordering trends, making fluxes easier, and transforming state boundaries in virtual lines (Kolossoff, 2005: 612). Some even talked about “borderlessness” (Kolossoff and Scott, 2013: 4) or a “borderless world” (Ohmae, 1994). On the other hand, the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the break-up of Yugoslavia and the separation of Czechoslovakia profoundly redesigned the European map, with several new states emerging, along with new territorial borders. The violent conflicts that erupted in some post-Soviet area countries and in the former-Yugoslavia brought back sovereignty and territorial control as primary concerns. Nation-building added to the imaginary of territorial control, for purposes of sovereign and identitarian self-identification, translating this idea of unity inside and difference towards the outside (Anderson, 1983). This seemed to push for a contrary trend, that of rebordering. This new map seemed, nevertheless, to offer new opportunities for the removal of other borders and barriers, such as those that were ideological. The fall of the Berlin Wall was, in this context, a symbolic moment of the breaking down of borders. This debordering moment bringing together the two Germanys and allowing the reunification of families, along with the reestablishment of sovereignty shows the multidimensional character that bordering practices might have, along with the cooperative practices that might be enhanced with it. However, other borders bring other implications. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the reinvention of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are example of the perpetuation of a symbolic border from Cold War times that materialized in territorial-militarised practices, particularly with NATO’s enlargement. If the permanence of NATO was highlighted as not constituting a threat or directed against Russia, the perception of insecurity and Russian readings of the Alliance’s persistent aggressive behaviour contradicted it. Borders are “historically contingent processes” (Paasi, 2011: 21), highlighting the relevance of context, and showing how the readings of the border are multiple – the borders’ “polysemy” (Balibar, 2002: 135) –, ranging from territorialized to symbolic approaches.

Recent border studies agree on the impact of these transformations by the end of the 1980s, early 1990s, with a shift from more traditional and fixed approaches to borders based on delimitation, sovereignty and territoriality, to a more complex reading of borders, in their meaning, types and functions (Sendhardt, 2013: 25; Kolossoff and Scott, 2013: 1; Brambilla, 2015; Van Houtum, 2005; Cooper, 2015). Moreover, understanding borders as socially constructed and therefore in permanent mutation, following social practices and discourses, and changing from border as the “what” to border as the “how” – bordering –, brought a dynamic approach to their study (Sendhardt, 2013: 25; Newman 2003: 15; Parker and Vaughan-Williams, 2012: 729). This means there was a move “from lines on the map to discursive practices of b/ordering” (Jacobs and Van Assche, 2014: 183). Bordering involves the activities leading to the constitution, sustaining or modification of borders (Parker and Adler-Nissen, 2012: 729). It is a process rather than an immutable physical barrier, thus it relates to the “everyday construction of borders” that takes place, for example, through discourse from politics, media, school textbooks, literature and the like (Kolossoff and Scott, 2013: 3). This closely relates to identity-building (Kolossoff, 2005: 614), as it implies the effects of bordering in

people's everyday lives. This can reflect practices of control, and/or practices of open cross-border. It also involves distinct actors, rendering bordering practices more complex.

Debordering and rebordering are, thus, fundamental concepts. According to [Sendhardt \(2013: 29\)](#) “debordering refers to the transgression of territorial borders, for example by functional systems (such as ‘the economy’) or symbolic systems (such as cross-border identities)”, implying less state control and social bordering processes. Rebordering processes imply a different dynamic where we can see, for example, “a tightening of (new) borders, an increase in border controls and the re-territorialization of space ([Albert/Brock, 2000: 39-40](#); [Rumford, 2006: 157](#))” ([Sendhardt, 2013: 29](#)). However, these processes are not static in themselves, as it is possible to find rebordering and debordering processes, such as in the case of the EU, where there is a clear tendency for further protecting its external border, with the case of migrants and refugees coming from the south and from countries such as Afghanistan, being a clear illustration. Differently, refugees from the war in Ukraine, part of the eastern dimension of the EU neighbourhood policy, found a more open and flexible EU external border. Von der Leyen stated “Europe stands by those in need of protection. All those fleeing Putin’s bombs are welcome in Europe. We will provide protection to those seeking shelter and we will help those looking for a safe way home” ([Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, 2022](#)).

Processes of cooperation within the ENP are also visible throughout the south and east of the EU, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine, pointing to contradictory movements taking place. In fact, within the ENP there is this double movement of promoting facilitated border-crossing between the EU and EaP countries, whereas the urge to reinforce controls at the external EU borders keeps very clear. The performative role of borders is thus key to understanding these different dynamics taking place. “Borders not only have a different meaning for different actors but are a manifestation of power relations in society at different scales [[Brunet-Jailly \(2005: 643\)](#) refers to the ‘agent power’]. In particular, they reflect the normative power of international organizations, including the EU and the power asymmetry between states in different fields” ([Kolossoff and Scott, 2013: 13](#)). This means the way the ‘other’ is interpreted varies.

Othering is a complex process that differs in time and space and is politicised, potentially creating new barriers or borders. The ones that are ‘in’ and the ones that stay ‘out’ translate well the exclusiveness of othering dynamics. They show “how borders and the processes of bordering and ordering bring together different spheres of socio-political and economic life, and are often vigorously mobilised to convert and redefine the main categories of social life, such as identity, belonging and citizenship” ([Paasi, 2020: 20](#)). However, the process itself is not linear as depending on the issue-areas or social groups, for example, ‘otherness’ might assume different connotations, with bordering practices also reflecting these nuances. In the process of ‘othering’ the definition of the ‘self’ and of the ‘other’ is not just in opposition/differentiation, but also looking at past ‘selves’, with inner dimensions ([Neumann and Welsh, 1991: 330](#); [Adler-Nissen, 2016: 33](#), [Prozorov, 2011: 1273-1274](#)) being also an important component of the process. Regarding the EU, looking at Europe’s violent past, there is a construction process of the ‘self’ that seeks differentiation from this previous history. As [Neumann and Welsh \(1991: 347\)](#) argue, “the problems which dominate Europe’s relationship with the Other are not confined to the realm of external relations, but are, as always before, intricately linked up with the question of what it is to be European, and which cultural requirements are necessary to attain that status”. The words of the President of Georgia [Salomé Zourabichvili \(2023b\)](#), addressing the European Parliament, are quite relevant in this regard, underlining the European choice and how the reforms needed towards EU membership are themselves part of Georgian culture and values, part of its identity, and not “some foreign ideas imposed to us – as was Soviet ideology”. The ‘other’ should not be read as simply inferior,

subordinated, dominated or stigmatised, as this ‘other’ holds agency and might enact resistance (Adler-Nissen, 2016, 36). This dynamics of resistance from some of the Eastern Partnership countries, show on the one hand how Russia became the driver for rebordering processes with strong political, security and economic dimensions, along with historical, social and identitarian embedded aspects. It also shows how the EU became the locus for resistance, with membership representing security and stability against the aggressive other – Russia.

In this way, the countries in the Eastern neighbourhood of the EU should not simply be viewed as dependent entities subservient to the EU. This would be not only a homogenous reading of these different actors, as it would disempower them in their needs, goals and ambitions. Interactions show that countries such as Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have proceeded closely to the EU in adopting reforms and internalising norms, but other examples show resistance to EU norms and practices, such as in the cases of Azerbaijan or Belarus, in different ways, still. This heterogeneity and actorness need to be accounted for. The use of the term ‘neighbours’, seems to point to difference, but it also indicates homogeneity, nevertheless the relations established between the six partner countries and the EU are quite different. “Although not by any means a strictly derogative term, neighbour does connote a certain externality; it designates a relationship of proximity, but manifestly not one of cohabitation” (Kølvraa, 2017: 13).

The normative dimension of the border “implies a consideration that borders involve struggles that consist of multiple strategies of resistance against hegemonic discourses and control practices through which they are exercised (what we can call counter-hegemonic borderscapes)” (Brambilla, 2015: 20). The coexistence of these competing dynamics is not unusual given the many diverse functions of the border, as more flexible and open to certain fluxes than other, for example. Acts of resistance have been a clear manifestation of positionality towards bordering, such as what Hess (2017: 87) calls “borderland resistance” illustrated for example by the ‘March of Hope’ of thousands of refugees on the highway from Budapest to the Austrian border on September 4 and 5, 2015. This was described as a strong demonstration of the “power of the powerless”, with the Hungarian government changing its policy on that night to allow these people to reach out to Austria and Germany (Murray, 2015). This kind of dynamics can also take place at state level, such as with the ‘march towards the EU’ by countries such as Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, that applied for EU membership, with the latter two having been granted candidate status in the summer 2022, and Georgia later in December 2023.

It is relevant in this context to take notice of how agency is somehow curtailed by the way the EU players convey the message to their own audiences. As Kølvraa (2017: 20) asserts, “the ventriloquising of the Other’s voice is a pervasive feature of ENP rhetoric and points to the way in which the neighbours’ desire for Europe is constantly imagined and recounted by EU officials speaking to a domestic audience”. The narrative of EU attractiveness feeds to a great extent this EU approach. This is an important point to take, as processes of recognition, identification and belonging are part of the EU inner strengthening, but we should also give space to the neighbours’ voices and concrete ambitions, as well as the way they interpret and formulate the EU’s ‘imposition’ patterns in this process of getting closer to the EU. The EaP also offers a discourse on identity and inclusion that might empower the neighbourhood and reach out to EU domestic audiences in a positive reasoning about the furthering of relations with these countries.

Juxtaposing rebordering and debordering processes in EU-Eastern neighbours’ relations

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), established at the time when the 2004 enlargement to ten new member states was in full swing, aimed at providing a framework for cooperation between

the EU and its neighbours to the south and east. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was created, following the same objectives, but singling out the six eastern partner countries in one single programme (EEAS, 2022). The goals defined are clear and in line with the major foreign policy lines of the EU: creating an area of stability and prosperity at the EU borders, contributing to enhance security, promote fundamental values, and designing a ‘ring of friends’ (European Commission, 2003: 4) around the EU external border, allowing to bring these states closer to the ‘EU ways of doing’. Mimicking dynamics were very much at the core of the ENP and also of the EaP. Then president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, referred to ‘everything but institutions’ (Prodi, 2002), in the sense that ample cooperation was foreseen in various sectors of activity, from politics, trade and economics to culture, but membership in the EU was not on offer. It also signalled for the former Commission president that the EU presented itself as a model to be followed for the promotion of global stability (Prodi, 2004a, 2004b; Dimitrova, 2012: 256). This policy was presented not as a second best to enlargement, but as a parallel process of informal integration, since the EU acknowledged it was not capable of enlarging indefinitely, especially in the wake of an enlargement process that brought ten new member states to the Union. The ENP might, thus, be seen as “a response to enlargement fatigue (Smith, 2005; Wallace, 2003), as an alternative to EU membership, particularly for the countries with European aspirations” (Dimitrova, 2012: 250).

Europeanization dynamics would, therefore, allow the neighbours to become closer to the EU through the adoption of the *acquis communautaire*. This sustains the idea of the EU’s power of attraction, but neglects the powerful incentive that membership implies to those countries willing to join. It should also be underlined that the EU avoids any criticisms of neo-colonialism or imperialism, and thus its attraction is an essential part of the narrative to assure no asymmetrical and dependency arguments are moved forward. It also means the status of candidate and ‘partner neighbour’ are very different in their substance. An approach that revealed problematic was the “one size fits all” based on an economic-oriented approach that with large sums of support and the negotiation of trade agreements, conditioned to the internalisation of EU norms and values, would “transform the neighbours into clients prepared to do the EU’s bidding” (Howorth, 2017: 126). Also, there was “no collective strategic approach” (Keukeleire, 2015 cited in Howorth, 2017: 126). This has been criticised as creating strong asymmetries between the EU and its neighbours which contradicts the underlining principles of partnership and cooperation stated, leaving for the EU the role of “ordering policies” in areas where it has clear interests, promoting relations of dependence from these partners (Dimitrova, 2012: 253). Moreover, the belief in its power of attraction led the EU to dismiss the competing challenge Russia was presenting when in 2010 it advanced with the establishment of the then Eurasian Customs Union, replicating somehow EU procedures and assuring the incompatibility of joining the Eurasian Customs Union with signing a DCFTA with the EU. The ‘Euro-centrism’ of this approach became clear when the partners did not all opt for the EU (Howorth, 2017: 127), such as Ukraine back in 2013, at the time of the Vilnius Summit where it was expected to sign a DCFTA with the EU.

Different interpretations have been made about the how and what of the Neighbourhood Policy with extension to the EaP. The ‘how’ questions led to criticisms about EU neoliberal practices being ‘imposed’ on the neighbourhood partners, described as hegemonic or neo-imperialist (Behr and Stivachtis, 2015) or furthering other strategic interests, such as “protecting Europe from ‘hard’ threats” (Bialasiewicz, 2012: 79). The securitarian approach to the external border of the EU became clear in discourse. “Proximity entails that most of the instability, conflict, state failure, repression and violence that besiege these regions could have negative spill-over effects into the Union. Hence, it is in the EU’s interests to contribute to their democratic, rule-bound and peaceful transformations” (Tocci, 2005: 22). This meant these countries to some extent “found themselves not only

geographically marginalised, but normatively evaluated as potentially dangerous spaces” (Kølvraa, 2017: 14). The ‘what’ questions focused on the fundamental issues inscribed in the agreements and the adjustments these implied in terms of reforms, when the end-goal of membership was not on offer. A limited budget accompanying these criticisms put the ENP on the spotlight as eventually being short of complying with partners’ expectations.

This became a key issue, as it was the drive for membership that indeed contributed to the success of the enlargement process. Those countries aspiring at being members made substantial efforts at implementing reforms and complying with the 1993 Copenhagen Criteria, a long road ahead for any of the candidate countries, with the end goal of joining the EU: “stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union” (Haughton, 2007). When this end goal is not on offer, the drivers are clearly different, and the incentives for reforms’ implementation are much more limited. This meant the EaP countries were “in a continuous state of ambivalent liminality” (Kølvraa, 2017: 11). Also relevant is the acknowledgement that not all EaP countries were ever interested in joining the EU or even in deepening cooperation beyond mostly economic and commercial deals. The cases of Azerbaijan and Belarus might be illustrative here.

This ‘ring of friends’ aimed at avoiding new dividing lines in Europe, pointed to debordering dynamics with no repetition, for example, of the Berlin Wall physical demarcation or the Cold War ideological divide. Whatever the narrative, this move by the EU represented a new drawing of political spaces, with “the Mediterranean” (Bialasiewicz, 2012: 83) or the “Eastern Neighbourhood” labels coming to define these ‘regions’ allowing the socialisation of EU principles and values with the goal of promoting a stable and prosperous vicinity. The Partnership and Cooperation Agreements to be negotiated with these countries were the first tool in the establishment of pragmatic cooperation envisaging the creation of an enlarged space for interaction, embodying this ‘regional’ labelling. According to the EU, the legally binding documents promoted through the Neighbourhood Policy envisaged to support democracy and economic development, and set out the partner country’s agenda for political and economic reforms, with short and medium-term priorities, thus working towards more flexible borders (EEAS, 2021). These initial agreements were followed by the Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) that sought to deepen the level of integration of the partner countries with the EU, as a way of rewarding those that implemented more reforms towards rapprochement with the EU, under the principle of differentiation and progress (‘more for more’). The baseline was the principle of reciprocity, where practices would be co-owned and there would be co-responsibility for agreed measures and their implementation as defined in the Action Plans. A terminology that was much criticised for example in the south Caucasus, where the blueprint to be followed and the conditionality implied, seemed to reduce the room for manoeuvring in terms of the agreements’ final wording, leading to implementation difficulties and a mismatch between expectations and results (Delcour and Hoffmann, 2018; Freire and Simão, 2014). Once more, this means conflicting bordering practices, with more flexibility to those that reform, while still maintaining procedures and conditions that restrain further integration.

The feeling of belonging or not belonging, was what mostly differentiated these countries in terms of the perception of inclusion/exclusion. Technically, border management was part of the Action Plans negotiated with the EaP countries, including measures related to the training and qualification of border guards, to the internalisation of the European acquis in the field of Justice and Home Affairs, to the adoption of good governance practices, and to cross-border cooperation programmes with countries sharing a physical border with EU member states (Wolff, 2008: p. 254,

cited in [Amaro Dias and Freire, 2022](#)). Nevertheless, this border dynamic was criticised for being mostly unilateral in its formulation with little input from the partners and a defining EU approach that should be validated – exporting EU regulations –, such as cooperation agreements with Frontex, or the terms for advancing negotiations on visa facilitation regimes applying to the most compliant partners. This contributed to the building of segregation zones, or of a buffer zone, at the European periphery, hindering access to the EU and crystallising a space that separates European security from an increasingly dangerous and unstable outside world ([Amaro Dias and Freire, 2022](#)). This strong security dimension, along with identity arguments, reinforced the ‘othering’ process.

The EU sought to respond to the many challenges coming in from the neighbourhood, where instability and violence was growing in countries such as Syria and Libya to the south, or tensions rising in the context of Ukraine, where in 2014 Russia annexed Crimea, and a long war was started. Despite the somehow reactive approach from the EU, in its strategic documents it has tried to convey the context and the potential responses. Briefly, the European Security Strategy (ESS, 2003) adopted in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and still before the 2004 enlargement, took stock of a changed international context, where the global war on terror had put in motion rebordering practices, affecting the EU inner and external borders. The identification of threats and ways to prepare for new challenges arising from these was thus very much at the heart of the document. Later, in 2016, A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy ([European Commission & High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2016](#)) was adopted, a document that already reflected the implications of the Ukraine war, including in the management of relations with the neighbours and Russia, and focusing on bilateral, regional, and neighbourhood-wide cooperation, as well as the promotion of cross-border interactions, promoting what was coined as “principled pragmatism”; and the most recent document, titled A Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence in the next decade ([European Commission & High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2022](#)), was adopted after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The document conveys the reaction to the strained international setting, with stronger words, more focused on hard security and defence issues, while not abandoning the traditional civilian approach of the EU, which does not come as a surprise. These documents reflect the presence of rebordering and debordering dynamics simultaneously – following the shifting politics towards Russia and Belarus, labelled as aggressive, “fencing off” the EU from Russia and Belarus ([Studzińska, 2023](#): 127), and the movement towards rapprochement to the EU from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, in particular. Along with this discursive adaptation, the shift from transformational diplomacy to resilience and local ownership, became clear with the EaP revision in 2015 and particularly the Global Strategy and Strategic Compass documents, in an acknowledgement of the need for a new positioning from the EU towards its Eastern partners. The 2015 revised ENP principles added a differentiated approach based on the recognition that different countries have different aspirations and therefore there needs to be also a distinct approach from the EU in terms of the deepness and comprehensiveness of what is on offer – the recognition of agency and of the relevance of these EU neighbouring countries to deal with the complex border crises, transnational issues, instability and war. This normative change affirmed in EU fundamental documents is most relevant, despite limitations regarding implementation.

The EU-EaP-Russia neighbourliness geography has profoundly changed right at the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2014, but absolutely fractured as a result of the escalation of violence with the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The ‘other-as-enemy’ narrative returned intensified by the threat that this geography represents, and based on the assumption that the existential threats that Russia faces cannot be contained in any other way than through territorial

expansion and control. It is the “return of old politics with a vengeance” (Lehne, 2014: 5). The reterritorialization of borders immediately followed, together with a civilizational narrative that empowered the rebordering process. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine represents both the objective of territorial expansion and control, and the fears involved in the Europeanisation processes and democratisation dynamics particularly from Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine which took the lead in this movement, expressed in their applications for membership in the EU. Candidate status was granted in June 2022 to Moldova and Ukraine and in December 2023 to Georgia, later than Moldova and Ukraine. This was due to domestic politics polarisation, with a less pro-EU government in tension with a loud pro-EU President, leading to an impeachment process initiated by the Georgian government, showing a serious political domestic struggle with upcoming elections in October 2024, and the slow pace in implementing reforms. The following section briefly showcases how the narratives from Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia towards the EU have changed, transforming previous criticisms regarding the EU’s approach through the EaP, to a new understanding of the EU as a locus of resistance, pushing for debordering processes, sustained in shared identities grounded on European values and principles. The narratives convey this similar message, but are framed in different terms, as analysed next.

Agency and shifting narratives: The EU as locus of resistance

The Ukraine war became the materialization of the violent rebordering processes we are seeing in Europe. Based on a civilizational, identity-driven and power politics narrative, Russia claims *droit de regard* in the post-Soviet space and has resorted to the use of force to assure it. The invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 was a definite game changer. The invasion meant an attempt at redrawing territorially the map of Europe, violating once more the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and thus, the European borders’ regime. Moreover, this war represents an attempt at redrawing symbolic and identity borders. The Slavic brotherhood for so long present in Russian discourse, involving Russia, Belarus and Ukraine, at the very core of Russia’s foundations, shifted to a narrative where Ukraine was taken over by a Nazi government with support from the West, that constituted an existential threat to Russia (Putin, 2021, 2022). In his article in the summer of 2021, Vladimir Putin advanced an historical reinterpretation of the Commonwealth of Independent States, by claiming these are not independent states with agency, instead these are entities that are part of “mother Russia” (Putin, 2021). The rebordering process implied in this historical reinterpretation meant the erection of identity borders, with the war strengthening as never before Ukrainian nationalism, by fracturing social and economic relations that were for long quite interdependent. The rebordering processes taking place assume human and material dimensions, play the function of disengaging and follow the othering practices in the framing of a violent self in face of a violent other.

This setting led to a shift in the narratives of some of the EaP countries, particularly Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. The underlining arguments are not exactly the same, but they point to two aspects that are central: first, they are part of Europe and it is in Europe they should be, and second, the EU represents a locus of resistance against war and aggression. The narrative of the insecurity drivers at the Eastern borders of the EU shifted further East to become focused on the Russian Federation. And the criticisms about ‘EU imposition practices’ gave place to acknowledgement about how this path to achieve membership strengthens these countries in what is their constitutive identity. President Salomé Zourabichvili of Georgia, states it very clearly in her May 2023 address to the European Parliament, referring to European integration as part of the country’s “DNA”, and

underlining how this path is naturally in line with Georgia's identity, in contrast to the "imposed" Soviet heritage.

[A] free Georgia in a free Europe. The only guarantee of independent Georgia and the only path to a better future for every citizen. (...) My point here is certainly not to say that historical records are sufficient to address current concerns, and there are many. But to underline that what the EU is asking is nothing but an integral part of our culture, our values, and our heritage. Your recommendations are not some foreign ideas imposed to us – as was Soviet ideology. These are in essence Georgian. Therefore, what you are asking from us is that Georgia remains true to its identity. What you are "recommending" is that Georgia eliminates the remnants of the totalitarian past and reunites with itself and its European roots.

(Zourabichvili, 2023a, 31 May)

Maia Sandu, the President of Moldova follows the same lines, underlining the 'European family' belonging, rooting Moldova on the European tradition. In her words on the celebrations of Moldova's Independence Day,

We choose the European path because we choose peace. (...) Our freedom also entails responsibility toward our own lives and the future of our children - we are free to choose whether to progress, face challenges with our heads held high, or remain stuck in the mire and do nothing. What we do today will propel Moldova forward - into the European family, where our country will be free to shape its destiny and preserve its culture and traditions. Where it will be strong enough to provide a good life for its citizens.

(Sandu, 2023a, 27 August)

In an earlier gathering on 21 May 2023 at the Great National Assembly Square, President Sandu argued that Moldova's aspiration to become a full member of the EU clearly underlines Moldova's European identity, historically, geographically, culturally, as well as through the fundamental values shared (Sandu, 2023b). Thus, European integration is the path towards stability in face of the challenges Europe is currently facing, particularly with the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine.

Understanding the EU as peace and Russia as war, the narratives ingrained the opposition dynamics and the security-value of the process of formal membership in the EU. This is clearly visible in the way the EU is represented as a safe space in face of the pressing Russian threat, with integration in the EU and the road to it constituting in this way a form of resistance. The construction of new borders, material and symbolic, has deepened the rebordering process towards Russia, whereas the path to the EU deeply signifies debordering processes. Ukrainian President Zelensky has been clear about this:

Europe's longest-lasting peace and most reliable security have been ensured by building ties between the peoples of Europe instead of barriers. And when we now see, instead of strengthening our ties, any fresh barriers that are so reminiscent of old mistakes, whether they are barriers in politics, or barriers in economics, or in trade, we see a threat not to one European nation, but to the whole of Europe.

(Zelenskyy, 2023a, 14 May)

But there are also differences. In Ukraine the narrative underlines the fact that looking at the EU, Ukraine seeks debordering dynamics in political, economic, security, social and territorial terms. The European identity and its belonging to Europe are part of the narrative that sustains the Ukrainian drive to the EU. Indeed, at centre stage have been how Ukraine fights for Europe, helps to unite Europe, has chosen Europe, but now Europe has to choose Ukraine. This rebalancing act implies Ukrainian agency at the core of European security. In his Annual Speech to the *Verkhovna Rada* in December 2022, President Zelensky made it clear:

We helped the European Union acquire real agency. We helped Europe feel like not several championships with teams of different levels, but one strong team that, together with the whole free world, is fighting for this important victory.

It was Ukraine that united the European Union. It turned out that it is possible!

And now Europe defends itself. Europe overcomes crises. And this is despite the colossal resources thrown by Russia to break our continent.

(Zelensky, 2022b, 28 December)

The Ukrainian narrative emphasises how it is time for Europe to recognise Ukraine's role in fighting this brutal war, not just as part of its territorial defence and integrity, but very much at the core of defending European values and principles in face of the Russian aggressor. This changes the perspective of responsibility and legitimacy in the narrative, pressuring the EU for faster decisions and faster action, so that "life will prevail over death and light will prevail over darkness". Also clear in the narrative is how Russia plays a key role in trying to destroy the key values that are constitutive of the idea of Europe, presenting itself as "the most anti-European force in the modern world". This needs to be countered, not only for Ukrainian independence and freedom, but also for Europe's independence and freedom. The war Russia is waging against Ukraine crosscuts speeches, reinforcing the aggression it constitutes and the relevance of fighting against it, to defend the EU and European values themselves. This is materialised in the political, economic and military support that is being provided to the Ukrainians. In the 2022 Annual Address, Zelensky highlighted,

It is only our victory that will guarantee all of this - each of our common European values. Our imperative victory! (...) For the first time in its history, the European Union is providing military assistance of such magnitude. And for the first time in history, I believe, it is preparing a positive assessment of internal reforms in a European country that is defending itself in this all-out war and at the same time - while fighting - modernizing its institutions.

We are getting closer to the European Union.

Ukraine will be a member of the European Union!

(Zelensky, 2023b, 9 February)

The security dimension is also reinforced in the other countries. Georgia reminds the 2008 war, and how the integrity of the country was violated, with Russia's threat of occupation still being a serious threat. Zourabichvili (2023a, 31 May) underlines Russian claims entail myths about its humiliation or insecurity that seek to justify its politics and war of aggression. She adds that the "largest country in the world has still to understand and accept that it also has borders", underlining the illegitimate attempt to redraw borders by force of arms and of ideological propaganda.

The domestic tensions between the government and the President also constitute an important factor, as Georgia's President is very much EU-forward looking whereas the government is less so, with a political struggle taking place also regarding who would be rewarded for EU's candidate status, when this was to be offered (Kucera, 2023). In an interview, the Moldovan Foreign Affairs Minister Popescu clarified that "No one wants divided countries inside the EU, but keeping countries at the mercy of geopolitical manipulation and separatist conflicts would be even worse for the continent, for the EU, and for us" (Gavin, 2023). The attempt to impeach the president was not successful, but President Zourabichvili commented on how it impaired on the country's political reputation and path towards EU integration (Politico, 2023), implying a more ambivalent discourse due to the domestic political situation, leading to the delay in Georgia's EU candidate status. This was granted, nevertheless, in December 2023 (European Council, 2023). The threat of Russia is very much present in the narrative, with continuous interference of Russia in Georgian affairs being cause of concern, seeking to gain influence over the country's political decisions. "As Europe helps Ukraine push back against brute force, its needs to help the Georgian people resist to this more subtle push" (Zourabichvili, 2023a, 31 May).

Moldova reminds about Transnistria, the self-proclaimed separatist territory, highlighting also how serious the issue is, but that it should not be on the way to the country's membership of the EU. The narrative has been different in Moldova and Georgia from the Ukrainian one. Moldova defines itself as a European country, and has had a consistent discourse towards the EU. The President uses many times the reference to the 'European family', or refers to "Moldova as an active member of our European family" (Sandu, 2023d, 1 June).

Thus, the issue of membership comes up as the materialization of resistance and recognition of the aspiration of these countries to join the EU, reinforcing their European identity. For Ukraine, in a double direction as membership will strengthen the country as well as Ukraine will make Europe stronger (Zelenskyy, 2023a, 14 May). For Moldova, the overlap in values, democracy and a free world, are key to this membership understanding, the choice of "democracy over autocracy, liberty over oppression, peace over war, and prosperity over poverty" (Sandu, 2022b, 21 September). Georgia's President also underlined the fight for freedom and what this entails for the three candidate countries and for the EU itself (Zourabichvili, 2023b, 15 December). The agency of these states on EU policies has become stronger and the escalation of the war in Ukraine clearly provided a new stage for enhancing their resistance against Russia and for pushing for the debordering of their relations with the EU.

Concluding remarks

This paper looked at EU-Eastern partners' relations from a bordering perspective looking at shifting trends in the way cooperation flows, with the escalation of the war in Ukraine in 2022 at centre stage. The Eastern Partnership project sought to provide an inclusive framework for the eastern partners, particularly in the context of the 2004 enlargement, where the external EU borders were redrawn. Along with this new configuration, identity issues have embodied these relations, with the European values and principles becoming constitutive of relations developed with Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. At different paces and with different political cultures, the path along the way was distinct, but developments in the past decades, with the war in Georgia in 2008, Crimea's annexation and the war in the Donbass in 2014, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, profoundly contributed to changing the setting. Debordering processes have been put in motion as evidenced in these countries application for EU membership, their reformist course and commitment to democratisation. The convergence of narratives on the sharing of values and principles became clear in

the EU and these candidate countries. Both symbolic and material debordering processes have also become clear in the identification with the EU-self representing freedom, democracy and peace, against the Russian other identified with aggression and violence.

The reconstruction of historical narratives led to the deepening of the rebordering processes with Russia. Rebordering practices became evident in the various dimensions of relations, of which sanctions, the militarisation of the EU external borders and conflicting visions of European security are an illustration. These embody the otherness dynamics in place, with Russia being the aggressive neighbour that became the fundamental threat to European security. Rebordering dynamics in this space, thus, reflect the material and symbolic political options made in the redesign of relations towards Russia. The power dynamics reflected in these bordering processes, demonstrate the fundamental reinterpretation of European security and agency of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in a contested context. These countries in the neighbourhood have voiced their concerns loudly. In this process, the EU became a locus of resistance.

Three main ideas become central. First, debordering and rebordering practices take place simultaneously in relations between the EU and the EaP countries, leading to elastic processes of more openness or closure according to the topics and the political willingness of those involved. These have not been linear, as analysed, though Russia's invasion of Ukraine understood as illegitimate aggression constituted a shifting point, by aggregating political will for consolidating the integration path. The message is that these countries agency has to be recognised and translated into political action.

This leads to a second point which highlights the heterogeneity of the partner countries to the East, with countries such as Belarus clearly closing both physical and ideational borders, whereas a country like Moldova has been following a stable course of approximation to the EU, signalling the 'European family' relevance for peace and stability. Ukraine, under fire, became the symbol of hard rebordering towards Russia and has been working for debordering processes regarding the EU, with the push for accession talks incarnating the core of reform efforts amidst war. The dominant narrative underlines the closeness of European values and how these countries belong to the European 'family', though Ukraine has shifted the narrative to its fundamental role in the fighting of this war of aggression. The Ukrainian fight for independence and freedom means also defending European values, fundamental for EU's freedom in face of a militarised and aggressive Russia. This narrative emphasises Ukraine's place at the heart of Europe – by fighting this war it is also defending EU's constitutive values. Georgia and Moldova also bring the freedom narrative in face of this aggressor, highlighting the fact that the territorial disputes in their countries should not impair the process of integration in the EU. Russia's "geopolitical manipulation" as the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Moldova put it (cited in [Gavin, 2023](#)), seeking to influence and pressure political decisions, needs to be countered by the path to integration in the EU. This symbolises the fracturing of the symbolic and material bordering processes with Russia on par with the EU's debordering dynamics, most visible in the offering of candidate status to these countries.

Finally, developments in this wide-Europe space point to the fact that the EU has become, particularly for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, locus of resistance as a result of bordering and othering dynamics, in that it represents peace and stability against violence and disruption, incarnated by Russia. The human and material dimensions of the rebordering processes have politically disengaged these states from Russia which became a significant Other led by violence and territorial quest. The fracture of the identity links associated to a shared past or the Slavic bonds Ukraine shared with Russia, gave place to identity reaffirmation in these countries, underlining their agency in the context of war. The transformative potential in relations between the EU and these

countries is grasped in these bordering processes and how these entail the EU as a locus of resistance.

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Author biography

Maria Raquel Freire is researcher at the Centre for Social Studies and Professor of International Relations at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Coimbra. She is also Visiting Professor in the Post-Graduate Programme in International Relations, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil. She was FLAD Visiting Professor at Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA in the fall of 2023. Her research interests focus on peace studies, foreign policy, international security, European Union, and Eurasia.