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A pragmatist theory of power: understanding the EU's transformation and security response to Russia's war in Ukraine

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Abstract
As the war in Ukraine has shown, the world has become increasingly unpredictable. The European Union (EU) must cultivate 'protean power'—the capacity to innovate and improvise in the face of radical uncertainty. In line with a pragmatist approach, power is understood here as a process of growth, and not merely survival. It is a form of navigation, in that it entails adaptation in form and action to accomplish something in a world that resists intervention. The article explores the EU's security response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine by focusing on the cases of the delivery of lethal weapons and the deployment of the EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine. In both cases, the EU has 'broken taboos' and undergone a process of transformation of its security identity. Yet there are significant obstacles to the formation a more creative and innovative EU foreign policy, not to mention the strictures of decision-making at 27. The EU must therefore learn to navigate complexity and uncertainty not just outside, but also within, developing an evolutionary potential that reflects member states' interests without the need for continuous collective ratification.

Keywords CSDP · European Union · Power · Pragmatism · Ukraine · Russia

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Introduction

The radical uncertainty created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has forced the EU to break taboos in the area of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The events challenged the way the EU funds security initiatives, the kinds of operations it deploys and, more generally, the EU's identity as a security actor. The transformations underway through, and as a result of, the EU's response are significant. This contribution adds to the growing literature on the EU's response to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine. The existing literature has been concerned with determining the impact of this exogenous shock on specific EU policies such as sanctions, migration or defence (see e.g. Bosse 2022, Fiott 2023, Heidbreder 2024) or the overall direction of European integration processes (e.g. Anghel and Jones 2022). Notwithstanding this research, this article seeks to examine how the war in Ukraine has impacted on the nature and identity of the EU as a power (see also Pomorska and Thomas, forthcoming). This is because both in the literature, but also in policy circles the EU has long been characterised as a power (civilian, normative, geopolitical), but we still know little of whether and to what extent the war in Ukraine has challenged those notions of power: who has it, who gains or loses it, who exercises it? Is the EU finding and using power as it evolves into a more geopolitically and militarily active entity? Or is it simply caught up in the power politics of other actors, reacting without being *powerful*? Our view is that these questions are difficult to answer on most conventional views of power, but that the emerging literature on protean power can help provide an answer. Specifically, we develop the broader concept of protean power in a pragmatist direction, focusing on pragmatist understandings of action and agency. The outcome is a pragmatist view of power, which introduces evolutionary theory (Juncos and Pratt 2024*)* to show how protean power manifests in conditions of institutional transformation during crises, through recursive processes of revision in practice.

Power, as we conceive of it, is a causal concept. To have power is to have the capacity of world-making, and to make worlds is to cause their genesis and transformation. This is not how everyone conceives of power; within political theory, 'power as domination' has a significant and important intellectual presence, and arguably a theory of power that does not reflect on the politics of control is missing important characteristics. Yet a causal view of power is central to the articulation of a 'protean' power, and according to it, power *acts upon* the world, remaking it in some way. Power, in other words, is the potential or actual bringing-about of a new state of affairs. With their concept of protean power, Katzenstein and Seybert (2018a, b) called attention specifically to how power manifests in the form of adaption, agility, and self-transformation by actors facing conditions of radical uncertainty. Missing from their account of power and world-making, however, is a more focused discussion on one significant manifestation: the recursive transformation of actors and their worlds, such that actors change what's around them and in turn are changed by their own actions. This is an embedded view action, aimed specifically at understanding and explicating the links between the



more strategic or instrumental forms of influence that Katzenstein and Seybert refer to as 'control power' (2018a) and the self-transformative forms they call protean. Through pragmatism we advance an *ecological* understanding of power that fully captures its evolutionary basis.

It is here that we stage our pragmatist intervention: a pragmatist view of power is just as interested in how actors transform themselves—for self-transformation is as much a manifestation of world-making capacity as transformation of others or of environments of action. Pragmatists share with the protean power programme of research an interest in innovation, spontaneity, and non-determination. But it can encompass 'control power', in that some instances of power in action can certainly be understood as the effective management and control of a situation, even if it simultaneously appreciates, as Seybert and Katzenstein (2018a) also do, the generative and creative possibilities of flexibility, adaptability, and indirectness. The challenge is in understanding how these different kinds of power coexist, and in particular the conditions under which protean power becomes more *powerful* as a transformative force. We argue that a pragmatist view of power can help develop this understanding, and as we will explain, this can be found in considering the interaction of the power to sustain a given arrangement and the power to evolve within it. In this sense, the pragmatist view of power we develop here is part of the discourse on protean power that this special issue seeks to host, and should be positioned as a complementary but intellectually and sociological distinct response to the doors Katzenstein and Seybert have opened—and those they haven't.

The EU's security response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates this. Russia's military action presented policy makers with a situation of radical uncertainty requiring a transformation in the way the EU does things but also its own identity as a security actor. The delivery of lethal weapons through the European Peace Facility (EPF) constituted a break in the way the EU had previously engaged with conflicts in its neighbourhood with the financing of an unprecedented volume of lethal weapons in the context of an inter-state war. Meanwhile, the EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine (EUMAM) also challenged the way the EU has deployed CSDP missions in the past by allowing it to operate within the territories of EU member states. Taken together, these initiatives have transformed the EU's security identity into a more risk-taking and geopolitical actor. The EU became something new.

In this article we expand upon the above claims and study the EU's response to the war in Ukraine drawing on a pragmatist view on power. We begin by introducing this pragmatist perspective and link it to the protean power programme. Then, we discuss how Russia's invasion of Ukraine was perceived by the EU as a form of radical uncertainty, pointing to areas where our pragmatist view of power helps explain the EU's response to this crisis. In the third section, we offer a granular examination of two EU initiatives: the provision of lethal aid to Ukraine via the EPF and the deployment of the EU's military training mission. They show that while EU institutions were not, at the outset of the crisis, well suited to backing and supporting warfare, as Russia's maximalist aims and Ukraine's tenacity both became apparent, EU countries adapted to this situation and adopted a more bellicose position, in turn transforming the EU's security identity. A pragmatist analysis shows how the EU



gained power through the self-transformation of its own instruments and identity—even if limits to this power remain in the form of intergovernmental and bureaucratic politics. We conclude with some reflections on other uses of the approach we develop, and on what it shows us about the EU's role in the current geopolitical context.

To determine whether the EU has exercised power and what kind of power, our analysis focuses on the first year of the invasion (February 2022–February 2023) to map the EU's response at a time of radical uncertainty. The article draws on evidence gathered by means of ten semi-structured interviews conducted online with national diplomats and EU officials involved in the EU's response to war in Ukraine. In order to respect the anonymity of our interviewees, interviews are coded and cited with a number in the text. This evidence was complemented and triangulated with documentary sources, both primary (official EU documents and speeches) and secondary sources such as press articles. We coded the qualitative data and identified themes which provided insights regarding the nature of the shock (e.g. crisis, uncertainty), the EU as a power (continuity/evolution) and the transformation of the EU's security identity, specifically.

A pragmatist view of power

For pragmatists, power is expressed in the effects of situated problem-solving that can create new relations. When actors solve their problems, they change both the world around them and themselves as a result; indeed, sometimes the solution to a problem comes mainly through self-transformation, such that a situation that once vexed becomes tolerable. In this sense, pragmatism provides an account of the background conditions for protean power—defined here as 'an actor's ability to confront external challenges by innovating and transforming itself' (Pomorska and Thomas forthcoming: 1). Moreover, pragmatism also addresses the need to grapple with uncertainty and indeterminacy; a problem is a situation with no obvious temporal resolution, as well as no obvious causal resolution, and therefore any action is an attempt to manage uncertainty and reduce indeterminacy. Powerful actions, and actors, are those able to resolve uncertainty in ways that permit life to continue in satisfying ways.

In other words, power exists in the ability to adapt to new situations, finding new ways of living within new limits, while finding new opportunities alongside them. Our position is that power should be thus defined as *the capacity for creation that lies in every transaction between an organism and its environment*, and every such transaction features the activation of that capacity in some way. Hence power is a causal concept, referring to the manipulation of the world via the interaction of its contents.

This pragmatist approach shares significant affinities with the discussion of 'protean power' and the associated concept of radical uncertainty. In pathbreaking work (Kaztenstein and Seybert 2018a, 2018b) and follow-up collaboration (Pomorska and Thomas, forthcoming) scholars have sought to better explore the



power of quick and flexible reactions to rapidly changing events, and the capacity for social agility in indeterminate situations.

In more systematic terms, our pragmatist view of power builds on this insight by adopting three premises:

1. Power is the capacity of actors to create or maintain a way of existing, ideally in the most satisfying, least anxiety-generating way;
2. The use of power is the resolution of inhibitions to a way of existing—applying power to a situation until it ceases to be inhibitive;
3. There is no a priori reason why the use of power cannot involve change in what one wants or how one lives, rather than maintaining objectives and habits while forcing the world to cooperate with them.

These premises extend and expand the contribution of the 'protean power' programme, linking its insights to a pragmatist view of action (see Katzenstein and Seybert; 2018a). Expressions of power thus simultaneously contain both control and protean forms. While they do not directly address the concern that causal views of power deflate or diminish the role of the political—of authority and domination as essential dimensions of power—they do allow us to treat a wider range of social processes as *powerful*. We see this insight as consistent with the project of defining protean power as an alternative conception to more mainstream views, expanding a key dimension of it: reciprocity between means and ends, and more broadly between actor and environment.

To develop these insights, we draw on Dewey's philosophy of action, which begins with 'transactions' between actors and their worlds—mutually constitutive relations linking entities that have no pre-given existence prior to them (Dewey and Bentley 1949). When transactions become 'inhibited', through unforeseen or gradual change, internal tensions and exogenous forces, actors experience a 'problem situation'. Revising their habits through strategic and ethical reflection, or even unconscious reaction, actors resolve their problems and generate a new arrangement of transactions. This transforms both worlds and actors, however, as transactions generate both together. These problem situations are particularly acute during moments of radical uncertainty as illustrated by the 2022 events in Ukraine.

Thus there is a 'creativity of action' (Joas 1996; Joas and Beckert 2001), where the constant making of new worlds and new actors, generated by the spontaneous discovering of new tools or strategies or by the unforeseen evolution of existing ones, reverberate on the actors themselves. This goes beyond the 'creativity' of artists or inventors and is not a variable potential possessed in greater degree by geniuses and lesser degree by boring people; rather, it refers to a fundamental sociogenetic and psychogenetic power in all action. The key cognitive and institutional implication of this theory of action is the reciprocity of means and ends. Dewey (1987) noted that as new means become available to actors, they also develop an awareness of new potential ends; people rarely waste time thinking about unachievable goals, but once the realm of the achievable expands or



changes, some of those goals are now worth considering. Others may no longer be. For individuals, this means living within a fluctuating horizon of desire and behaviour; for institutions, this means that new practices can motivate new functions, with efficiency and purpose linked in more open-ended ways than rationalist accounts claims.

The transformations that we have seen in the case of the EU's security response to the war in Ukraine provide evidence of this 'creativity of action', as we will discuss in the next sections. This can be seen in the way EU has 'creatively' interpreted the provisions of the treaties to deploy CSDP missions in the territory of an EU member state. Of course, the EU is no stranger to experimentation in this policy field or more broadly. For instance, Sabel and Zeitlin (2012, p. 169) have put forward the idea of experimentalist governance suggesting the iterative and temporary nature of EU governance. Former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, also underscored the significance of experimentation when reflecting about the EU's foreign policy: 'we must be ready to experiment more. It is often the safest option to stick to what we know and what we have always done. But that is not always the best way to get results.' (Borrell 2022c). Moreover, with the EPF new means allowed the EU to envisage new ends, resulting in a more significant involvement in the provision of lethal aid to a state defending itself from invasion. That end would have appeared unimaginable before.

From a pragmatist perspective, power has two major functional outcomes. When it involves the maintenance of existing relations *power is sustaining*. When problems interfere in the maintenance of relations and actors begin to change their situations and themselves in response, power becomes *evolutionary*. *Sustaining power* is always operational and comprises the bulk of human activity, as people continually reconstitute the social world and the actors or subjects therein in a stable form. *Evolutionary power*, so named because of its adaptive and transformative essence, is sporadically operational; the actions which express it occur often but unpredictably, in response to unforeseen challenges and producing unforeseen effects. Evolutionary power is not random, but because it is adaptive, its outcomes are as underdetermined as the pressures and problems it allows agents to resolve. This reveals the strategic origins to action, but also how the power of action detaches from the circumstances that produced it, causing unintended consequences and directing its effects universally. Action wields power, but nobody wields action; merely do they initiate it.

Of these two kinds of power, one is more analytically novel than the other, as far as IR scholars are concerned. Sustaining power is familiar enough to IR scholars; it is, more or less, the fuel for what Margaret Archer referred to as 'morphostasis' (1995), that is, the generation of social stability. Evolutionary power, though, may introduce some new conceptual sensitivities or possibilities to the study of international relations, and deserves more sustained theoretical attention. Evolutionary power may in many cases work in a way already familiar to those studying strategy: actions might lead to the intended manipulation of the environment (including the actors within it) without also causing significant change to the make-up of the actor. But the opposite extreme may also be the case: action may lead to limited transformation of the world, at least in a way apparent to others, but lead to a major re-orientation or re-constitution of the actor. Evolution, for pragmatists, is an open-ended



process of growth (Popp 2012), and while growth is never random it is often unexpected in form, direction, and implication. IR scholars have certainly investigated how (political) subjects change, but they have typically operated from ontological frameworks that do not accord much transformative agency or capacity to the actor or the action. With only a few notable exceptions, such as Adler (2019) where this understanding of evolutionary growth is central, the field has preferred either synchronous analysis or descriptions that are agnostic as to causal influences; investigating evolutionary power requires us to examine the interaction of these things.

This raises the question of how to actually identify evolutionary power in action. If prediction is not always possible, then standard hypothesis testing methods are out—if you cannot know the implication of an initial condition, you will not know what confirms or disconfirms the theory that indicates it. The answer lies in an analysis of practice and innovation. Evolutionary power is found in the ways practitioners identify pressures as problems, consider instruments and responses to them as possible solutions, and experiment with novel interventions. In the next two sections we illustrate this with a concrete case: we examine how evolutionary power worked in the EU's response to Russia's war in Ukraine, applying the insights of pragmatism and the notion of protean power to shed light on the transformations that have so far taken place—along with their implications.

Radical uncertainty and Russia's war in Ukraine

As mentioned above, the exercise of power becomes more visible when actors experience a 'problem situation'. The EU's willingness to provide 'lethal aid' to Ukraine must thus first be placed in such a situation, a context which was perceived by EU policy-makers as one of 'radical uncertainty'. Russia's invasion of Ukraine produced unprecedented conditions of uncertainty—and it is in a world of uncertainty, rather than risk, where evolutionary power thrives (see also Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b). Indeed, then High Representative Josep Borrell, in his speech to the Annual Conference of Ambassadors in October 2022, directly used this language, describing the challenge of 'radical uncertainty' as one where '[t]he speed and scope of change is exceptional. We should not try to deny it. We should not try to resist it. It would be a futile effort. We have to accept it and to adapt [to] it, prioritising flexibility and resilience'. (Borrell 2022d; also Borrell 2022b).

To break taboos, to shift from sustaining to evolutionary power, a situation of radical uncertainty must present itself—as was the case with the war in Ukraine. Despite warnings from the US about the imminent invasion, Europeans were 'quite reluctant to believe it…We did not believe that this was going to happen' (Borrell 2022d). One of the interviewees noted that 'the intelligence was only [available] quite close to the invasion, by mid-February or so'. Another added: 'We were all taken by surprise, which didn't look good, but this is really how it was' (Interview 3; also 5). The EU also did not foresee the way the war was going to develop regarding Ukraine's response and its ability to resist Russia, or Russia's engagement in the war: 'We had not foreseen either the capacity of Putin to escalate [with regards to] the level of mass mobilisation and open nuclear

threats.' (Borrell 2022d). The Russian invasion of Ukraine was a complete surprise for the EU, a 'heavy wake-up call for all' (Interview 5). Though, of course, the extent to which people were 'surprised' by Russia's actions varied, with officials from Central and Eastern European countries more aware of the potential risks of invasion (Interview 2; 7).

While the EU's sanctions against Russia agreed in the aftermath of the invasion can be seen as an example of control power (Borrell refers to this as 'coercion capacity' [Euroactiv 2022a]), other expressions of power here take an evolutionary form, as a direct response to this acknowledged need for adaptive capacity. This is not the first time that the EU resorted to innovation when dealing with Ukraine (see Dimitrova and Dragneva 2022); but the EU was able to express power by devising creative and flexible ways to adapt *itself* to the new situation: 'the 2022 Ukraine war saw the belated birth of a geopolitical EU' (Borrell 2022b; 2022a). These comments are illustrative because it implies that the EU developed the capacity for action in a situation where it previously lacked it; the EU's exercise of power here contains significant expressions of both sustaining and evolutionary power, as understood in our pragmatist approach. The agreement to provide lethal weapons to Ukraine had once been considered impossible but the radical uncertainty created by the war opened up the opportunity for the EU to reimagine itself, a manifestation of evolutionary power:

> Whatever we do, there are taboo-breaking decisions. We break taboos on the Ukrainian war, using the European Peace Facility to buy arms – something that at the beginning [was] 'oh, that is impossible, we have never done it'. 'We have never done it' is not a recipe. Maybe we have to start doing things that we have never done in the past. When we hesitate, we regret it (Borrell 2022d; also 2022a).

Also revealing is the remarkable speed of the pace of the response, which went 'further [in] weeks than [the EU] did in the previous decade' (Borrell 2022a; 2022b), evidencing the rapid formation of new capacities and trajectories in response to the dilemmas of the war. This also illustrates the conception of 'power as agility' (versus power as capabilities) that underpins the notion of protean power (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b: 53). Yet this is also an example of what we have termed evolutionary power, as it required the EU to move beyond prior normative boundaries as a security actor. To quote Borrell,

> We have taken rapid action across the whole policy spectrum and broken several taboos along the way: unprecedented sanctions, massive support to Ukraine including, for the first time ever, financing the delivery of military equipment to a country under attack […] Our response to the Ukraine crisis shows what can be done if the pressure is extreme. (Borrell 2022b).

The EU's response also illustrates the limits of evolutionary power in the case of the EU, in particular, in the case of intergovernmental policies such as the CSDP where one member state can slow down progress or block decisions. We will reflect on some of these obstacles in the final section.



The EPF and the EU military assistance mission to Ukraine

The main expression of evolutionary power here came via the provision of lethal aid via the EPF. The war in Ukraine did not lead to the creation of this instrument, but rather to a readjustment of its goals. In that sense, the original decision to establish the EPF can be understood as protean power: an action taken in response to a more complex and uncertain world, but which ends up having effects that actors cannot fully know in advance or control (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a). Yet it also involved significant adaptive transformation, as the EPF became an instrument and process for the unprecedented decision to provide EU assistance to a state involved in an inter-state war.

The EPF was adopted by a decision of the Council of the EU in March 2021 (Council of the EU 2021). The decision to establish this instrument responded to the failings of previous integration steps, and the fact that despite increasing involvement in military training, the EU did not have a financial instrument to cover the costs of military equipment provided to partner countries (Bergmann and Müller (2021; Interview 7; 8). The total budget for the period 2021–2027 was initially agreed at EUR 5.6 billion. Compared to previous initiatives such as the Capacity Building for Security and Development or the African Peace Facility, the EPF innovated by allowing the purchase of lethal military equipment and having a global reach (Hauck 2022). This was already an important move: '[the EU] broke the taboo. It was broken modestly, silently, the way the EU usually does its own business' (Interview 2).

However, while the instrument adopted in 2021 foresaw the provision of military lethal equipment, NGOs, members of the European Parliament and some member states voiced at the time their concerns about such possibility (Euroactiv 2021a). According to Bergmann and Müller (2021: 1678), 'Denmark, Malta and the Netherlands reportedly opposed providing lethal equipment, while Ireland and Sweden expressed reservations and pushed for strong safeguards' (also Interview 7). To placate these concerns, the EPF decision included the requirement of a thorough risk assessment and safeguards as a condition for the provision of lethal weapons. The consensus in 2021 was that most assistance should be directed to African partners (Hauck 2022).

Yet the scale of the invasion witnessed on 24 February 2022 would challenge this consensus and result in a radical reorientation of this instrument. It was a 'watershed moment', in the words of Ursula von der Leyen (Politico 2022a). The invasion would thus result in an action which was 'previously excluded'; specifically, 'the allocation of significant resources to an activity or purpose that was previously considered undesirable or unfeasible' (Pomorska and Thomas, forthcoming). The significance of this move is summed up by one of the interviewees:

> The EU, with all its shortcomings and weaknesses, it is still very agile and able to respond to problems […] It was fortunate that in this case we had a mechanism that we could use, I am not sure if the EPF had not existed whether we could have gone and pick money from someplace else (Interview 2; also 3).



The first tranche of support of EUR 500 million was agreed very quickly after the invasion on 27 February 2022 and resulted in an important shift, totalling more than all the EPF commitments up to that date.[1] The interviewees agreed that this decision and the speed at which was taken could not have happened without the sense of urgency caused by Russia's aggression (Interview 2, 3). By the end of 2022, the EU had committed over EUR 3.1 billion to finance lethal and non-lethal military equipment to support Ukraine to defend its territory against Russian attacks, in addition to EUR 31 million for non-military expenditure such as field hospitals, medical equipment or cyber-defence (EEAS 2022).[2] For High Representative Josep Borrell, the use of the EPF constituted a creative moment for the EU: 'Another taboo has fallen. The taboo that the European Union was not providing arms in a war' (Politico 2022a; also Interview 4).

The size of the EPF contribution to the Ukrainian Armed Forces had major implications for the way this instrument operates. Firstly, it meant that the original annual financial ceilings and the total funds allocated to the EPF for the seven year period soon proved insufficient to meet the demands of Ukraine. Because of this, the overall financial ceiling of the EPF had to be raised in June 2023 to EUR 12 billion (Council of the EU 2023). Secondly, what was initially conceived as an instrument to deal with complex security challenges such as civil wars, capacity building, security sector reform, counter-insurgency, or counter-terrorism in Africa—mainly the Sahel region—was reoriented to the East and used to face a more traditional security threat: inter-state conflict. This reorientation can be seen as contributing to the transformation of the EU into a more 'geopolitical' actor.

Overall, the mobilisation of the EPF to assist Ukraine challenges the EU's self-understanding as a normative or 'peace' actor through its (indirect) involvement in an inter-war conflict, with some arguing that 'the EU is supposed to be an organisation of peace and that the EPF is somehow polluting that legacy or making an important shift towards something else' (Interview 7). In the words of Borrell, 'we claim that the EU is a peace force and cannot provide arms to anyone else [but] Yes, we can. Yes, we have done' (Euroactiv 2022a). One of the interviewees also spoke of the demonstration effect the EPF had and that this transforms how both the EU sees itself and how others see the EU: 'We have proven to ourselves that we can do it, which is the first barrier, and that it can work, and this has a direct effect not only on Ukraine's response to the war, but also how our partners see us.' (Interview 1; also 4). Another described how the EPF had impacted on the EU's security identity in the following terms: 'to be perceived as a security provider, being a security provider, someone call it a "game changer" and this is not the wrong word' (Interview 3; also 5; 7).

[1] Until the end of 2021, the EU had mobilized approx. EUR 300 million from the EPF budget to support partners in Africa, the Balkans and Eastern Europe, including EUR 30 million to Ukraine.

[2] By the end of 2023, this figure had increased to €5.6 billion, including €1 billion of funds to reimburse member states who had provided ammunitions to Ukraine. €1 billion from EPF funds had also been committed for the joint procurement of artillery ammunition under the ASAP initiative.



Russia's attack on Ukraine has also increased public support for further integration in the area of security and defence (Eurobarometer 2022; Fernandez et al. 2023). While the response to the crisis has not led to the creation of an EU army,[3] given earlier disagreements among the member states, it is telling that EU member states not only have agreed to use this instrument, but they also expanded its use since February 2022. For instance, Borrell argued in March 2022 that 'everybody was completely aware that we have to increase our military support to Ukraine, to continue putting pressure on Russia' (Reuters 2022b). Moreover, the transfer of weapons to Ukraine also accelerated further integration in this area with new Commission proposals for common EU defence procurement to refill depleted weapon stockpiles, which was also deemed 'taboo breaking' by EU officials (European Commission 2022; Politico 2022b; Hakansson 2023).

Last but not least, the resort to the EPF to finance the delivery of weapons to Ukraine has challenged the EU's identity and security role as this was the first time that the EU authorised the delivery of military assistance, including lethal weapons, to a country actively engaged in an inter-state war. As noted by one of the interviewees, actively supporting one of the warring parties in a conflict increases the risks for the EU, which suggests a more risk-taking attitude on the part of the Union than previously thought (Interview 1). In such instance, the provision of lethal weapons also raises questions regarding legality, accountability and legitimacy for the EU. While it has been argued that EU assistance to Ukraine complies with the law of neutrality given the inherent right to self-defence of any party victim of an unlawful attack, there are still issues relating to international accountability for the misuse of lethal weapons provided by the EU (Rutigliano 2022). In sum, while responding creatively to uncertainty, the provision of lethal weapons to Ukraine can also result in more uncertainty in the medium and long term, a marker of the circulation of protean power (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 25).

The EU's decision to launch a military assistance mission (EUMAM) to support Ukraine on 17 October 2022 (Council of the EU 2022b) constitutes another example of the EU's creativity of action. As acknowledged by Borrell (2022c), the EUMAM was not a new idea.[4] It had been on the cards prior to the invasion, but EU member states had failed to take a decision then, relying instead on sustaining power: its existing commitments and instruments already deployed in Ukraine such as the EU's security sector reform mission (EUAM). Ukraine had requested the deployment of such a military training mission in July 2021(Euroactiv 2021b). However, while such a possibility was discussed among EU ambassadors—a discussion on a Military Training Mission to Ukraine was included in the PSC agenda of

[3] The EPF role was and continues to be an intergovernmental framework to co-ordinate among EU member states the delivery of military assistance to third countries.

[4] Some EU member states have had in place bilateral military training activities for some time. The new mission sought to add coherence to these efforts and allow the participation of EU member states that had so far not launched such activities (Interview 2).

16 September 2021—it did not find agreement among the member states.[5] Some countries (for instance, Italy, Greece and Cyprus) saw such a step as escalating tensions with Russia (Euroactiv 2021b). According to one of the interviewees, any of the caveats put forward by those opposing the mission 'disappeared with the aggression'; after February 2022 it was much easier to find consensus because of the sense of 'urgency' (Interview 2; also 4; 5).

To what extent can EUMAM be seen as an instance of evolutionary power? Here the answer has to do with the way in which uncertainty led to a creative response (the launch of a CSDP mission *within* the EU) in the context of radical uncertainty (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018b). Reflecting on the process that led to the establishment of the mission, Borrell highlights how the war in Ukraine made possible what had previously been considered impossible:

> We had been discussing about the Ukrainian Training Mission before the war for months. "Do we have to send a training mission to Ukraine?", "No, come on, Ukraine, training mission, military in Ukraine...". And then, boom, the war comes and people said: "we should have done it." Yes, we should have done it. And now we are doing it quickly – well, quickly for European standards.' (Borrell 2022d)

The EU has deployed several military training missions in the past (mostly to African countries) and has a wealth of experience in this area, but the fact that for the first time ever the mission was deployed on EU soil rather than outside its borders constituted a form of innovation for the EU (Interview 2, 3). According to the Treaties, the CSDP 'shall provide the Union with an operational capacity drawing on civilian and military assets. The Union may use them on missions *outside the Union* for peace-keeping, conflict prevention and strengthening international security' (TEU, art. 42.1, emphasis added).[6] Given that the training facilities of the EU's training mission to Ukraine are located in Poland and Germany, the mission challenged the legal basis of the CSDP and represented an example of the EU's protean abilities resulting in 'significant changes in the mandate or principles on which an actor's formal claim to legitimacy is based' (Pomorska and Thomas, forthcoming). The speed of the response was also said to be quite remarkable, especially considering the complex and demanding mandate of this mission: 'It was extremely quick for a very difficult reality because it was going to be the first CSDP mission to be deployed in EU soil' (Interview 5; also 6). In general, the mission was said to contribute to the EU becoming a more risk-taking actor, to be perceived as 'a decisive actor' (Interview 6).

In terms of innovation, is it also worth noting that while the EU had some previous experience with military training, this time it had the very specific objective of enhancing a country's military capabilities to conduct military operations in the

[5] The EEAS also produced a needs assessment regarding the Professional Military Education (PME) sector in Ukraine for the PSC meeting of 7 October 2021. A potential training mission to Ukraine was discussed on the 14 December 2021 and 2 February 2022. No decision was adopted by the Foreign Affairs Council prior to the start of the war.

[6] Though as pointed out by Novakly (2022), EU naval operations deployed in the Mediterranean, SOPHIA and IRINI, had also operated within the territorial waters of several EU member states.



context of an inter-state war. As put by Novakly (2022), '[t]hrough EUMAM, the EU will provide military training to a country fighting an active war against a great power aggressor. This is something that the EU as an organisation has never done or experienced before.' From the EU's perspective, the mandate was designed in accordance with the principles of the UN Charter and the principle of self-defence in that that mission would 'allow Ukraine to defend its territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, effectively exercise its sovereignty and protect civilians.' (Council of the EU 2022). While offering military training does not make the EU a party to the conflict, it does increase the risks for the EU, for instance, to misinformation, sabotage or even direct attacks from Russia. As one of the interviewees put it: 'we are taking risks in supporting one of the sides without any caveats'. Another one argued that 'It was also a risk to establish this military mission in support of Ukraine which is on EU soil […] many months ago many would have thought, is this escalation, is it too dangerous? Not anymore.' (Interview 1; also 3; 5). This again suggests a significant transformation of the EU as a security actor, which has traditionally been very risk averse when it comes to CSDP operations (Novakly 2022). It also points to the uncertainty-enhancing effects of protean power (Katzenstein 2020: 490). The mission chartered new territory in EU security policy in that it foresaw a stronger role for the EU in global security or 'the birth of geopolitical Europe' according to Borrell (2022a), but it also raised the risks of escalation in the war and of direct conflict between EU member states and Russia (Interview 2). In the words of Borrell, 'EUMAM is not just a training mission, it is clear proof that the EU will stand by Ukraine for as long as is needed.' (Council of the EU 2022).

Pragmatism and the limits of protean power in the EU

While the previous sections provide evidence of the EU's ability to exercise power, there remain significant challenges to the EU's ability to effectively transform itself in the face of radical uncertainty. In other words, there are limits to protean power, and we can see those limits in the way it is impeded or suppressed by stifling structures. The main obstacle relates to the fact that nothing the EU does is particularly agile—despite the manifestly earnest attempts by EU officials to develop greater such agility, it is slow to react to new pressures and crises. For Katzenstein and Seybert, protean power 'thrives on actors' agility'; they argue that this form of power arises 'from actors' creativity and agility in response to uncertainty' (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 25; 4). Yet the EU as a complex and multilevel form of governance is not suited to this. By 'EU standards' some of the decisions surrounding the use of the EPF and the deployment of the EUMAM could be considered quick (Borrell 2022d; Interview 3, 5), though not particularly agile. Moreover, some of these decisions would have been more 'revolutionary' had they been adopted prior to the start of the war— when they were first considered (Interview 2). The result: 'what in peaceful times would have been valiant efforts to take the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) forward inevitably comes up short now' (EPC 2022). The EU's initial security response to the Ukraine crisis, especially if evaluated in terms



of military assistance to Ukraine, also paled in comparison with that of the US (IFW Kiel 2023).

The above analysis reveals two problems that have affected the exercise of protean power when responding to the security situation in Ukraine. The first arises from intergovernmentalism and the de-centralised nature of EU foreign policy. During crises, EU member states prefer 'the certainty, or the self-controlled uncertainty, of national self-reliance' (Hoffmann 1966, 882) to EU solutions, especially where the gains are unclear, or the EU lacks the capabilities. This also explains why despite the presence of functional and political conditions, the war in Ukraine has still failed to foster further European integration (Genschel et al. 2023). As noted, pre-2022 discussions on the EPF had already been affected by intergovernmental politics (Bergmann and Müller 2021). And while during the first year of the war, national sensitivities did not prevent a unanimous decision to use the EPF to fund arms transfers to Ukraine; opposition has grown the longer the war goes on. From the beginning, neutral countries (Austria, Malta and Ireland) decided not to participate in the transfer of lethal weapons to Ukraine (Interview 7). For very different reasons, Hungary also decided not to deliver any lethal or non-lethal weapons to Ukraine or to allow the transit of such deliveries through its territory (Reuters 2022a). Yet, Hungary has become more vocal about its opposition to fund Ukraine's war effort over time and other member states, namely Germany, have also grown disaffected with the functioning of the EPF (Interview 7; Politico 2023). Similarly, intergovernmental politics got in the way of an earlier decision to deploy a training mission in the autumn 2021 and impacted the planning of EUMAM. For instance, it was reported that 'Berlin's worries over Warsaw's "too offensive attitude towards Russia" and questions on whether the country should assume such predominant weight on the "command and control" side of the mission' had delayed the adoption of the decision earlier in the year (Euroactiv 2022b). This discussion also sheds light on the interlinkages between the national and EU levels. For the EU to break taboos, these also need to be broken at the national level[7]; though it is possible to see how actions at the EU level might also enable actions at the national level (e.g. in the case of Germany).

The second problem arises from pathologies of international bureaucracies in general, which are never that quick to react to radical uncertainty, as a result of their reliance on institutionalised norms and their tunnel vision (see Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Dandashly and Noutcheva 2019). In this case, rigid financial rules and bureaucratic procedures have limited the EU's ability to quickly disburse or increase the funds allocated to arms transfers to Ukraine (Blockmans and De Agostini 2022: 2–3). Disagreements about EPF reimbursement rules (Euroactiv 2022c) and later on about the need to amend the Multiannual Financial Framework (Politico 2023) also illustrate how bureaucratic rigidities can get in the way of agile responses. The management of the EPF is also hindered by bureaucratic pathologies and the complexity of EU governance procedures, especially in the area of the CSDP. While the processing of requests from Ukraine is done by a clearing house

[7] We are grateful to the reviewer for bringing this to our attention.

within the EEAS led by the EU Military Staff, the administration of the EPF is under the responsibility of the Foreign Policy Instruments, which is a Commission service. And although inter-institutional cooperation has generally proceeded well, frictions between different institutions are also unavoidable: 'institutionally there was always going to be issues, especially since the EPF is deemed to be successful' (Interview 7).

These problems limit the degree to which the EU can possess and express protean power, but, surprisingly, they do not prevent the EU from expressing evolutionary power—and needless to say, they capture the momentum of sustaining power as well. EU decision-making and procedures do not need to be agile to still, over time, engage in processes of self-transformation and adaptation. Evolutionary power is manifestly not always smooth, consistent, or an elegant form of action; often to identify its operations we must look at the micro-level of practice, at least over shorter time scales. Herein lies one of the greatest differences between the protean power programme and the pragmatist view we develop and articulate to complement it.

Conclusions

Our pragmatist understanding of power contributes a complementary approach to 'protean power' and its associated insights. Building on existing work (Juncos and Pratt 2024) on this topic and drawing from a broader pragmatist turn in the field (Pratt 2016; 2022) it foregrounds creativity, evolution, and reflexivity as key drivers of change. The case of EU support for Ukraine and in particular the transformation of the EPF into an unprecedented programme of military aid illustrates this kind of self-transformative power. It moreover sits within a broader discourse on EU agility, showing the clear links to, and benefits of, the core agenda of protean power research as well.

As Guzzini (2013) notes, power-talk enables a number of functions within IR discourses, ranging from statecraft to critique, and that the cognitive duties or epistemic qualities of 'power' differ across multiple dimensions as a result. Here there are two significant benefits to a pragmatist view of power. First, it spans both 'control' and 'protean' expressions of power. Whether explicitly or implicitly, pragmatist thought cuts across a range of sociological traditions, informing views of social movements, institutional formation and change, the role of technology, and more broadly theories of practice. Second, it shares much with both structuralist and discursive theories of power that scholars can recognise and engage one-another across research traditions, providing a methodological good already in demand: that is, a framework capable of 'coherently model[ing] the dynamics' of different perspectives on power, without committing to the truth of any one of them (Bially Mattern 2008, 697).

A few conclusions arise from comparing—and contrasting—the insights offered by both protean and evolutionary power. One of the more significant ones is that fixation on agility may itself be problematic. Agility is a process as much as it is a quality or capacity, on a pragmatist view; EU institutions and bodies should not reify agility or speed, but simply focus on adaptation and the reciprocity of means and



ends. Agile or not, evolutionary power will support EU goals, strengthen its core mission, and open bureaucratic minds to new ways of being.

Another is that both protean and control power belong in cases or expressions of both sustaining and evolutionary power—and vice versa. The instruments of compellence and domination require constant adaptation to new technologies and environments of coercion, even as they are often used to maintain the status quo. Conversely, the process of self-transformation often involves the management and disciplining of internal conflicts and insurgents, propelled by a complex interplay of experimentation, authorisation, and re-allocation. The diplomatic practices necessary to expand and reorient the EPF without attracting vetos illustrate this especially well.

The medium-to-long-term outcomes of Russia's war on Ukraine and the EU's response to it remain undetermined and unknown. This is both because the future is hard to predict but also because evolutionary power has no fixed ends—because the ends of self-transformation are by definition unformed. The advantage of approaching this ongoing process from within the protean power conceptual apparatus, and from a pragmatist perspective, is the ability to recognise just how many possibilities still exist, and therefore how many opportunities lie on the horizon. If the EU is to manifest the resilience and strategic autonomy which have been articulated and prioritised in recent documents (Council of the EU 2022a; European Council 2022), it must remain sensitive to this.

Appendix

Interviews

Interview 1. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 9 December 2022.

Interview 2. National official, videoconferencing platform, 19 December 2022.

Interview 3. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 19 December 2022.

Interview 4. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 21 December 2022.

Interview 5. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 19 January 2023.

Interview 6. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 19 January 2023.

Interview 7. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 17 February 2023.

Interview 8. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 22 February 2023.

Interview 9. National representative, videoconferencing platform, 28 March 2023.

Interview 10. EU official, videoconferencing platform, 20 June 2023.

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