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Regional Transformation as Reterritorialisation: Examining the distorted image of EU- ropeanisation

Tiffany G. Williams *University of Jena*

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Abstract

The European Union's (EU) mission to promote its idea of European-ness across the continent led to its eastern enlargements and later the Eastern Partnership of the European Neighbourhood Policy. Along the way, this mission encountered competing norms and regional integration efforts shaped by sociocultural and historical ties connecting state, society and territory. These ties inform the barriers to Europeanisation and the backsliding from EU-managed policy reforms. They can illuminate where the EU's self-image and constructed European identity do not reflect perspectives abroad or those of EU member countries. Such inconsistencies in the EU-constructed identity that shaped related policy mechanisms prevented sustainable regional transformation and integration. Further policy integration and future EU enlargement remain strong possibilities, as does the risk of basing the next generation of policy mechanisms on a distorted image of the EU and its capacity to transform. In this article, I apply a novel critical theory perspective on the entwined processes of de- and reterritorialisation to this context, and argue that this perspective clarifies and informs the EU's aim to transform and unite Europe.

Keywords

Europeanisation; Reterritorialisation; European Union; Eastern partnership; Regionalism; Post-colonial

Notions of the EU as a 'force for good' that is 'predisposed' to behave in a normative way internally and externally (Manners 2002: 242) had a firm hold on EU scholarship for well over a decade, despite early alarm bells questioning whether predisposed normative behaviour was actually a good thing (Sjursen 2006: 236). Since then, the unanticipated consequences to EU external action show that instead of a one-way process of the EU exporting its norms and values, it also is shaped by those of its neighbours, particularly the countries that become new members (Delcour 2011, 2018b; de Franco, Meyer and Smith 2015; Burlyuk 2017, Williams 2022).

Building on scholarship that applies de- and post-colonial and post-imperial perspectives to European integration, this article explains that while EU external action follows colonial and imperial patterns (Kølvraa 2017; Ifversen 2019, 2022; Luciani 2020), its distinctions from past actions invite further examination through an even more nuanced lens. The theoretical perspective discussed herein is that when implemented externally, the EU's brand of Europeanisation would need to reterritorialise a targeted region in order to achieve its core expansionist objectives of deep, comprehensive regional transformation followed by integration. The brand of Europeanisation refers to the EU's discursively constructed and promoted policy mechanisms used to diffuse EU norms and values into domestic contexts and discursively justified as offering the solution to regional problems.

EU norm diffusion is commonly represented as a mechanised process implemented in the domestic sociopolitical contexts of its member, candidate and partner countries, as well as throughout the broader international community (Manners 2002; Sedelmeier 2011; Börzel and Risse 2012; Seybert 2012; Kølvraa 2017): in other words, exporting EU norms and values across borders. Is this exportation enforced, threatening other countries to adopt EU norms and values or else? A prevalent argument concludes it is not, but rather that countries that wish to participate in partnerships or other policy-based agreements with the EU and its countries either accept conditions, or simply do not participate in partnerships. As such, these partnership policy mechanisms utilise incentivised conditionality and are therefore voluntary and dependent in nature (Manners 2002; Diez 2005; Lavenex 2008; Haukkala 2011; Seybert 2012). However, this approach does not merely prescribe a voluntary set of limitations and conditions. The partnership policy mechanisms also aim to exert a normative yet palpable power in that they target 'reterritorialisation of power away from the central state along vertical lines via the principles of regionalization and subsidiarity, and horizontal lines via the principle of partnership' (Stanivukovic 2018: 61; see also Havlík 2020). Whether or not this aim is feasible and functional is a question this article addresses.

Policy norm diffusion via conditional partnership agreement conceivably corroborates a post-Cold War departure from using violent means to enforce one's beliefs and values. It exemplifies a soft power approach. However, this article aims to show that this softer approach nevertheless promises more than it could ever deliver, and argues that treating norms and values as goods for cross-border export still follows past colonial and imperial perspectives that are perhaps not entirely consigned to history.

The EU neither has nor intends to wield the type of power necessary to achieve such ambitious regional transformation goals given the fact that, even if not fully appreciated when first launched, such goals necessitate de- and reterritorialisation. Prior understandings of the EU theorise that it behaves as a normative power given the norms-based, incentivised conditionality in EU external action mechanisms. However, these conceptualisations do not adequately address what these mechanisms are meant to achieve and presume voluntary compliance without viable evidence. Along with demonstrating these points, this article argues that the dual processes of de- and reterritorialisation offer a new, necessary lens through which to gauge the planning,

development and implementation of EU foreign policy and external action frameworks in order to avoid further overambitious or underdeveloped objectives.

But, why, after all the discussion already on normative power EU-rope, would such a lens matter? Discussing what was called the 'European question,' Jan Ifversen implores, 'If we are to have any hope in the transnational and intercultural potential contained in the idea of Europe, it is time to listen to those who have been marginalized and silenced' (2022: 293). So, it matters only if those who believe in the European project truly want to reflect good in the world. If the aim is to see the EU's version of Europe and the EU self-identity reflected in its neighbours as if holding up a mirror, where is the EU-ropean self in Brexit? Or, in the mixed messaging from EU countries during the invasions of Ukraine (Maurer, Whitman and Wright 2023)? Where is the EU-ropean self when asylum-seekers drown who could have easily been rescued by EU country authorities (UN 2020; Stevis-Gridneff and Shoumali 2023; Vasques 2023)? Who is the EU-ropean self that identifies as the exemplar of 'force for good' to the world, yet also shows the jungle-like, invasive overgrowth (European External Action Service Press Team 2022) of sociopolitical and economic issues that it perceives as an external problem. Furthermore, where is the exemplary good in making new candidate members (European Commission 2022; European Parliament 2022a) and pushing forward the last (European Parliament 2022b) when the cracks left in the foundation after prior enlargements are not yet mended? The image reflected back to the EU from its neighbours indeed shows its inconsistencies and weaknesses, and reveals where the EU self-image is distorted. A lens through which to examine and understand these issues matters for those who want to correct that distortion.

To demonstrate this, the article focuses on the campaign to instil the EU's idea of European-ness across the continent. This led to its eastern enlargements and the Eastern Partnership arm of its European Neighbourhood Policy, all of which were constructed from the EU's policy integration platform. Within the Eastern Partnership countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, the EU's policy implementation and normative positions encountered competing norms and regional integration efforts constructed from existing national and regional identity perspectives. Such perspectives are shaped by the sociocultural and historical ties between states, societies and territories. The de- and reterritorialisation processes inform how these ties can push back against or compete with the EU's version of what it means to be European, thereby informing the barriers to its Europeanisation, and can also explain regression from implemented political or social reforms.

In order for the EU's brand of Europeanisation to achieve and sustain the intended transformation and integration, the ties to national and regional identity that impede its Europeanisation efforts would (will) need to become undone and reconstructed through de- and reterritorialisation. However, as discussed in theoretical debate and shown historically, e.g. colonialism and imperialism, hegemonic power is required to achieve this profound degree of transformation and integration (Hevia 2003; Diez 2013; Duran 2015; Stanivukovic 2018; Luciani 2020). The outcomes of the Eastern Partnership do not demonstrate that the EU possessed such power (Burlyuk 2017; Williams 2022). Examining how the partnership processes discursively unfolded also reveal which sociocultural, political and historical ties within the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood represent resilient obstacles to the EU's aim to deeply and comprehensively transform the region with its soft power, norm diffusion approach.

Critical examination of this approach illuminates and challenges the driving beliefs about its characteristic power structure that dictates which actors should set limitations and control standards, and which should be controlled. An intended function of this approach is to reaffirm a self-image that, compared to its neighbours, the EU is an attractive, better actor that 'appears desirable and worthy of identification, even if one has to leave "EUrope"

to find it' (Kølvraa 2017: 22). Interrogating EU external action from a reterritorialisation perspective can clarify the inaccurate views driving identity affirmation through expansion. When examined through the lens of reterritorialisation, Europeanisation and region-building are revealed for what they are, thus elucidating the inconsistencies in what the EU expected yet did not have the power or capacity to achieve.

To illustrate these assertions, this article discusses four key, interconnecting concepts that shape the EU's regionalism from the perspective of de- and reterritorialisation: power; self-reproduction; problem-solution narrative promotion; and identity-affirming behaviour. De- and reterritorialisation as entwined processes are reviewed and explained within the context of the EU's brand of Europeanisation that blends identity-driven region-building with the exportation of norms and values. Particular attention is given to the problem-solution narrative in which the EU offers itself as a solution to regional problems, aiming to justify its power-seeking behaviour. The discussion will also further unpack the role of identity and the related discourse underlying the EU's Europeanisation approach, informing and clarifying the inconsistencies between its objectives and its potential. Ultimately, while more precise representations of policy problems and practical solutions are important, they are insufficient for the EU's brand of Europeanisation: regional transformation and integration cannot rely on both normative conditionality and the rapid dissolution of longstanding social, cultural or historical ties.

THE EU'S BRAND OF EUROPEANISATION: 'SOFT POWER,' NORMATIVE RETERRITORIALISATION?

If reterritorialisation can explain the inconsistencies in and unanticipated consequences of EU external action, then we can expect to see evidence in the related policy mechanisms of intended reterritorialisation of power away from the state. These mechanisms, in contrast to the physical violence of past colonialism and imperialism, aim to hold power by setting standards, incentives and conditions, yet place the onus for change on candidate and partner countries, and furthermore lack enforcement measures.

The type and degree of transformation and integration that these policy mechanisms are meant to achieve are also relevant for understanding the intended direction of power. This is revealed in the EU's profound, comprehensive platform for social, political and economic norm transformation in targeted regional territories, including integration for its members via the *acquis communautaire* (acquis). Additionally, the EU's aim to 'unite the European continent' (European Union 2007: Preamble) suggests more than a plea for peace when taken alongside the widespread mechanised campaign to export EU core norms (Thomas 2006, 2016; European Union 2007) throughout most, if not all, layers of European countries' domestic contexts.

Evaluating compliance to EU policy mechanisms also follows a top-down direction that reterritorialises power away from the state towards another actor, the EU (Stanivukovic 2018). As mentioned, the Eastern Partnership agreements place the responsibility to implement the diagnosed institutional changes on the partner country's government (European Commission 2011, 2015; EEAS 2016). This corroborates research findings showing that the credit for reforms in Eastern Partnership countries cannot exclusively or unequivocally be given to external actors (Delcour 2011, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Kakachia, Lebanidze and Legucka 2021; Williams 2022). However, the top-down nature of the Eastern Partnership stipulates that if the partner country is to reap the conditional benefits, it must demonstrate change to a degree that the EU deems sufficient. In such a structure, the country responsible for change is not meant (or permitted) to decide if it has transformed to the point that it deserves conditional benefits or deserves to be an EU member. Additionally, the EU's discursive positions regarding who belongs to its united, 'better' Europe and who is sufficient to be a member have been inconsistent (Delcour

2011, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; Crudu and Eremenko 2012; de Franco et al. 2015; Williams 2022).

Furthermore, the divergent outcomes of the Eastern Partnership processes implemented in the six Eastern Partners demonstrate that belonging to Europe and/or confirming a common European identity may not hold the same value across domestic contexts (Kølvraa 2017; Delcour 2018a, 2018b; Williams 2022). The external recognition of continental or regional identity may become trivialised while national identities (of which many may persist within one country) are still forming, connecting and evolving according to the social, cultural and historical ties that remain. In such instances, controlling the narrative on a common European identity and who belongs to Europe holds little to no power. On the contrary, being approached as 'the other' may be an expectation or even a preference if it means avoiding labels constructed by external actors (Williams 2022).

Given these issues at the heart of EU external action in terms of both a lack of power and capacity, questioning why Brussels decided to move forward with such frameworks is fair. The fact of a distorted self-image helps to explain how this occurred; however, it is also necessary to account for the fact that the EU's identity-driven expansionist ambitions demanded (de- and re-)territorialisation, and why this was not just under-appreciated, but overlooked.

REFLECTED ABROAD: SELF-REPRODUCTION AND CONTEMPORARY DETERRITORIALISATION AND RETERRITORIALISATION

The theory of reterritorialisation was initially developed in the fields of philosophy, anthropology and sociology. Reterritorialisation is the reconstruction of a place that has experienced social, political and/or cultural deterioration (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987; Hevia 2003; Duran 2015; Stanivukovic 2018; Havlík 2020). As a process, reterritorialisation needs *d*eterritorialisation, which beyond mere deterioration entails separation (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 1987). Deterritorialisation as a process entails weakening and undoing the links between culture and place, and supersedes the confines of physical territory in that places of origin and territorial homes are interwoven in cultural and personal identities. The deterritorialisation process is 'not a promised and pre-existing land, but a world created in the process of its tendency, its coming undone' (Deleuze and Guattari 1977), and this undoing can occur distinctly or alongside the redoing process of reterritorialisation.

De- and reterritorialisation relate to the former Soviet republics given that they are in a period of sociopolitical, economic and cultural transition and rebuilding after separation from the collapsed Soviet Union. Afterwards, some of the formerly communist countries aimed to democratise and build economic and diplomatic ties across the globe (Delcour 2011, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). Moreover, historically, the region experienced the grip of competing imperial and colonial territorialisation even prior to the Soviet Union, which can further complicate the way forward as the newly (re)independent countries decide which cultural features to keep for their national identity (Delcour 2011, 2015, 2017, 2018a, 2018b; Simão 2013; Bolkvadze et al. 2014; Luciani 2020; see also Crudu and Eremenko 2012).

Understanding the relationship between who or what instigates the processes of de- and reterritorialisation and the given justification for it can inform the outcomes, intended and unintended. Externally instigated territorialisation can aim to reproduce the external actor and its norms, values and beliefs to the benefit of its preferences and interests. Historically, colonial and imperial territorialisations occurred by violent force: both the breaking of ties between peoples and places through deterritorialisation, and the reterritorialisation of power away from the existing leaders in order to enforce the adoption

and standardisation of new norms and behaviours. Along with the normalisation of intergovernmental organisations, territorialisation via external actors was reconfigured to be a process managed diplomatically and economically through policy and political tools (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Duran 2015; Kølvråa 2017; Luciani 2020). This still carried an expectation, however, that reterritorialisation would occur as evidenced by government and societal behaviours following, reproducing or 'imitating' (Kølvråa 2017) values-driven norms set by the dominant actors in the international community. The justification is that such efforts are considered humanitarian in nature, and aim to deter conflict and war, rather than benefit from these acts. This directly corroborates the EU's justification for its Europeanisation through comprehensive policy norm integration that relies on voluntary compliance with norms and incentivised conditions. Furthermore, this framework places the EU at the top, setting and promoting its own norms, and evaluating compliance and the ability to 'imitate' its preferred behaviours. As such, this brand of Europeanisation functions as a system of EU reproduction.

With regard to the Eastern Neighbourhood, partner and candidate countries can conditionally receive financial and programmatic support to adapt to EU standards, which is represented as a transformative type of European integration for the non-EU European Eastern Partners (European Commission 2011; EEAS 2016). Such incentivised conditionality reveals a fundamental belief that Europeanisation entails an underlying power structure where the EU community determines and manages the standards for the broader European constellation, thus promoting its own constructed version of a European identity. Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that a key interest for the EU in implementing its Eastern Partnership is to (re)construct the European continent according to its own specific set of standards, and with the aim for the result to reflect its specific understanding of Europe.

Reterritorialisation informs this system of transformative reconstruction that assigns identity and exports sociopolitical norms and values, yet is bound to regional territories (Havlík 2020). The EU's brand of Europeanisation reflects a reterritorialisation effort in that it targets specific regions for profound, comprehensive social, political and economic norm transformation, setting its own norms and values as the baseline (Stanivukovic 2018; Havlík 2020). This is demonstrated across the EU's integrationist platform, including the *acquis* as a legalised mechanism for profound integration among EU countries. As mentioned, this reterritorialises power away from the state, rather than the state and society concerned reterritorialising their country and deciding without external pressure which ties between them and their country form the national identity.

Additionally, the core emphasis on *territorial* identity demonstrates that institutional change was not the sole purpose or intention of the EU's approach to external norm diffusion through partnership mechanisms. The reterritorialisation perspective illuminates how accomplishing regional transformation and integration is a more profound ambition, which must be not just reproduced but also normalised in order to be sustainable (Stanivukovic 2018; Luciani 2020; see also Duran 2015). Moreover, it demands a high degree of power that, despite the emphasis on rules and normativity, is not represented in the intrinsic conditionality of the EU's mechanisms.

The historical examples of profound, comprehensive and longstanding transformation attempted by an external actor inform how hegemonic power is necessary (but perhaps still not fully sufficient) to achieve reterritorialisation (Hevia 2003; Diez 2013; Duran 2015; Stanivukovic 2018; Luciani 2020). However, the outcomes of the Eastern Partnership and broader European Neighbourhood Policy mechanisms neither show that the EU can reach such power, nor that it is prepared to resort to the type of behaviour prevalent in prior examples, e.g., imperialism, colonialism. Yet, the old roots still seem to have produced fruit in the form of a driving belief that if the EU is to unite the European continent, then

it must aim for EU-specified profound, comprehensive transformation externally, and profound, comprehensive integration internally.

These inconsistencies between intended and actual power are shown in the problem-solution narrative underlying EU discourse on its brand of Europeanisation. They seem to be the result of providing a benefit-seeking solution before the problem was fully understood (Delcour 2015, 2018a, 2018b; European Commission 2011, 2015; Burlyuk 2017). Moreover, representing the discursive construction of the EU as a transnational brand or identity in the problem-solution narrative may have shifted focus and weakened the policy-driven approach (Diez 1999, 2005; Reinke de Buitrago 2012; Seybert 2012; Bolkvadze, Bachmann and Müller 2014; Delcour 2018a, 2018b). The next section further addresses the role of the problem-solution narrative, followed by an in-depth examination of the broader identity-affirming discourses that shape the EU's brand of Europeanisation.

RETERRITORIALISATION AND THE LIMITATIONS OF NORMS-BASED CONDITIONALITY: RIGHT PROBLEM, WRONG SOLUTION

Political and policy-related decisions can be grounded in problem-solution narratives in order to sell them to targeted audiences. Such solutions are presented as a 'fact of life', obvious response to a social problem that is not open for interpretation, debate or alternative recommendations (Fairclough 2003: 91-92, 210). When examining problem-solution narratives, it is necessary to consider whether the related 'social order... "needs" the problem' (ibid.) in that those with authority and power promote their agenda as a solution to a problem that may not exist, may not exist as stated, or that may purposefully never be resolved. Solutions can 'need' a problem when those driving the problem-solution narrative seek some benefit that can only be legitimised if it is believed to resolve a serious problem, otherwise the justification for securing the intended benefit is not convincing: for example, securing a voluntary following in order to legitimise power-seeking, expansionist behaviour. However, it is possible for such solutions to produce negative effects, require unwanted changes or otherwise entail unattractive features, thus preventing their voluntary acceptance. I contend that such outcomes corroborate the unanticipated consequences of the Eastern Partnership that contradict initial beliefs about EU power, and highlight state and societal ambivalence towards external actors. The EU's condition-based partnership mechanisms demonstrate a 'fact of life' belief that the EU belongs in charge of norms-setting and should expect its behaviours and values to be reproduced and reflected, particularly by external countries that want to be members. However, this overlooks the lack of power and enforcement in these mechanisms' inherent conditionality, which also does not account for the fact that new members in turn import their norms, values, interests and behaviours, likewise impacting the EU community.

The EU and its member countries deemed the problem of instability in the neighbouring, formerly Soviet region impactful enough to devise a plan for how they can change it. With the Eastern Partnership, the EU initially proposed its brand of Europeanisation as a solution to this regional problem in its Eastern Neighbourhood (Delcour 2011, 2015; European Commission 2011, 2015; Simão 2013; EEAS 2016). Functionally, the 'EU as a solution' perspective aims to discursively justify the attempt to realise Europeanisation abroad and achieve the previously discussed external self-reproduction. The EU's core membership norms that shape policy mechanisms like the Eastern Partnership are not necessarily problematic themselves (see European Union 2007). However, the manner in which the EU externally promotes its norms, its justification for this as a solution, and the results of these decisions draw attention to instances where old, entrenched beliefs about power start to show through, necessitating critical examination. The EU was forced to adapt its approach and objectives when the Eastern Partnership was met with unexpected reactions and responses, and did not achieve regional transformation via policy norm and behaviour reproduction as intended (Burlyuk 2017). This suggests that the EU did not possess the

hegemonic power necessary to achieve its specific regional transformation objectives throughout its Eastern Neighbourhood – yet it acted on the belief that the EU-ropeanisation solution it offered was both sufficient and the most attractive.

This problem-solution narrative additionally posits that the conditional benefits and incentives the EU offers are deemed otherwise unattainable for the targeted partner country. However, for the Eastern Partnership countries, there are other regional and global partnership opportunities through which to promote their own interests that are not based on normative conditionality. Therefore, the EU's partnership by conditionality was not a 'fact of life,' obvious-best solution even with the substantial incentivisation aimed at attracting voluntary participation and compliance (Fairclough 2003: 91-92, 210; European Commission 2015). Additionally, normative frameworks and conditionality do not work in every context, and whether they work at all to produce genuine, sustainable change is disputable since countries can play along and imitate what is expected to reap benefits, then backslide soon after (Sedelmeier 2014, 2017; Kølvråa 2017). Furthermore, although the EU claims to jointly develop with candidate and partner countries the incentivised conditions through which they are meant to acclimate to EU norms and standards, there is a lack of enforcement and an end-point is unclear (European Commission 2011, 2015; Lebanidze 2020; Kakachia et al. 2021).

Additionally, the aim to unite Europe shows evidence that it is still rooted in the soil of old beliefs that designate a wealthier group experiencing a (temporary) period of camaraderie as worthy of dominating and setting the standards for the entire continent (Diez 2005, 2013; Crudu and Eremenko 2012; Kølvråa 2017; Luciani 2020; Williams 2022). This exposes beliefs about not just belonging, but also about who is deserving of power. Examining the discursive construction and implementation of the Eastern Partnership can reveal how sociocultural, political and historical ties within the Eastern Neighbourhood effectively pushed back against these beliefs about an external actor reterritorialising the region, even via normative, soft power.

These ties inform how prevalent identities, including the EU's version of European-ness, are discursively constructed and promoted. Two common discourse frames, othering and 'same-ing', are widely and strategically used to construct, promote, justify, legitimise, transform and deconstruct identities, actions or political positions (Diez 2005; see also de Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1999). Examining this critically through the lens of de- and reterritorialisation shows that discursively constructing, promoting and justifying its normative identity as connected to national and regional identities was not enough for the EU to achieve reterritorialisation. The identity discourses ultimately positioned the EU against regional and national ties, beliefs and perspectives, thus preventing reterritorialisation of the Eastern Neighbourhood region (Bolkvadze et al. 2014; Romanova 2016; Delcour 2018a, 2018b; Williams 2022).

The following section addresses how the EU promoted its EU-ropeanisation problem-solution narrative through othering and same-ing identity discourses. More specifically, the tracing of the EU/European identity discourse, and the subsequent responses and outcomes, shows how it promoted a transformation mission comprised of incompatible objectives. While reterritorialisation would be the degree of transformation necessary to achieve the Eastern Partnership's initial deep, comprehensive ambitions, the EU always lacked both the perspective and the power to do this. The regional transformation mission was nevertheless based on longstanding beliefs about West/East and Global North/Global South identities rooted in colonial and imperial practices. In other words, it aimed to achieve regional transformation based on timeworn identities without wielding the same power and physically violent means used during past colonial and imperial periods in Europe. Nevertheless, the past violence attributed to those identities is held in regional

memory, which can be triggered by discursive othering and same-ing, thus inspiring the desire to establish national identities without external pressures.

IDENTITY AND RETERRITORIALISATION: THE ROLE OF OTHERING AND 'SAME-ING' DISCOURSES

Unlike the lighter Europeanisation of similar, relatively stable countries that the EU achieved in the 1990s through integrating already common policies (Schimmelfennig 2001), its eastern enlargements were taxing (Crudu and Eremenko 2012; Sedelmeier 2014, 2017; Stanivukovic 2018). It was therefore a risk to attempt additional replication in even further dissimilar countries, even if at a slower pace. The EU's regional approach has been well documented as the EU's Europeanisation efforts have moved further to the south and the east across Europe. However, this regional focus overlooks intervening identity perspectives and beliefs. As this section explains, a critical miscalculation in the EU's Europeanisation was to construct policy mechanisms from the assumption that perspectives on the EU throughout the region directly reflected its self-identity as a powerful, attractive force for good (European Commission 2015).

While the EU claims its membership requirements are based on geography and core norms, sociocultural values and historical connections are still found in the discourse on who the EU is, what it stands for and how it behaves. The EU's claim to a strong 'western' identity was a central focus when considering eastern enlargement (Thomas 2006, 2016; Crudu and Eremenko 2012; Seybert 2012). As such, the potential Central and Eastern European candidates presented the case that they in fact had always been 'western' and 'a part of Europe', citing historical references like the Austro-Hungarian empire, and emphasising that they were executing a sociopolitical transition towards western-style, liberal democracy (Ramet 2007; Crudu and Eremenko 2012; Seybert 2012; Thomas 2016; Stanivukovic 2018).

Perhaps these countries made their case, or perhaps nothing could be a stronger signal that the EU is 'the most important normative power in the world' (Peterson and Barroso 2008: 69) than to have so many countries attempt to become members. Or, at least this was the story coming from Brussels about the EU and its external action (Peterson and Barroso 2008; EEAS 2016). This narrative advocated for the Eastern Neighbourhood to strive to be good enough for the EU, and thereby resolve domestic issues by 'imitating' (Kølvraa 2017) the EU-ropean identity to reach some EU-determined standard. As such, a perceived benefit of the eastern enlargement for the EU was the opportunity to establish the 'good-Other' identity and declare itself the better and more responsible 'force for good' alternative to competing global powers (Thomas 2016: 3; see also Peterson and Barroso 2008; Stewart 2011). As discussed, the problem-solution narrative proposing the EU as the solution to regional problems was used to justify pursuing this benefit, aiming to represent it as a benefit for the continent, not just the EU.

In order to sell its problem-solution narrative, the EU strategically framed it both internally and externally with identity features claiming 'friendly' sameness, or 'same-ing', and 'othering', or discursively positioning actors as for or against others (de Cillia et al. 1999; Diez 2005; Reinke de Buitrago 2012; Horký-Hlucháň and Kratochvíl 2014; see also van Leeuwen and Wodak 1999, 92 'we group/they group'). While constructing membership standards is itself a norm in international organisations, the EU opted for a particularly comprehensive norm integration platform that, as is now observed, requires substantial power and authority to be realised and sustained (Kølvraa 2017; Luciani 2020; Williams 2022). Its same-ing discourse strategy to convince others that it can be trusted with such power, and that it also trusts its members to voluntarily comply in return, relies on shared 'EU-ropean' values and normative positions. Furthermore, as mentioned, this discourse strategy is framed with the 'EU-ropean identity' device to sell the Eastern Partner countries

on the idea that EU norm compliance would bring them into the EU's Europe and solve their instability problem (Delcour 2011, 2015; European Commission 2011, 2015; Simão 2013; EEAS 2016; Kølvråa 2017).

Guided by the norms and conditions detailed in EU partnership agreements, the targeted partner countries were expected to voluntarily commit to actively setting and implementing a comprehensive domestic reforms agenda. This is critical to the core identity discourse on ethical normative conditionality that asserts that countries willingly and voluntarily comply with EU norms and conditions, therefore justifying and legitimising the EU's authority as the norm-setter and values-exporter.

However, reaching the EU's stated standards can be a grand ambition for countries experiencing sociopolitical and economic transitions in complex, tense regions – both abroad and internally. 'Below EU standards' is a framing device in an othering discourse strategy that has been constructed and promoted as a particular problem for which the EU and its agenda is the solution (Delcour 2011, 2015, 2018a, 2018b; European Commission 2011, 2015; EEAS 2016). Yet, the recent social and political norm divergence of eastern enlargement members, such as Hungary and Poland, reveal that the imbalanced internal mechanisms that constrain the EU without similarly controlling member states were not resolved prior to enlargement and remain a problem (Meijers and van der Veer 2019; Stubbs and Lendvai-Bainton 2019). Additionally, enduring post-crisis economic decline in certain EU countries, like Italy and Spain, contradict the EU's economic progress norm (Picot and Tassinari 2017; Badell et al. 2019), and shocking reactions to migration in Mediterranean countries (UN 2020; Stevis-Gridneff and Shoumali 2023; Vasques 2023) violate its human rights and rule of law norms.

This divergence among EU countries and internal lack of EU norm compliance contradict the integration platform that requires members to be facsimiles in terms of domestic policy norm implementation in order to function as a collective. These internal inconsistencies controvert EU norm diffusion and integration mechanisms, as well as the surrounding narratives. Furthermore, if EU countries clash regarding EU norms and how to implement them, it challenges the notion that a functional internal EU normative mechanism even exists to be exported or promoted abroad in the first place. Further still, if the limitations of the EU's internal integration platform persist and continue to produce unfavourable outcomes, mobilising it externally is likely to yield similarly unwanted outcomes. In brief, the aim to export and reproduce itself abroad will reproduce existing internal inconsistencies as well.

It is also particularly relevant that the EU claimed to base its core membership norms and integrationist platform on the United Nations Charter (European Union 2007), despite the 'distinctly European' regionalism and Europeanisation (de Franco et al. 2015; see also Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Making a fundamental United Nations connection strategically situates the EU in a now normalised global system of institutionalised intergovernmental organisations, aiming to implicate sameness with an established organisational identity. As mentioned, the normalisation of intergovernmental organisations reconfigured an 'acceptable' form of territorialisation. The Cold War period following the Second World War, roughly 1945-1989, was a time when many countries hoped to rebuild and form new alliances, which ultimately led to the normalisation of institutionalised multilateral governance administered via organisations like the United Nations and the World Trade Organization among many others (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; see also Delcour 2015, 2018b). These global intergovernmental initiatives later produced regional intergovernmental organisations around the globe that were continental, transcontinental or subregional. While global and regional multilateral governance blossomed, breakdowns and wars still nevertheless occurred, at times spurred by territorial conflict. In the late 1980s, the intergovernmental organisations began to

intervene in emerging conflicts as relative outsiders aiming to negotiate peace and act as catalysts for rebuilding countries and regions with the consent and participation of their governments (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; see also Delcour 2011, 2015; Seybert 2012; Simão 2013; Stanivokovic 2018). As discussed earlier, such interventions were largely justified as humanitarian and peace-seeking within the international community.

Nevertheless, even if humanitarianism is the intention and discursively woven into organisational identities, because the intergovernmental organisations are established and managed by powerful, economically dominant countries, the lines are blurred between their interests and the organisations' interests (Bickerton 2011; de Franco et al. 2015; Delcour 2018b; Stanivokovic 2018; Havlík 2020; Luciani 2020). This is even more pronounced within the EU with its club-membership basis and distinctive regional targeting externally and internally (e.g., *European Union, Neighbourhood Policy*). For a regional actor to establish its own core norms as a regionalised version of state norms, it needs similarity across state contexts and likewise requires the elimination of dissimilar state attributes, which signals a demand for de- and reterritorialisation. However, the EU attempts to use a normative, condition-based soft power that heavily relies on attractiveness internally and externally. This creates a sticking point in that a preference for normative and incentivised conditionality is necessary to affirm the EU's good-Other identity perspective.

Existing research addresses how EU external action mechanisms can function as neocolonial and neocapitalist mechanisms in many external contexts, and even evoke a 'neo-medieval' form in the EU's mission to unite the European continent (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Birchfield 2011; Manners 2011; Crudu and Eremenko 2012; Luciani 2020). Yet, their normative, condition-based approach is not sufficient to secure comprehensive, enduring reterritorialisation because building a new system on top of a divergent old system is not sustainable. The evidence of this was already very apparent before signalling a fourth and fifth eastern enlargement (European Commission 2022; European Parliament 2022a, 2022b). Brexit, the unacceptable treatment of migrants, the backsliding of Central and Eastern European EU countries and the revival of far-right nationalism did not sprout overnight, but were the fruit of deeply rooted identity perspectives, beliefs and practices (Seybert 2012; Sedelmeier 2014; Stanivukovic 2018; Ifversen 2019, 2022). This indicates that the EU's promotion of its self-image and its incentivised policy mechanisms were insufficient to de- and reterritorialise national and European identities, even those held within EU countries. The EU's integrationist and expansionist foundations were constructed from this distorted self-image that does not necessarily reflect others' European identities, or how it is perceived by others throughout the European region it aims to transform and unite. Additionally, this integrationist and expansionist mission is still promoted with the approval of new candidates.

Therefore, clearly, given the evidence that the EU imports as much as it exports in enlargements, an open reflection on how these candidates see the EU and themselves in it – not just a conflation of their views with the EU's self-image – should occur before future accessions.

Furthermore, the candidate and partner countries are aware of the inconsistent messages of belonging, and in their own ways take control of deciding what is enough for their own country that already belongs to Europe geographically, historically and culturally (Williams 2022; see also Bolkvadze et al. 2014; Kakachia et al. 2021). This confirms that, despite the region-building approach, the different domestic contexts of the Eastern Partners interact differently with the EU, thus explaining the different partnership outcomes (European Commission 2015; Burlyuk 2017; Williams 2022). Consequently, Eastern Partnership countries whose domestic contexts are resistant or not amenable to the domestic changes entailed in EU policy diffusion may seek beneficial partnerships

elsewhere. Armenia and Belarus have demonstrated this with their membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, which strongly restricts the ability to form a deep, comprehensive trade agreement with the EU or other similar strategic partners (Popescu 2014). As such, it can be said that the EU would then need to attain and employ hegemonic power to reterritorialise or shape the reterritorialisation of these countries.

Nevertheless, the various manifestations of reterritorialisation in formerly Soviet countries are evident. While the EU was developing its transformation and integration mission, the countries in the targeted Eastern Neighbourhood were (re)building their own sociocultural and political ties, as well as re-evaluating their historical ties beyond the Soviet era. The partner countries' own domestic contexts, national identities and ties between and among culture, people and territory limited the EU's normative, 'soft power' approach to Europeanisation as reterritorialisation. While this demonstrates that comprehensive and sustainable deterritorialisation must occur before an external (nonviolent) actor can embed its own norms and values, it also emphasises the power in a country rebuilding and reconstructing its own identity at the national level, even for small states like the Eastern Partnership countries.

In brief, the EU attempted to define and justify its expansionism and power-seeking behaviour as a regional 'force for good' solution to a post-communist problem by relying on its beliefs about western, Global North, and intergovernmental organisational identities. The proposed solution packaged the 'reterritorialisation of power away from the central state' (Stanivukovic 2018: 61) towards the EU/Brussels as a partnership for region-building led by an experienced actor that has already achieved desired objectives (Peterson and Barroso 2008; Delcour 2011, 2015; Simão 2013; Stanivukovic 2018). Given the mission to unite and integrate across the European continent, the region-building aspect is an important component of the EU's Europeanisation formula. It contributes a palatable reason for territorialisation that also supports the 'force for good' narrative about uniting Europe. In other words, it aims to portray the EU and its members as parts of a greater whole – i.e., the European continent including the 'weaker', transitional Eastern Neighbourhood – who must take control of building, shaping and sustaining that whole. Nevertheless, as the next section will discuss, when the region-building framework was initially operationalised, the stipulations on who leads, as well as why and how, were not convincing, and the surrounding justification for this approach unravelled when contested.

REGION-BUILDING AS RETERRITORIALISATION

As mentioned, since the Eastern Partnership was enacted, the outcomes corroborate that the countries the EU aims to transform also influence the EU to adapt (Burlyuk 2017; Lebanidze 2020; Kakachia et al. 2021; Williams 2022; see also Crudu and Eremenko 2012; de Franco et al. 2015). This calls into question whether the EU 'is shaping or shaped by' (Delcour 2011) its targeted partner countries, and interrogates the EU's external norm diffusion. Additionally, it emphasises that the EU conceived of this as a one-way process where only its norms and values are exported, without appreciating that expansion and integration would also import the values, views and beliefs of new member countries and their citizens.

The EU planned its partnership by conditionality to function as a top-down process intended to manage the partner countries' transitions via norm-based, or norm-justified, power (Bickerton 2011). Extant research addresses how the EU explained its region-building behaviour as a mission to unite the European continent and transform neighbouring regions in order to 'create' the neighbours it wants (Stewart 2011: 65) by 'establishing good neighbourly relations' (Simão 2008: 56). It wanted to see what it believed to be its own achievements and attractive features and values reflected in its neighbours as a shared regional experience that supersedes borders (European

Commission 2011). However, as discussed, external views of the EU and its identity were not fully appreciated or accounted for when constructing the mechanisms used to pursue this regional goal (European Commission 2015).

Furthermore, while the EU may identify itself as leading norm selection and managing related policy implementation, there is no true enforcement mechanism regarding political positions or general government behaviour for partner countries. Where administrative enforcement of EU-level policy is concerned, the implementation is in the hands of the state, and relies on national systems to develop mechanisms and operations in order to adopt and comply, or not. Even early descriptions of internal EU community-shaming do not corroborate actual enforcement (Schimmelfennig 2001). On the contrary, the EU's internal structure involves, perhaps unintentionally, mechanisms through which member state interests can constrain EU action. Similarly, the EU's external norm diffusion campaign is dependent on voluntarily compliant followers. These issues press upon the EU's ability to execute partnership by conditionality. As a result, the Eastern Partnership instrument and the EU's 'force for good' justification for its region-building approach has unravelled under the weight of the inconsistencies between norm diffusion and conditionality.

As discussed, the EU's reliance on normative, incentivised conditionality was necessary to construct and affirm the 'good-Other' identity that was furthermore necessary to justify its power-seeking, expansionist behaviour. This formula of incompatible components represents a structural trap where, despite its self-image as a powerful leader, the EU must trust that its members will continue to imitate and reproduce the norms they agreed to when they joined. However, as prior examples explained, state interests and identities, both internally and abroad, pushed back against the EU's imbalanced position, requiring Brussels to seek core adjustments to restabilise.

To be fair, perhaps the intentions of the architects and managers of the European Neighbourhood Policy and its Eastern Partnership were not to be domineering or judgemental. Perhaps, however miscalculated or subjective, the intention of these individuals was indeed to do their job of protecting EU progress and EU citizens, which to them meant defining EU relations with surrounding regions. Nevertheless, scientific enquiry should not begin and end with those subjective statements of intent. It may be good and better that EU behaviour as a political actor differs from past or current hegemonic powers. Yet, the policy mechanisms and political processes it designs and implements do not necessarily corroborate that all lessons learned from history are enforced, and this is deserving of critical examination. Therefore, a firm appreciation of the de- and reterritorialisation processes can aid in curtailing the enticement towards the old, familiar and deeply-rooted beliefs and practices. The processes themselves are not necessarily bad or negative, but rather demand exceptional power to achieve. As such, external actors should be vigilant in their understanding of this if the power to shape a country, its identity and its future should be left to the *demos*, the people.

CONCLUSION

This article argued that the perspective of de- and reterritorialisation is a much-needed missing link to understand what did not work in the Eastern Partnership. Future research can apply this perspective to policy mechanisms implemented in other candidate and partner countries, as well as where regionalism is found in EU development policy. As it stands, the EU's brand of Europeanisation underappreciates the realities of sustainable regional transformation, and as such the realities of de- and reterritorialisation. The core issue in this specific brand lies with power, or lack thereof, and the assumption that its self-image as a powerful force for good is reflected and shared abroad. Additionally, the one-way partnership by conditionality feature confronted established competing identities,

and the challenges of national and regional transitions as prior states re-emerged concurrently with the generation of alternative institutions. As such, an external actor requires hegemonic power to de- and/or reterritorialise these states, including a willingness to sever and prevent the reforming of ties to identity, values, history and culture. The EU possesses neither the capacity nor the will for this, and therefore its external action was left with only its normative positions and generic conditions from which to negotiate for its norms-based regional transformation objectives. Given the constraints of the EU's internal functions and the limitations of its integration platform, reproduction of the EU model abroad was not set up for sustainable success.

Contrary to the EU's regional approach, the unique domestic context of each Eastern Partner interacts differently with partnership by conditionality and its entailed normativity, and has thus produced different partnership outcomes. Eastern Partner governments have at times accepted more attractive alternative partnerships over those the EU proposed in order to attain similar incentives without similar norm compliance. The EU's brand of Europeanisation is then not only insufficient without the necessary degree of power to support it, but is also counterproductive to the achievement of stable, sustainable partnership. Instead, it places unnecessary pressure on the ties between and among a culture, a people, a place and identity, which *opposes* the goal to unite Europe. Overall, these ties persist and have represented domestic and regional obstacles to the EU's normative policy integration platform.

When examined from a critical perspective, the story that the Eastern Partnership tells cautions against the ambition of profound, comprehensive regional transformation, particularly under the pretext of partnership. Regional partnerships and initiatives could be catalysts for stability and peace in tense regions, however, in such contexts it may be best to avoid the designation of a norms-promoter, or identifying as the 'most important normative power' (Peterson and Barroso 2008: 69). Given the shared history and culture combined with persistent conflicting positions, a united, peaceful, stable Europe may require the eradication of the Europeanisation goal. The related beliefs and the mentality they shape breed competition and stir old offenses. Building a top-down mechanism for regional transformation on such a foundation, even if 'hard power' or violence are not an option, is likely to continue producing unintended and unfavourable outcomes.

The EU has struggled to find a balance between its staunch normative positions and a sustainable, attractive partnership mechanism that can also influence countries abroad. Rather than fixate on its own community norms, an amended problem-solution perspective that takes a more honest look at the EU identity and self-image could improve the EU's status in the broader Eastern Neighbourhood and beyond. Specifically, one that can account for the fact that, even if changes to be more EU-ropean have occurred, new members will nevertheless import their unique features along with their accession to the Union. Although this was not fully appreciated or accounted for in the beginning, looking through the lens of reterritorialisation moving forward will show a clear image of region-building as it is, rather than the distorted image of what the EU assumed it could achieve.

AUTHOR DETAILS

Tiffany G. Williams, University of Jena, Institute for Caucasus Studies, Accouchierhaus, Room 203, Jenergasse 8, 07743 Jena, Germany [tiffany.williams@uni-jena.de].

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