

The EU's Green Peace Narrative and Russia: Russia's War in Ukraine in the EU's Climate Narrative

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ABSTRACT

The article looks at how Russia's war in Ukraine enters the EU's climate narrative. The European Union has over time developed a narrative of itself as the global green leader. This narrative has increasingly served as a complementary one to the EU's foundational peace narrative. For the peace narrative, the EU's own violent past served as 'the other', whereas for the green leader narrative other world powers less willing to participate in climate action, including the US, China and Russia, have served as 'the others'. The current war merges the two narratives and posits the EU as the peaceful green leader in contrast to the brutal aggression of the authoritarian Russian oil and gas economy. The war discourse, moreover, facilitates the concrete work with the EU's Fit for 55 climate mitigation agenda, and during the second half of 2022, several important milestones were reached in this respect.

KEYWORDS

European Union, Ukraine, Russia, climate policy, narrative analysis

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INTRODUCTION

The European Union's status as a global green leader has long been integral to its strategic priorities. The European Green Deal (EGD) is a recent flagship initiative of the European Commission (EC) under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen, who became President in December 2019. Some analyses have gone as far as suggesting that the EGD is a new defining *"building block to the European economic model"* (BONGARDT – TORRES 2022). A crucial feature of the EGD is the roadmap to make the EU carbon-neutral by 2050. Within this strategy, the 'Fit for 55' legislative package is a crucial first step aiming at reducing EU greenhouse gas emissions by 55 percent by 2030. The package was proposed by the Commission in 2021 in the middle of the Covid pandemic, and when the different proposals entered the legislative procedure the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine began.

There is now beginning a literature on how the previous significant crisis in the EU, the Covid pandemic, influenced the EU's approach to climate mitigation. Some parts of the initial analyses have been optimistic, and considered the pandemic and lockdowns an opportunity for economic transition, whereas others suggested that the crisis and its negative consequences on the economy would lead to a prioritization of economic investment and a decreasing willingness to impose a stringent climate mitigation policy (SEE, E.G., BÄCKSTRAND 2022). At the same time, official EU discourse tended to describe climate policy as key to the recovery from the crisis – an economic opportunity in line with the ecological modernization thesis (HAJER 1997) more recently repackaged under the label 'circular economy' (LEIPOLD 2021). The crucial point of this discourse is that economic growth and sustainable development are combinable. With the EGD and the Fit for 55 legislations, the EU continues along a path of reforms based on utilizing market-based instruments. For one thing, the EU's Emissions Trading System (ETS) has been described as the flagship of EU climate policy.

The EU's climate policy has both an internal and an external dimension. Internally, the policy aimed to enhance solidarity by introducing the social and climate fund to support the citizens and businesses most badly affected by the extension of the ETS. In addition, the ETS already included the modernization fund established primarily to support the less affluent

member-states in their transition to a climate-neutral economy. Externally, there were always several foreign policy components related to the EU's climate policy. The target of climate neutrality by 2050 and the 55 percent reduction target to be achieved by 2030 made the EU the leader among major economies in climate mitigation (VON HOMEYER – OBERTHUR – DUPONT 2022). Historically, the EU's greenhouse gas reduction commitments to the outside world came before the existence of any internal climate policy (SEE, E.G., OBERTHÜR – DUPONT 2021). The EGD and the attempts to reduce the EU's dependence on the import of fossil fuels were also always viewed as foreign policy in relation to oil/gas exporting countries, in particular Russia. Frans Timmermans explicitly warned about potential negative reactions to EU climate policy, in particular, those of Russia already before the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine began (TIMMERMANS 2021). Additionally, other countries are affected in this context, such as those along crucial oil shipping routes (LEONARD ET AL. 2021).

As the impact of the Covid pandemic on the EU's climate policy only begins to emerge, it is even more premature to draw definitive conclusions about the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine. Some early research has suggested that it weakens the East-West conflict within the EU over EU climate policy (VON HOMEYER – OBERTHUR – DUPONT 2022), whereas other studies have indicated a new division line between those states that consider coal as a (temporary) solution to achieving energy security and those which do not and instead focus on renewables, energy efficiency and/or nuclear energy (MIŠÍK – NOSKO 2023). Nevertheless, during the first year of the war in Ukraine, the EU managed to adopt some crucial legislation of the Fit for 55 package. In particular, the Czech Council of the EU Presidency managed to broker an agreement between the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission on an extension of the ETS to nearly all sectors of the economy, including buildings and transport (FEDERAL MINISTRY FOR ECONOMIC AFFAIRS AND CLIMATE ACTION 2022). There were also some setbacks, in particular the reversal of the agreement to ban combustion engines by 2035 (COKELAERE 2023). A more notable change has occurred in the official 'green Europe' narrative; Russia and the war in Ukraine now occupy a sizeable role in it.

Indeed, a significant transformation has emerged within the content of the official 'green Europe' narrative. This narrative, traditionally

centred around environmentally friendly practices, sustainability, and the collective action of European nations to address climate change, has experienced a shift in focus to Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. The role of the war is not just peripheral, but substantial, thus warranting a detailed examination. This shift signifies a geopolitical angle, an addition that has nuanced the existing narrative. It brings into the conversation the implications of the war on energy security, regional stability, and the overall objectives of the 'green Europe' narrative.

This narrative change is what this article aims to decipher. In the following, we first briefly introduce how we understand the role of narratives in the development of European integration and for the EU as an actor in international politics. Thereafter, we provide an examination of the discourse among EU representatives about climate mitigation in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. In the final discussion, we seek to answer the question of how the war is integrated into the EU discourse on climate mitigation and how the narrative can facilitate domestic legitimation as well as the external role of the EU as a green normative power. We argue that as an internal outcome, while identifying Russia as anti-green and as an aggressor in its green narrative, the EU is actually defining itself as the opposite, a process that can be conceptualized as *othering* in the context of collective identity building. Thus, Russia's war in Ukraine allows the EU to merge its foundational narratives of being a peace project and a climate leader. Externally, the transition to climate neutrality, which is argued for by the EU as a normative power in the international arena, is not a win-win situation for everyone, particularly not for exporters of fossil fuel.

THE EU'S FOUNDATIONAL NARRATIVES

Narratives are stories people tell to make sense of their reality. For an evolving political entity such as the EU, narratives are crucial for the domestic process of legitimation but also for its external normative power. In times of crises and increased politicization of the European integration project, narratives are increasingly important, but crises can disrupt narratives that people have utilized to make sense of the world around them.

The foundational narrative of the EU serves as the bedrock upon which the union is built and operates, embodying the principles, aspirations,

and collective identity that bind the member states together. At its core, the EU's foundational narrative is based on the ideals of peace, unity, and prosperity. It was born out of the ashes of World War II, where a desire for lasting peace led nations to bind themselves together in an unprecedented political and economic structure. The narrative encompasses the commitment to prevent the recurrence of the devastating wars that ravaged the continent through cooperation and shared decision-making. Another crucial component of this narrative is the pursuit of prosperity. The EU seeks to create an integrated and thriving economic space where trade barriers are minimized, and economic opportunities are maximized. This commitment is reflected in the establishment of the single market and the shared currency, the Euro. Finally, democracy, human rights, and rule of law form the pillars of the EU's foundational narrative. These principles are said to guide the union's internal policies and its relationships with the outside world, serving as a beacon for countries aspiring to join the EU and acting as a yardstick for the union's actions on the global stage. In essence, the foundational narrative of the EU is a complex tapestry woven from threads of shared history, collective aspirations, and firmly held principles. It serves as both a guide for action and a mirror reflecting the union's identity.

The former Commissioner Olli Rehn claimed in 2005 that the EU was *“a postmodern entity: a community of states that have agreed to pool their sovereignties and obey common laws in order to increase their impact in the world [in contrast to] the mindset of spheres of influence currently prevailing in Russia”* (REHN 2005). However, already at that time, critical academic voices warned that in relation to Russia, the risk was that the EU would *“learn from Russia and embrace precisely what it is lauded for having overcome: traditional (realist) geopolitics”* (KLINKE 2012: 930).

Della Sala (2023) suggests that the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine undermines the EU's foundational myth based on achieving peace through interdependence. While facing a concrete military threat the peace narrative, which was confirmed through the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, is not a credible story for the future anymore. However, already prior to the latest stage of Russia's war in Ukraine, research suggested that the initial peace narrative of reconciliation and postwar reconstruction

was gradually replaced by new stories such as the Green Europe narrative

(MANNERS – MURRAY 2016).

We suggest here that while the Russian war undermines the EU's traditional story of facilitating peace through interaction, it simultaneously strengthens the EU's green narrative. The EU's climate policy has been internally contested, which has hampered both the EU's work on climate change policy and its potential global leadership role in this regard, which is referred to as the EU's 'green normative power' (VAN DER HEJDEN 2010). The contestation does not disappear as a consequence of the war, but from this perspective, it generates an increased urgency for coherence. Moreover, even if Della Sala (2023) might be correct in suggesting that the war undermines the EU's traditional view of itself as creating stability in the neighbourhood through interaction, it renders the traditional narrative increased relevance by showing how fragile peace is. Waever (2005) suggested that the EU's other was the continent's own brutal past, but with the war on the Union's border, the 'other' is no longer an abstract interpretation of the past. The following analysis illuminates how the war enables a merger of Green Europe and the peace narrative.

THE GREEN EUROPE NARRATIVE IN TIMES OF WAR

The tensions between the EU and Russia regarding climate policy, let alone the geopolitical tensions between them, began well before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Despite their mutual interdependence in their energy relations, concerns were voiced regarding the reliability of Russian energy companies and contrasting environmental policies (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT 2013). The EU has been criticizing Russia for its lack of ambition, as well as the inconsistencies in its approach to climate change mitigation (GROSS 2021). However, even up until the start of the invasion, there were expressions of hope for a cooperation between the EU and Russia, at least on climate issues. Russia and the EU organized a joint climate conference in 2020¹; speaking at the World Economic Forum in 2021, von der Leyen described climate change as the defining challenge of our time and urged the EU's partners, including Russia, to jointly work on solutions to it together with the EU (WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM 2021). However, just a few days before the invasion, von der Leyen commented on Russia's troop build-up at Ukraine's borders at the Munich Security Conference, promising that

the EU would not rely on a partner that initiated a war on the European continent ^(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022A).

After the invasion, discussions on the domestic energy crisis caused by rising gas and oil prices brought Russia's war in Ukraine into the EU's climate narrative. In a press release published less than two weeks after the invasion, the EC declared the necessity to significantly speed up the commitment to move to renewable energy sources "*in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine*" ^(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022B). In the press release, von der Leyen and Frans Timmermans underscored the urgency of accelerating the EU's clean energy transition by stressing not only that renewable energy is "cheap" and "clean", and has the potential to create new jobs at home, but also that the EU can no longer rely on Russia as an unreliable energy supplier "*who explicitly threatens us.*"

Since then, the EU has consistently included Russia's war in Ukraine in its climate narrative, expanding the focus from energy policy to a more general climate neutrality strategy in line with the EGD. In this narrative, the EU is presented as a peaceful and green world leader, while Russia is portrayed as an aggressive and anti-green (fossil fuel-dependent) actor who disrupts the regional order. For example, at the World Economic Forum in 2023, von der Leyen highlighted the progress made by the EU in replacing its "dangerous dependency" on Russian fossil fuels with a "net-zero transformation," describing it as an unprecedented shift in industrial, economic and geopolitical realms ^(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2023A). In a statement on energy from September 2022, von der Leyen once again called Russia an "unreliable supplier" which manipulates the market, and which the EU cannot work with ^(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2022C). Describing the steps the EU has taken to free itself from Russia's "grip," von der Leyen called the investment in renewables the most crucial one as they are cheap and will make Europe independent, stating that "*the renewables are really our energy insurance for the future.*"

During the European Parliament Plenary on December 15th 2022, von der Leyen began her speech by detailing the devastating consequences of recent Russian missile attacks on Ukrainian cities, emphasizing that "*this is what we [Europeans] are all standing up against*" ^(EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2023B). Reconfirming that the EU is peaceful (in its support of peace in Ukraine)

and green (in its progress in line with the EGD and move away from fossil fuels), von der Leyen maintained that *“Putin assumed that our support for Ukraine would not last. Today, one year after the war began, he has already lost the energy war he started [against the EU]. [...] Putin’s attempt to blackmail Europe using energy has been an abject failure.”*

This line of argumentation suggests that the EU’s foundational narrative is being reshaped, with a clear distinction being made between the ‘green’ EU and the ‘anti-green’ other, Russia. As noted by Laurence Tubiana, the CEO of the European Climate Foundation, during COP’s discussion on the “Impact of Russia’s War against Ukraine on European Climate Policies”, this is not just about an energy crisis or climate policies; it is about *“reinventing Europe”* because the energy transition is not only a technical issue but also a political and social issue (INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT 2022). This regional integration-facilitating reinvention has started when von der Leyen’s Commission presented the EGD with the promise to ‘green’ Europe – to centre the EU’s activities around climate neutrality targets. But the post-war Europe has both accelerated the green transition to make the Union lead the *“clean tech revolution”* (EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2023C) and demonstrated that it is a peace promoter, especially since the refugee crises in the last decade did not show the EU in a good light in that regard.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION – THE EU, CLIMATE AND RUSSIA

For several decades and even more so in the last few years, the EU is believed to hold leadership in global climate governance. An essential aspect of being a leader is being more ambitious than other entities. However, recently, some scholars have called for a ‘grand climate strategy’ of the EU (OBERTHÜR – DUPONT 2021) to harmonize the normative and diplomatic aspects of this leadership. The EU’s normative leadership has been linked to setting an example but also convincing others to make changes due to the size and relevance of the EU’s single market. Increasingly, however, the EU leadership in the field cannot ignore that the transition to climate neutrality is not a win-win situation for everyone, especially in the short term; exporters of fossil fuel lose not only income but also influence over the EU and, more generally, power in the international system.

The disappearing EU market for oil and gas affects not only Russia but also other major exporters such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and countries in the Middle East and Africa (LEONARD ET AL. 2021). For Russia, the war in Ukraine is likely to mean that the EU market will soon disappear completely, especially considering that market analysts had already predicted a fall in Russian GDP growth as a consequence of climate mitigation measures elsewhere (MAKAROV ET AL. 2020). If the EU's normative leadership is successful, this will mean a gradual decrease of other markets. For Russian 'state capitalism,' the fossil fuel revenues will be difficult to compensate for (KINOSSIAN – MORAGN 2022). Moreover, Putin's popularity and power have been linked to the rising oil prices during the early period of his leadership, which was combined with the process of nationalization (DRESSEN 2014).

For the EU, the war can potentially facilitate internal coherence. The Czech Republic, a country often described as being reluctant at best when it comes to EU climate policies (SEE, E.G., BRAUN 2019), held the EU Council presidency during the second half of 2022. Despite the country's opposition criticizing the Green Deal for contributing to increased energy prices, the government moderated its critique in this regard and stressed the need for a transfer to a carbon-neutral energy mix that would make the country more independent. However, the increased prices in Czechia, as in other countries of the EU, also led to an increase in coal use.

In this analysis, we have proposed that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine has catalyzed a unique convergence within the EU's foundational narratives. This convergence is between the EU as a peace project – historically dedicated to preventing conflict through integration – and the EU as a climate leader committed to environmental sustainability and spearheading global green initiatives. As such, a pertinent question arises: is the EU's response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine a reflection of a broader trend towards the EU behaving as a more traditional power in the sphere of international relations?

The EU began imposing sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine situation as early as 2014, and in 2023, another round of sanctions was enacted. These actions indicate an increasing willingness to use economic power to influence international affairs, a characteristic more typical of traditional state actors. Moreover, the EU's decision to supply arms to Ukraine,

particularly since the start of the full-scale Russian invasion, marks a novel and significant step in its external policy.

However, these actions, suggesting a shift towards the EU acting as a conventional power, do not necessarily undermine its foundational narrative of being a peace project. In fact, they could be seen as a reaffirmation of this narrative. By standing up against aggression, the EU is demonstrating its commitment to maintaining peace and stability within its borders and its neighbouring regions. It is signalling that it is prepared to take necessary measures to safeguard its values and principles.

When we bring into the mix the narrative of the EU as a global climate leader, the situation becomes even more nuanced. The EU's actions can be interpreted not only as an attempt to maintain peace but also as an effort to safeguard its green initiatives. This combination of peacekeeping and environmental stewardship has given rise to what might be termed as the 'green peace' narrative. This narrative, if sustained, could foster domestic legitimacy and earn external recognition, enhancing the EU's standing as a unique and influential actor on the global stage.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See the conference agenda here: <<https://www.eas.europa.eu/delegations/russia/first-eu-russia-climate-conference-dialogue-climate-policy-and-next-steps-en>>.

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