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To cite this article: Veronica Anghel (22 Sep 2025): Why the EU is a geopolitical power: wartime enlargement, integration, and reform, Journal of European Public Policy, DOI: [10.1080/13501763.2025.2558974](https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2558974)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2558974>



Published online: 22 Sep 2025.



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INTRODUCTION



Why the EU is a geopolitical power: wartime enlargement, integration, and reform

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ABSTRACT

The European Union is undergoing strategic redefinition through wartime conditions and shifting global orders, seeking to position itself as a geopolitical power. Enlargement and deeper integration are increasingly framed as instruments to achieve EU geopolitical goals. Since 2019, EU leaders have embraced the language of power and strategy, a shift accelerated by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Yet it remains unclear how the EU – an actor without a unified national interest or classic statehood – can operationalise a geopolitical agenda grounded in traditionally state-centric logics. How is the EU achieving power-maximising goals beyond its borders? Building on the contributions to this special issue, this article argues that neither realist nor critical geopolitics sufficiently capture the EU's hybrid geopolitical practice. Instead, it advances a framework of *relational geopolitics* to explain how the EU simultaneously pursues deterrence – a classic geopolitical move – and constructs a broader 'security crisis space' grounded in spatial complexity, local agency, and the co-production of order – a strategy best described through the filter of relationality. Enlargement is central to this approach, functioning both as a tool of influence and as a mechanism for reshaping the EU's strategic identity under wartime conditions.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 26 August 2025; Accepted 4 September 2025

KEYWORDS Geopolitics; relational IR; enlargement; Russia-Ukraine War; integration

Introduction

When Ursula von der Leyen pledged to lead a 'geopolitical Commission' in 2019, she signalled a striking departure from the European Union's traditional self-image (European Commission, 2024). Alongside EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell's call for the EU to 'learn to use the language of power' (2020) and Emmanuel Macron's warning that the continent could 'disappear geopolitically' if it failed to act strategically (2019), this new rhetoric evoked a logic long thought alien to the EU project. From its inception, European integration

aimed to transcend the zero-sum imperatives of power politics. Its founding vision, shaped by Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman, rested on the promise of interdependence, shared sovereignty, and a security order rooted in rules and institutions, not raw power. Today, however, the vocabulary of geopolitics is no longer confined to great state powers and realist theorists. It has become so embedded in the EU's lexicon that it seems there is no alternative to geopolitics (Bialasiewicz, 2022).

Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine only amplified the pursuit of a geopolitical shift in the EU's self-perception and agenda (Håkansson, 2023; Adriaensen *et al.*, 2025). The EU began a major process of reforms, including in its international relations, to respond to the Russian threat and rapidly changing global orders. The EU also responded to Russia's belligerence by deciding to expand its membership – not only to Ukraine, but also to Moldova, Georgia, and the countries of the Western Balkans.

EU leaders did not act this way solely out of solidarity with the people of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Nor did these countries significantly improve on the benchmarks used to assess potential EU member states overnight. Rather, the EU acted strategically when it chose to entangle its resources and security so deeply with those of threatened neighbouring states – especially with a country whose sovereignty Russia seeks to violently erase. This geopolitical message of the EU's pursuit of self-interest recurs throughout key documents and public speeches on enlargement where such language is pervasive: 'EU enlargement is a driving force for long-term stability, peace and prosperity across the continent. EU membership is a geostrategic investment in a strong, stable and united Europe' (European Commission, 2023, p. 2).

What remains unclear is how the EU's pursuit of geopolitics as a problem-solving framework grounded in power can serve the 'long-term stability, peace and prosperity' goals of European decision-makers. The EU lacks the fundamental state-centric features typically associated with geopolitical actors capable of unilateral power projection. It is not a state and it lacks a singular, unified 'national interest' to guide its actions. Its foreign and defence policy remains largely under the control of member states, complicating the implementation of coherent external strategies or the use of hard power instruments. As Eugénia da Conceição-Heldt and Sophie Meunier aptly put it, 'the EU resembles more a cacophony of voices unable to develop or defend a common position over time' (2014, p. 961). Moreover, its borders are fluid and porous, enabling the EU to engage with outsiders through differentiated and evolving forms of integration, yet always struggling to control access to its material and immaterial resources (Anghel & Jones, 2025a; Demirci *et al.*, 2025).

While the EU lacks the institutional capacity to engage in classic geopolitics, it also cannot be neatly classified as an international organisation

through which member states pursue their geopolitical objectives (Howorth, 2010). It possesses more agency and collective ability than a mere intergovernmental forum designed to serve national interests beyond the EU's borders. Indeed, it is actively pursuing (albeit incomplete) institutional reforms aimed at expanding EU-level agency – sometimes at the expense of national sovereignty (Draghi, 2024; Letta, 2024; Niinistö, 2024). If the absence of a unified foreign policy does not entirely preclude geopolitical agency, how then should we conceptualise the EU's distinctive mode of spatial action and order production? In short, what kind of analytical framework can capture a multi-level, dynamic, and processual form of geopolitics?

Building on the contributions in this special issue and related scholarship, this article theorises the *relational geopolitics* embodied by the EU. It argues that wartime conditions have revealed how the EU navigates multiple geopolitical logics, blending classic strategies of deterrence and power projection with critical geopolitical insights that challenge the notion of geopolitics as a zero-sum contest among great powers. This hybrid approach reflects the EU's incomplete statehood and diffuse identity – and underscores the centrality of enlargement in its mode of external engagement (Slootmaeckers, 2025).

Methodologically, this article embraces theoretical pluralism. Theoretical pluralism is widely accepted in contemporary International Relations (IR), and many scholars advocate analytical eclecticism (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010) as a way to bridge paradigms in order to better explain real-world complexity. Relational geopolitics is such a hybrid approach where power is primarily material, interest-driven, and institutional, but is also constituted through relationships, embedded knowledge, and diffuse interactions. The empirical application is a descriptive (non-exhaustive) account of the EU's mechanisms for relational geopolitics.

In line with the suggestions of analytical eclecticism, this theoretical framework – along with the illustrations provided by the contributions in the special issue – reflects more closely how power is often exercised in practice. On one level, the EU engages in classic geopolitical behaviour by integrating Ukraine economically, militarily and politically, thereby signalling that further Russian aggression will carry strategic costs. It extends this deterrent posture through intensified engagement with other states facing Russian military or hybrid threats, particularly in its Eastern neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans. And it reforms its coordination capacity, supply chain structures, military infrastructure and strategy building technologies towards further integration. At the same time, the EU operates beyond fixed territoriality, constructing what might be called a 'security crisis space' through co-created dense economic, legal, social, military, and normative linkages with countries beyond its formal borders. This logic reflects a relational understanding of political interactions: one that takes local conditions seriously,

acknowledges dispersed agency, including that of candidate states (Anghel & Jones, 2022), and considers critical views where power operates not despite geography but *through* geography – shaped by distance, embedded relations, and contested meanings of space (Tuathail, 2017).

To illustrate how relational geopolitics works, this article proceeds as follows: The first section presents the theoretical foundations of relational geopolitics and argues that neither geopolitical intellectual thought nor relationality alone explains the problem-solving strategic interactions of a multi-level actor (like the EU). It introduces the hybrid frame of relational geopolitics, drawing on existing international relations literature and highlighting how this perspective on power projection differs from other approaches. The second section introduces previous literature that directly or indirectly identified the EU's use of relationality in external relations and connects those studies to others illustrating the EU's geopolitical turn. It identifies the role of enlargement in the EU's power-projection agenda. The third section comparatively reviews the main contributions to the 'Wartime Europe: EU Integration, Reform and Enlargement' Special Issue and categorises (non-exhaustive) relational mechanisms deployed by a geopolitical EU. Several articles in this special issue illustrate the EU's capacity and willingness to develop different cross-border governance frameworks (Bruszt & Langbein, 2025; Rabinovych, 2024; Thiemann *et al.*, 2025), candidate countries' agency in institutional co-production (Buzogány & Varga, 2025; Vukov, 2025) and the EU's patterns to differently narrate the meaning and content of enlargement depending on the evolution of EU interactions with its neighbours or the interests of its elites (Ghincea & Pleşca, 2025; Scicluna, 2025). The conclusion follows.

The theoretical foundations of relational geopolitics

Geopolitics is a controversial topic. In the twentieth century, it was frequently mobilised as a pseudo-scientific framework to legitimize militarist, racist, fascist, and imperial ambitions of major state powers in the run up to World War II (Antonsich, 2008; Natter, 2003). The apparent utility of the term throughout the Cold War period has put some distance between the concept's loaded past and its present use. The concept has since been reclaimed by scholars from different disciplines and methodological traditions (Bachmann & Białasiewicz, 2020).

In broad analytical terms, geopolitics can be understood in two main ways: as a realist (state-centric, power-maximising), and policy-oriented framework rooted in geography (classic geopolitics), and as a critical, interpretive project that exposes how spatial and strategic knowledge is constructed and deployed (critical geopolitics).¹ The two traditions of understanding geopolitical models appear in opposition, yet they can be mixed in practice, creating

hybrid models for actors' interactions with the outside world. Given the extend use of the term, often without a robust understanding of its meaning, including by world leaders, it is useful to first briefly review the fundamentals of geopolitical thought.

Classic geopolitics refers to a problem-solving framework that conceptualises and guides foreign policy by treating geographical space as a foundational condition for political life. It provides an instrumental form of knowledge that takes existing power structures for granted and seeks to inform strategic decision-making by political elites (Tuathail, 1999; Wu, 2017). It is thus aligned with political realism in its focus on power, strategic advantage, and the role of geography in shaping global politics.² As such, classic geopolitics serves as a practical and normative theory of statecraft, offering foreign policy advice grounded in a vision of a territorially organised world order. When former EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell claimed that 'Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be' (2020), he borrowed directly from classic problem-solving geopolitical thought.

While the conventional – or classic – view of geopolitics treats geography as an objective and foundational factor in statecraft and foreign policy, there is also a distinct critical tradition that challenges this premise. Critical geopolitics rejects the idea that geography passively shapes politics and instead examines how political actors actively construct spatial representations of the world to justify and exercise power (Kuus, 2017). In this view, geopolitics is not merely about strategic calculation within given geographic constraints but is itself a form of power-laden knowledge production. This critical view scrutinises how maps, narratives, and geopolitical categories (like 'East' and 'West,' 'the Global North' and 'the Global South' or 'Eastern Neighbourhood') are discursively constructed by state elites, intellectuals of statecraft, and institutions to advance particular interests. It shows how these representations are neither neutral nor universal, but embedded in cultural, historical, and institutional power relations. In that sense, Europe is not just a steady territory, but also a collection of constructed meanings and relations that change in time, and which host multiple and overlapping geometries.

Critical geopolitics problematises space and it is not geared towards problem-solving. It argues that spatiality is not confined to territoriality, and it shifts the focus from the 'is' and 'must' of strategic realism to a more reflexive inquiry into *who is speaking, from where, and for what purpose* (Tuathail, 1999). This view is more aligned with issues of identity politics. When EU leaders declare that 'Ukraine is part of our European family' (European Parliament, 2025) they transmit a message that Ukraine is no longer merely approaching Europe; Ukraine is being narrated, enacted, and increasingly institutionalised as part of Europe. But the EU and, in this case, Ukraine, do not stop solely at challenging European identity. In discursive, symbolic

and institutional terms, the EU and Ukraine are co-producing a common identity space and interdependence that transcends formal membership and territorial borders.

Marrying together the two intentions and strategies of the EU – strategic deterrence and co-production – requires a framework that moves beyond the dichotomy between classic and critical geopolitics. While classic geopolitics emphasises material power and fixed territorial interests, and critical geopolitics interrogates how spatial meaning is constructed through discourse, neither alone fully captures the EU’s hybrid geopolitical practice. To make sense of an actor that projects influence not through traditional statecraft but through multi-level, often informal, and negotiated mechanisms, we need other conceptual resources of international relations theory. In particular, the relational turn in IR offers tools for rethinking how actors, space, and power are co-constituted, through multi-level interaction rather than assumed as fixed.

Relationality (or relationism) is rapidly emerging as a key theme in IR, with recent scholarship exploring relational approaches to regional orders and global politics (Fisher-Onar & Kavalski, 2023; Kurki, 2021). Yet applications of this lens remain at an early stage (Petrova & Baranzini, 2025). Anchored in the relational turn in IR (McCourt, 2016; Jackson & Nexon, 1999, 2019) and informed by Qin Yaqing’s relational ontology (2016), relational geopolitics contributes to this emerging literature. It reconceptualises geopolitics as a processual, co-constitutive practice – one in which actors, interests, and spaces are not fixed entities but the evolving outcomes of dynamic interactions. Table 1 summarises the pluralist theoretical underpinning of relational geopolitics.

Yaqing Qin’s formulation of relational international relations posits that the fundamental units of analysis are not sovereign actors or institutions, but relational configurations or processes. In his terms, identity is constituted in relation to others, and action stems not from exogenous preferences but from evolving patterns of relational positioning. The concept of relational

Table 1. Theoretical foundations of relational geopolitics.

Concept / Theory	Focus	Connection to <i>Relational Geopolitics</i>
Relational theory of world politics (Qin, 2016)	Ontology of relations, identity, power	Core foundation for relational ontology
Relational turn in IR (Jackson & Nexon, 2019)	Focus on positions and process	Provides epistemological basis
Critical geopolitics / Geography (Tuathail, 1999).	Spatial power, discourse, territory	Shares focus on geography and power
Complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1973)	Transnational webs, economic connections	Partial relational overlap, more liberal framework
Strategic-relational state (Jessop, 2007)	Power through selective relations	Structural-relational dimension relevant

geopolitics builds on the growing recognition that international politics is not merely a competition among pre-given actors over fixed geographic space, but a dynamic process in which power, identity, and spatial order emerge through relations.

At the same time, relational geopolitics recognises the persistence of power asymmetries among co-constituents and the influence of material interests across identifiable spaces. It integrates insights from liberal theories of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1973), while also recognising that actors strategically select partners when constructing interdependent structures – a practice once attributed solely to states (Jessop, 2007).

To clarify this landscape of geopolitical thinking, Table 2 summarises a 2 × 2 typology structured along two analytical axes: the ontological status of actors (substantialist vs. relational) and the nature of space (territorial/fixed vs. processual/constructed). This framework yields four distinct ideal types of geopolitical reasoning, each offering a different account of how power, space, and identity are configured in world politics.

The first quadrant in Table 2, defined by a substantialist ontology and a territorial conception of space, corresponds to classic geopolitics. Here, the international system is composed of pre-given, self-interested states competing over fixed geographical space. Power is understood in material and spatial terms – primarily as the ability to control land, borders, and strategic chokepoints. Thinkers in this theoretical space treat geography as a permanent constraint and states as autonomous entities maximising security or influence through territorial expansion. In this understanding, international organisations are tools that member states use to maximise their national interests. The EU's enhanced agency and integrated collective governance model that dilutes member states sovereignty goes beyond this limiting role of an international organisation.

Moving vertically within the substantialist column in Table 2, the second quadrant combines a substantialist ontology with a processual view of space, aligning with traditions such as liberal institutionalism and theories

Table 2. Locating relational geopolitics.

	Substantialist (Pre-given actors & interests)	Relational (Actors & space co-produced)
Territorial/Fixed (Space as static, physical, mappable)	Classic Geopolitics: Power as control over territory; fixed geography shapes strategy	Critical Geopolitics: Focus on how elites discursively represent space (e.g., 'heartland'; 'neighbourhood')
Processual/Constructed (Space as made through practice, discourse, interdependence)	Complex Interdependence / Liberal Institutionalism: Actors are fixed but entangled; space shaped by functional ties (e.g., regimes, trade zones)	Relational Geopolitics: Power enacted through evolving spatial relations, practices, institutions and identity co-constitution (e.g., 'security crisis space')

of complex interdependence (Keohane and Nye, 1973). While states are still treated as stable units with endogenous preferences, space is no longer seen as fixed. Instead, it is shaped by transnational flows, institutional linkages, and functional interdependence. Regions, regimes, and economic zones emerge through the increasing density of cross-border interactions. However, these approaches generally stop short of rethinking the ontological status of the actors involved.

The third quadrant, overlapping relational ontology but maintaining a territorial understanding of space, is best exemplified by critical geopolitics. This tradition problematises how space is represented and instrumentalized through discourse, particularly by political elites and strategic communities. It draws attention to how geopolitical narratives such as 'buffer zones,' 'civilizational frontiers,' or 'the heartland' are socially constructed to legitimize political action. Yet while it deconstructs spatial imaginaries, critical geopolitics often retains the assumption of coherent actor categories – such as 'the West' – thus limiting its embrace of full relationality at multiple levels of interaction. Critical geopolitics also stays away from policy prescriptions and grand strategy design. Unlike critical geopolitics, which focuses primarily on how elites represent space, relational geopolitics is concerned with how actors co-produce space through practice – material, institutional, discursive, and normative.

The fourth quadrant, which this article terms relational geopolitics, combines a pragmatic relational ontology with a constructivist conception of space. Relational geopolitics shares with substantialist frameworks a recognition that material power, territorial positioning, and strategic intent matter for understanding how international actors pursue their interests. It also takes seriously the constraints and affordances of geography and acknowledges that geopolitical agency involves shaping spatial arrangements to deter adversaries and secure influence (Cadier, 2018). Like classic geopolitics, relational geopolitics sees power projection as an intentional, pragmatic process shaped by competitive environments. However, it departs from the static, state-centric ontology of classical geopolitics by emphasising that both space and actors are co-constituted through dynamic interaction. In this sense, relational geopolitics builds on – rather than rejects – the foundational insights of classic geopolitics, but reworks them through a processual lens that accounts for institutional embeddedness, evolving partnerships, and identity formation.

Relational geopolitics shares with interdependence theory a sensitivity to interconnection and mutual influence, but it diverges by treating interdependence not as an exogenous constraint on state behaviour but as a constitutive process of spatial power formation, one that also affects creates actors through feedback loops.

Mechanisms of spatial ordering in relational geopolitics include:

- **Norm diffusion and localisation**, whereby global norms (e.g., territorial integrity, regional cooperation) are adapted and re-embedded in specific spatial contexts;
- **Strategic alignment**, through which actors co-constitute regions not simply by locating themselves within them, but by invoking, negotiating, and institutionalising them through joint action;
- **Hard power motivations**, where the construction of shared spaces is shaped by the relational deployment of deterrence (i.e., the cost of aggression is raised through institutional embeddedness, co-dependence, and the diffusion of risk across allies and partners);
- **Narrative framing and identity building**, which renders certain spatial arrangements intelligible and legitimate;
- **Material entanglement**, such as infrastructure and supply chain interdependencies, which produce spatial webs that structure power asymmetrically yet relationally;
- **Feedback loops**, in which interconnected actors change as a result of their interaction.

In brief, where classical geopolitics privileges territorial control, physical geography, and material capabilities, and critical geopolitics centres on the discursive construction of space, relational geopolitics introduces a more process-oriented ontology. It rejects the substantialist assumption that actors operate upon a static, pre-given space and instead views space as co-produced through intersubjective practices, narratives, hard power motivations and normative alignments.

In this view, power is not a resource actors (including non-state actors) possess and impose over space, but something enacted through spatial relationships. At the same time, relational geopolitics does not exclude pragmatism or strategic intention in the projection of power and the selection of partners. Similar to substantialist perspectives, it recognises the structural asymmetry between partners. While partners co-constitute a shared security space – partly through the narration of a common identity – they also seek to project power through this very space and to deter hostile intervention within it.

The relational geopolitics framework provides a sharper lens for analysing contemporary phenomena that elude classical and critical geopolitical models: the formation of infrastructural regions, the emergence of hybrid security zones, and the strategic uses of non-territorial networks such as digital platforms or supply chains. These phenomena are not reducible to cartographic maps or discursive imaginaries alone – they are relational spaces enacted and maintained (or erased) through evolving pragmatic interactions.

The utility of this concept is that it invites scholars and practitioners alike to move beyond static models of geography and embrace a more fluid,

embedded, and co-constitutive view of global politics – one where power is exercised not over space, but *through* it. The European Union is a premier example of relational geopolitics at work.

EU relational geopolitics and the role of enlargement

Scholarly works that apply directly or indirectly the relational frame to map EU foreign politics often do so from the problematising perspective of critical geopolitical theory. Problem solving remains outside of the scope of critical thinking. Thus, when employed in isolation from geopolitical assumptions, relationality alone often overlooks the EU's material and institutional needs for strategic action that considers security and economic prosperity under wartime conditions and uncertainty surrounding continued U.S. security guarantees.

This article contributes to IR theory by integrating the concept of relational geopolitics into the analysis of EU external action from a policy-driven perspective – maintaining a focus on EU agency in the co-creation of collaborative frameworks with external actors while recognising the strategic and spatial dimensions of its foreign policy. Relational geopolitics offers a conceptual bridge between material power and co-constituted political space, capturing how the EU engages in geopolitics not despite, but through, its multi-level and hybrid nature.

Recent scholarship in numerous fields from political economy to comparative politics to EU studies, including contributions in this special issue, often hint at the relationality of EU foreign policy and suggest that the EU's external interactions unfold not through unilateral projection, but through the co-creation of goals, practices, and identities with third countries. Previous studies show these countries or communities actively shape their own relationships with the EU, and in doing so, influence the EU's policies and evolving identity (Gazsi, 2025; Gstöhl & Frommelt, 2023; Lavenex & Öberg, 2023; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009). The dynamic is often one of interaction rather than imposition – of relational co-production rather than one-way transfer (Slootmaeckers, 2025).

At the same time, scholarship has documented the EU's intentional geopolitical turn – along with its sister concept of *geo-economics* (see Herranz-Surrallés *et al.*, 2024). Academic research demonstrates the EU's evolution into a geopolitical actor: through defence and strategic alignment with its neighbourhood (e.g., coordinated stances on Ukraine, see Nitoiu & Sus, 2018; Raik *et al.*, 2024), via economic statecraft and market instruments (e.g., digital infrastructure, industrial policy, see Seidl & Schmitz, 2024), and by institutional innovation and normative recalibration (e.g., investing in autonomy, adjusting global strategies, see Bauerle Danzman & Meunier, 2024).

Such influential, yet often disconnected work, would benefit from the bridging vocabulary of relational geopolitics – a theoretical step forward that both

comparativists and IR scholars could relate to. This concept reframes EU foreign policy in its geopolitical era as a project of relational governance and transformation, rather than one of territorial domination. That project is not state-centric; it acknowledges that the EU operates through dense, multi-level ties – including between firms, citizens, and institutions across and beyond EU borders (Anghel & Jones, 2025b). This model reflects a more reflexive geopolitical posture, one that acknowledges dispersed authority, foregrounds local agency, and recognises power as spatially embedded and context-sensitive. It also moves away from Eurocentric accounts of EU foreign policy, embracing a more decentred and mutually constituted understanding of external relations (Keuleers *et al.*, 2016; Fisher-Onar and Nicolaidis, 2013).

This relational perspective resonates with Manners (2002) concept of normative power Europe, which casts the EU as a transformative actor shaping its environment through legal harmonisation and shared regulatory regimes. Yet the EU's evolving geopolitical posture – particularly under wartime conditions – reveals the limitations of normative power as an explanatory framework. As Antoaneta Dimitrova (2002, 2004) previously observed, the EU does not merely diffuse norms; it aspires to reshape its neighbourhood through structured, strategic engagement. Moreover, in the context of war and the fragility of U.S.-EU security ties (Anghel & Jones, 2024; Meijer & Brooks, 2021), the EU is also investing in traditional hard-power defence and instruments of power projection (European Commission, 2025; Håkansson, 2021).

The power asymmetry between the EU and candidate states or neighbours remains a fact and a limitation on the extent to which relationality alone can define the EU's posture. The cooperation frameworks, narratives and interdependencies that the EU co-creates and develops remains strategic and policy-oriented. The EU's technocratic, integrationist, and accession-linked practices – particularly enlargement – are tools through which geopolitics is also enacted. As the contributions to this special issue show, the deployment of these tools is also self-interested, and can be provisional in nature.

In a policy environment where the EU is preparing to operate in an era of great power competition, that strategic engagement need not be geographically limited. While this article focuses on the EU's neighbourhood in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and Moscow's growing hostility toward Europe, the relational geopolitics framework has broader analytical reach. It enables a reinterpretation of EU geopolitical instruments under shifting global orders – for example, by envisioning a redefined 'transatlantic community' that includes willing Latin American and Caribbean countries. By decentring the state and foregrounding interdependence, this framework also helps policymakers engage with scenarios that may initially appear far-fetched – such as the idea of EU membership for Canada (Economist, 2025) – by providing a conceptual lens through which to explore the evolving spatial logic of integration and affiliation in a multipolar world.

At the core of relational geopolitical logics lies the EU's enlargement policy, which has become a central instrument in its geopolitical repertoire. Enlargement is not merely a foreign policy tool; it is a mechanism for strategic influence, normative co-creation, and identity transformation. It allows the EU to exercise geopolitical agency by binding candidate countries into dense webs of rules, institutions, and mutual obligations. As such, enlargement illustrates how the EU's relational mode of power projection operates: not through conquest or imposition, but through strategic entanglement and co-produced integration.

This reconceptualization departs from earlier theories that viewed enlargement primarily through normative or economic lenses. While prior scholarship emphasised the diffusion of EU norms (Manners, 2002), external governance (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009), or stabilisation (Dimitrova, 2002), a relational geopolitics perspective captures how enlargement is also about spatial and identity transformation under conditions of geopolitical transformations. The relational geopolitical EU model also predicts the EU's choice to strengthen its external borders with some actors and not others (Demirci *et al.*, 2025).

In this light, enlargement is not merely an extension of territory or institutions akin to imperial practices. It is a relational geopolitical technology: a mechanism through which the EU reconfigures not just its neighbourhood, but its own strategic identity. The contributions in this special issue reflect this dynamic at work, as well as suggest room for further applications and extensions of this theoretical framework.

The practice of EU relational geopolitics

The eight studies in the 'Wartime Europe: EU Integration, Reform and Enlargement' Special Issue, while diverse in focus and methodology, converge around a central insight: EU enlargement is not a linear process of norm export or territorial expansion. Instead, it operates as a multidimensional practice of relational geopolitics. As a practice of relational geopolitics, the EU and candidate countries co-produce strategic alignments, institutional entanglements, and governance spaces through dynamic, often contested and often fragile interactions. This section traces how these contributions reveal the workings of relational geopolitics across sectoral, institutional, and temporal domains.

The interactions between the EU and Ukraine exemplify the hybrid logic of relational geopolitics most vividly. This is why several contributions in this special issue focus closely on how these two actors engage with one another. The EU's intensified involvement with Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion is not merely an act of solidarity or a reflection of normative alignment; it constitutes a relational strategy of deterrence and integration.

Through deepened institutional cooperation – such as the €50 billion Ukraine Facility, military entanglements – such as Ukrainian defence production in Denmark, and the discursive anchoring of Ukraine within the ‘European family,’ the EU asserts geopolitical agency. This form of strategic interdependence raises the cost of Russian aggression, which, as a result, increasingly targets not just Ukraine but the EU as a whole. At the same time, the EU co-produces a shared political and legal space through the transformative activities triggered by the enlargement process. Enlargement, in this context, functions both as a symbol of geopolitical commitment and assertiveness and as a mechanism of institutional transformation for all those involved – demonstrating how the EU projects power through relations.

Governing through sectoral entanglement

Several contributions show how specific policy domains become arenas of spatial co-production, rather than vectors of unilateral influence. Buzogány and Varga’s analysis of the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in Ukraine highlights how enlargement becomes a battleground over land governance, resource redistribution, and domestic sovereignty. Here, integration is not a smooth extension of the *acquis* but a conflictual process shaped by domestic resistance and strategic recalibration. Similarly, Rabinovych’s concept of ‘super-spillover’ captures how market integration during wartime deepens EU-Ukraine ties through functional, legal, and political linkages. Both articles illustrate that space is not pre-given but co-constituted – through subsidy regimes, regulatory infrastructures, and institutional negotiations that tether Ukraine to the EU and the EU to Ukraine even in the absence of membership.

These sectoral entanglements exhibit three key relational mechanisms:

- **Spatial co-production:** Integration is negotiated through specific governance instruments (e.g., land policy, market rules), not imposed wholesale.
- **Contested asymmetry:** EU leverage operates through instruments that simultaneously constrain and empower domestic actors.
- **Relational agency:** Candidate countries actively resist or reshape EU templates, illustrating the non-linear, recursive nature of spatial integration.

Institutional assemblages and infrastructural governance

If Buzogány and Varga, and Rabinovych focus on sectoral governance, Thiemann, Mocanu, and Piroška shift attention to institutional technologies. They show how the EU’s enlargement strategy increasingly relies on financial infrastructures – particularly blended finance – to shape reform trajectories in Ukraine. The emergence of what they call the ‘European Enlargement State’ marks a turn toward infrastructural geopolitics: enlargement enacted

through investment frameworks, bank coordination, and technical project selection. Bruszt and Langbein's concept of the 'Transnational Developmental State' provides a historical precedent, illustrating how enlargement once aimed to mitigate market shocks and promote developmental capacity through technocratic, co-produced state-building.

Together, these studies illuminate the EU's infrastructural turn in relational geopolitics:

- **Enlargement as infrastructural practice:** Geopolitical influence is exerted through investments, pipelines, and development planning rather than formal accession alone.
- **Institutional interdependence:** Enlargement institutions (DG NEAR/DG ENEST, the European Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) do not merely administer funds – they shape governance logics and developmental priorities in candidate countries.
- **Fragile co-production:** These institutional configurations are relationally constituted and historically contingent; they are also fragile and can dissolve if political commitment or societal legitimacy wanes.

Temporal layering and discursive co-production

Ghincea and Pleșca's typology of enlargement logics – transformation, stabilisation, demarcation, and cohabitation – provides a temporal map for understanding how relational geopolitics evolves. Rather than treating the EU's strategy as fixed, they argue that enlargement reflects shifting constellations of internal pressures and external risks. Their model introduces a critical insight: geopolitical agency is relational not only across space and institutions, but also across time. Enlargement strategies emerge from the recalibration of policy logics in response to changing environments and interactions. This temporal lens clarifies why certain relational assemblages persist, mutate, or dissolve over time.

Scicluna adds a discourse-centred layer to the relational argument. Her analysis of von der Leyen's speeches and European Party manifestos shows how enlargement's meaning is not pre-determined, but discursively co-produced across institutions. Enlargement emerges as a hybrid discourse: rhetorically cast as a geopolitical necessity yet procedurally governed by conditionality and technocratic metrics. This institutional dissonance, rather than indicating incoherence, reveals the recursive interactions that constitute EU geopolitical identity. Key relational insights include:

- **Temporal dynamics.** Geopolitical agency is dynamic across time, in response to changing environments and interactions.

- **Discursive sedimentation:** Even as new geopolitical framings emerge, older procedural scripts persist, constraining how strategic ambitions are articulated.
- **Institutional interaction:** The EU speaks with multiple voices – not because of fragmentation alone, but because its geopolitical agency is relationally enacted across institutional sites with different temporalities, mandates, and audiences.

Economic embeddedness and domestic coalition shifts

Vukov's comparative study of Romania and Serbia shows how economic governance instruments – not just formal conditionality – reorder domestic state – society relations. By embedding competition rules and procurement oversight early in the process, the EU fosters new political economies and redistributes elite incentives. This echoes relational theories of state transformation: domestic change is not simply a reaction to external pressure, but the result of interdependent restructuring across sectors, institutions, and coalitions.

Her contribution reinforces three relational mechanisms:

- **Governance through economic ties:** Spatial transformation occurs via regulatory embedding, not through territorial annexation or legal harmonisation alone.
- **Co-constitution of agency:** EU instruments work when they align with domestic coalition dynamics, not just when they are imposed from above.
- **Path-dependent layering:** The timing and depth of economic integration shape the resilience of domestic institutions over time.

Publics as relational nodes

Finally, Eck and Michel (2025) shift the lens to public opinion, reminding us that geopolitical alignment requires domestic legitimation. Their findings – support for Ukraine in the EU remains strong but uneven – suggest that public attitudes are not merely reflective of elite narratives; they are constitutive of Europe's geopolitical agency.

While positioned squarely within the literature on public attitudes towards foreign policy, the study offers indirect but important insights into how EU geopolitics is constituted through popular legitimacy. Though methodologically and conceptually outside the relational paradigm, Eck and Michel's study complements it by foregrounding the political volatility of geopolitical solidarity. If geopolitics is no longer understood as the projection of material power over territorial space but as the practice of sustaining strategic alignments through institutionalised relationships, then public opinion itself becomes a constitutive site of geopolitical agency. Their data suggests that Europe's geopolitical commitments toward Ukraine are not merely

articulated at the elite level but are also mediated through shifting constellations of public attachment, economic concern, and identity narratives.

If relational geopolitics is about sustaining spatial orders through embedded ties, then public support becomes a condition for relational endurance. The EU's enlargement posture, especially in Ukraine's case, must therefore attend not only to institutional and sectoral relations but also to the volatile terrain of mass politics. Their article underscores that:

- **Publics are co-producers:** Citizens shape the legitimacy, direction, and limits of relational strategies.
- **Legitimation is fragile:** Strategic entanglements can erode if public attachments fray or become politicised.
- **Relational geopolitics is multi-level:** It unfolds not only between Brussels and Kyiv, but also within national publics and media discourses across Europe.

When read alongside articles that examine the EU's institutional and material technologies of enlargement and external engagement – such as those by Vukov, Thiemann *et al.*, or Bruszt and Langbein – this contribution calls attention to the public leg of Europe's relational assemblage. If relational geopolitics entails the production of geopolitical space through dynamic, multi-actor interactions, then the domain of public opinion cannot be treated as epiphenomenal. Instead, it must be integrated into a broader understanding of how Europe's strategic posture is continuously negotiated, sedimented, or disrupted from below.

Together, these eight studies affirm that EU enlargement is a paradigmatic case of relational geopolitics in action. Across sectors, institutions, discourses, and publics, they reveal a form of geopolitical agency enacted not through domination or control, but through entanglement, co-constitution, and contested governance. This relational strategy is not uniform or uncontested: it generates tensions between steering and ownership, between ambition and procedure, between integration and differentiation. But it also illustrates how the EU projects strategic influence without replicating classic modes of power politics.

The analytical task now is to systematize and further test these insights. What emerges is not a singular EU enlargement model, but a repertoire of relational technologies – market infrastructures, development banks, conditionality regimes, discursive framings, public legitimation circuits – through which EU agents govern space, sustain alliances, and co-produce geopolitical futures. Relational geopolitics, then, provides the conceptual grammar to make sense of this repertoire. It shifts the focus from borders to infrastructures, from interests to interactions, from actors to assemblages, from state to non-state actors. Enlargement is not the extension of EU will; it is the negotiation of EU's place.

Conclusion

During their 2025 European Union Studies Association Lifetime Achievement Award ceremony, Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks – authors of *Multi-level Governance and European Integration* (2001) – were asked what they believed would be the next major research frontier in EU studies. Gary Marks replied that we have yet to properly theorise how EU geopolitics works. This open question continues to preoccupy not only scholars but also EU policymakers, allies, and adversaries alike. Henry Kissinger's famous quip – 'Who do I call if I want to speak to Europe?' – remains unanswered, not because the EU lacks *actorness*, but because the EU's actorness is dynamic and it depends on not having a single leader to pick up the phone.

The EU's distinctive configuration as a multi-level system, tasked with managing common-pool resources and regulating interdependence both within and beyond its borders, means that its external action cannot be understood through traditional, state-centric paradigms. Its foreign policy and strategic posture are deeply shaped by institutional complexity, procedural constraints, and the hybrid nature of its authority. This makes it not less geopolitical, but differently geopolitical.

Relational geopolitics – a theoretically pluralist conceptual framework – captures this distinctiveness. It blends elements of classical power politics with the EU's own repertoire of pragmatic, co-constituted interdependencies. In contrast to state-centred power projection or unilateral norm diffusion, relational geopolitics foregrounds co-creation, embeddedness, and mutual transformation. It understands power not as possession but as relation – not as dominance but as interdependence. From this perspective, the EU's geopolitical agency manifests through layered governance arrangements, legal entanglements, discursive framing, and institutionalised cooperation across multiple spatial and political scales.

Relational geopolitics is not utopian. It recognises asymmetries in capacity and influence, and it does not romanticise consensus or harmony. Rather, it provides a vocabulary and analytical lens for grasping how the EU projects power (including hard power) in ways that are strategic but not state-centric or imperial, normative but not naive, institutional but not rigid. It explains how Europe can exercise influence even in the absence of consolidated statehood – through dense regulatory frameworks, strategic funding, conditional partnerships, and spatially distributed networks of resilience and deterrence. It also helps us understand how the EU absorbs geopolitical shocks and recalibrates its posture in response to threats – from Russia's aggression to transatlantic uncertainty. While the EU offers a particularly illustrative case, relational geopolitics also provides a broader conceptual lens for analysing how other non-state, hybrid, or multi-level actors, such as regional organisations, city networks, or transnational alliances, when

needed, enact geopolitical agency through dynamic and spatially embedded forms of interaction.

The special issue introduced here applies this framework to one of the EU's most consequential instruments: enlargement. It reframes enlargement not as a dormant project being revitalised, nor as a straightforward tool of geopolitical expansion, but as a strategic method for co-producing order through embedded, evolving, and often contested relationships. Enlargement is revealed not as an act of territorial aggrandisement or normative paternalism, but as a relational process of governance through interdependence. It is in this sense that Europe's borders, values, and geopolitical identity are continuously made and remade.

Understanding this hybrid logic that combines realist statecraft and relational tools is crucial for assessing the EU's so-called geopolitical turn. It is also useful for those practitioners involved in developing a grand strategy for a geopolitical EU. The EU continues to operate without the full toolkit of statecraft, yet it engages in both conventional deterrence and more diffuse, relational forms of influence. On the one hand, it pursues deterrence through intensified bilateral ties and strategic alignment with Ukraine and other vulnerable neighbours, echoing classic geopolitical logics. On the other, it constructs a 'security crisis space' shaped by critical and relational geopolitical sensibilities – attuned to local conditions, spatial entanglement, and the multilayered geographies of power and vulnerability.

Rather than offering a singular model of success or a fixed path toward membership, enlargement today reflects the EU's hybrid geopolitical logic – one that is simultaneously strategic and normative, spatial and institutional, political and procedural. The contributions to this special issue provide empirical grounding for a theory of relational geopolitics that is attuned to the messy realities of multi-level interaction, institutional friction, normative pluralism, and the changing architecture of global order. They show how enlargement has become a key site of power projection – not through coercion or military force, but through legal harmonisation, financial instruments, political signalling, and embedded conditionality.

In sum, enlargement exemplifies how the EU acts geopolitically in a world where interdependence and contestation go hand in hand. It is through enlargement – and other relational technologies – that the EU navigates its role as a geopolitical actor without a state, wielding influence not despite its institutional complexity, but through it.

The relational geopolitics framework also highlights EU vulnerabilities and the ways they can be exploited – a particularly salient concern for practitioners facing the transatlantic challenges of the Trump era in U.S. foreign politics, which call into question how the EU wields power and sustains its values and economic prosperity.

At the same time, relational geopolitics remains an evolving heuristic – one that must be further refined, challenged, and empirically tested across different policy domains, regions, and temporalities. Its interdisciplinary potential is particularly salient: in security studies, it reframes strategic behaviour not as the pursuit of dominance, but as embedded in interdependence and adaptive deterrence; in integration theory, it illuminates how institutional entanglement and mutual constitution drive deepening processes beyond formal accession; and in studies of the global order, it offers a framework for understanding how fragmented authority and spatial plurality shape emerging configurations of influence. By conceptualising power as process and space as co-constructed, relational geopolitics opens fertile ground for future research into how the EU navigates a fractured world through practices of embedded, contested, and adaptive governance. Not as what it could be – a state with a sovereign voice on speed dial – but as it is – a polycentric, multi-level system where geopolitics takes a village.

Notes

1. This categorization is a simplification. Both strands of research encompass diverse subfields. Within critical geopolitics alone, there is extensive work on popular geopolitics, resistance or anti-geopolitics, and feminist geopolitics – which shifts attention from elite actors to the everyday construction of political subjects. The longevity of classic geopolitics and the internal diversity of critical geopolitics have both contributed to the enduring relevance of the concept.
2. The aim of this article is not to retrace the rich intellectual history of geopolitical thought – much is inevitably lost in such brevity. For instance, ‘polity-oriented’ geopolitics retains a problem-solving ethos, but shifts focus away from territorial control toward questions of linguistic and cultural affinity, as well as broader ideas about how to organise and manage political and economic systems (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This regionalist perspective once cast the EU as hesitant to engage in security affairs beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Revisiting this view could offer another useful point of departure for tracing how EU geopolitics has evolved beyond its borders.

Acknowledgements

The organisation of the *Wartime Europe: EU Integration, Reform and Enlargement* Special Issue benefitted from the support of the European University Institute (EUI) Widening Europe Programme and the Central European University Democracy Institute. Many scholars beyond those represented in this collection contributed valuable comments and advice during a series of events organised by the EUI Enlargement Hub. I am grateful for – and inspired by – this community of colleagues, who committed to supporting each other’s work throughout the project and since, and especially by Ukrainian scholars working toward an independent and European future for their country. This article has also benefited from feedback received at the conference *The Liberal World Order and the Future of Transatlanticism: Tensions, Debates and Critiques*, sponsored by the Keck Center for International and Strategic

Studies, the Robert Schuman Centre at the EUI, the University of Denver, and the Carnegie Corporation. I thank Berthold Rittberger and the anonymous reviewers for their guidance and support.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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