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**Becoming a Geopolitical actor: the discursive construction of the European Union by  
European Commission during 2021-2023**

Master's thesis

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## **The author's declaration**

I have written this Master's Thesis independently. All viewpoints of other authors, literary sources, and data used for this academic work had been properly referenced.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
ABSTRACT .....	5
1. INTRODUCTION .....	6
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: a CDA approach to identity change .....	10
2.1. European Union's identity formation and it's international perspective .....	10
2.2. Constructivism and normative power EU .....	16
2.3. Change in identity: becoming a geopolitical actor .....	18
2.4. Critical discourse analysis .....	21
3. METHODOLOGY .....	25
3.1. Case selection and description of data .....	26
3.2. Overview of the corpus .....	30
3.3. Critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis .....	32
4. A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR IN THE MAKING: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EU ...	36
4.1. Discourse of the European Commission before the war .....	37
4.1.1. Corpus analysis of the speeches before the invasion .....	38
4.1.2. Critical discourse analysis of the selected speeches .....	41
4.2. Discourse of the European Commission since the war .....	49
4.2.1. Corpus analysis of the speeches since the invasion .....	49
4.2.2. Critical discourse analysis of the selected speeches .....	54
4.3. Implications of the war on EU's identity formation .....	65
4.4. Socio-political consequences of the discursive change in identity .....	68
5. CONCLUSION .....	70
References .....	73

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## ABSTRACT

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, launched in February of 2022, has directed international relations and the European Union to a new era, inviting discussions about the EU's identity and global role. Through resolute action among its member states, the EU has made significant strides in establishing itself as a prominent player in geopolitics. This geopolitical turn challenges established notions of the EU's international identity as a "civilian" or "normative" power and, coinciding with a "militarization" of the EU, the idea of European integration as a peace project. Against this backdrop, the aim of this thesis is to find out if and how the war has impacted the discursive geopolitical turn of EU's identity. It specifically explores the construction of the EU's international identity and, more specifically, whether it has reinforced the geopolitical turn. As academic literature demonstrates, identity is a dynamic construct that is continuously modified by speech and interaction rather than a static trait. Discursive activities, such as the re-articulation of an identity in the context of a significant event or change in context, are crucial in forming and altering identity, serving as a potent instrument in identity studies, including the study of the EU's international identity.

Analyzing 267 political speeches by the Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, this study employs both corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to detect changes in the discourse from a time period of one year pre-war to one year into the war. The research reveals a strategic depiction of "self" (EU) as a bearer of democracy contrasted against the "other" (Russia and Belarus), framed as aggressors. The findings underscore a narrative shift from global concerns, as they were characteristic of the EU's international identity, to themes of security, defence, and geopolitical dynamics, particularly emphasizing strengthened alliances, notably with the US, and a push towards strategic autonomy. This shift is marked by an increased focus on borders, military aspects and diplomatic relations. Together, these features and renewed emphasis on geopolitical identity markers suggest a strengthening of the geopolitical identity of the EU. Furthermore, the study discusses the implications of this re-articulation of the EU's identity into a more geopolitical actor, suggesting that the discursive shifts triggered by the war catalyzed a more autonomous EU stance, diverging from its traditionally civilian-focused identity. With these findings, the thesis contributes to the broader discussion on how significant international events reshape identities and policy orientations, providing insights that are crucial for policymakers and scholars in understanding the evolving nature of the EU in the face of crises.

Keywords: geopolitical identity, European Union, critical discourse analysis, political speeches, identity formation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was launched in February of 2022, has directed international relations and the European Union (EU) to a new era, inviting discussions about the EU's identity and global role (Youngs, 2022). The European Union found a unified voice unprecedentedly fast, and big decisions were taken at a rapid pace. The invasion triggered an unparalleled mobilization of EU's assets to counter Russian aggression in fields of humanitarian aid, economy, and security.

Through resolute action among its member states, the EU has made significant strides in establishing itself as a prominent player in geopolitics (European Council on Foreign Relations webpage, 2022). Josep Borrel, the EU High Representative of Foreign Affairs, even declared “the awakening of geopolitical Europe” (European Council on Foreign Relations webpage, 2022). In the beginning of her presidency, Ursula von der Leyen pledged to lead a “geopolitical Commission”, meaning one of its goals would be reinforcing the EU's role as an important international actor through boosting multilateralism (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019). The overall idea thus arises, if the escalation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has prompted the European Union to assert itself as a more prominent geopolitical player, which is also at the center of many political discussions today. This is fundamentally about the reconstruction of the EU's identity through discourse and the discursive shift, meaning new ways of talking about and then articulating the EU's international identity.

Europe's conception of freedom during the last fifty years has been shaped by universalism, economic interdependence, shared sovereignty, and the notion of Europe as a single unit based on a shared set of institutions (Leonard, 2023). However, the conflict in Ukraine has put the bloc's fundamental principles in jeopardy and given doubtful national leaders a platform to refute them. As a result, the goal of European integration, which was initially to maintain peace on the continent, has also taken the direction of an armed security effort. Formerly dependent on soft power, European institutions are now arming Ukraine militarily and European Commission has

also weaponized EU's economy through sanctions (Leonard, 2023). The union made a unique geopolitical move when it decided to give Ukraine candidate status as well (Leonard, 2023).

This geopolitical turn of the EU occurs against the backdrop of the identity and narrative of "Europe as a peace project", with peace being one of the important goals of the union since the EU was established (European Union webpage, 2023). The components of political entities' identities that relate to their interactions with the outside world can be considered their foreign policy identities, as they serve as a symbol for what makes the community unique and sets it apart from others (Risse, 2012).

"Civilian Power Europe" is an example in this context as it indicates what European foreign policy is not, notably militarist or nationalist, while also characterizing the EU as a force for peace and multilateral collaboration (Risse, 2012). Hanns Maull's (1990) definition of civilian power entails the pursuit of national objectives via collaboration and prioritizing non-military methods, while maintaining military power as a contingency plan. It also entails creating supranational frameworks to tackle global management concerns. François Duchêne's (1973) notion of civilian power centers upon the European Union (Community beforehand) as a prime example of a new phase in political civilization. Duchêne highlights the four components of civilian power, which include the use of resources and objectives, the establishment of cooperative relationships among nations, and the promotion of shared accountability and contractual approaches to global challenges. He cautions that the EU will fully capitalize on its prospects if it stays faithful to its inherent traits, principally focused on non-military objectives and methods. This means the EU has been more about the classic perspective of "strengthening multilateralism" in the past, opposing the new military notion that has started to emerge. The geopolitical turn hence raises questions about the EU's foreign policy identity and, more widely, about the identity of the integration project at large. The extent of the declared "geopolitical turn" is analyzed its manifestation in the re-construction of the EU's identity change with the possible accompanying changes in practices. This study adds to this discussion by showing where the EU currently stands in terms of identity.

Accordingly, the aim of this thesis is to find out how the declared ambition to turn to a more geopolitical union has influenced and altered the discursive construction of EU's identity, also looking at if and how the war has impacted the discursive geopolitical turn. This is also intertwined with the discursive change in identity bringing about changes in practices, for example how the

European Union and the Commission are doing something differently because of the notion of being geopolitical. This matters beyond the question of the EU's identity as such – for example, for its actions/social-political consequences of a changing identity construction. The time period of one year before and one year since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 is chosen to explore the changes in discourse affected by the conflict. This study tries to answer the following comprehensive research question: *how did the Commission re-articulate the EU's identity in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war?*

With the question stated above, the Commission set out to reformulate the EU's identity, which is an interesting theme in exploring to what effect and whether it succeeded in this and with what consequences. Such a geopolitical rearticulation of the EU's identity invokes themes and imagery that emphasize the significance of a geopolitical union by underlining shared goals, unity, and multilateralism, aiming to foster a sense of collectivism among the member states. Thus, the study analyzes and looks for a change in how the Commission has articulated these themes. It can also be assumed that perhaps before the notion of being more geopolitical was more about “strengthening multilateralism” with the war changing the narrative to a more military approach, which is new for the EU. The study captures this rearticulation of EU's identity in the context of the war by conducting critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis comparing the speeches delivered before and since the invasion by the Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen.

The first half of the master's thesis introduces the theoretical framework of the study, including main concepts as well as theory about EU's earlier identity construction, especially concerning the place of geopolitics. The explanation of identity construction through discourse, as well as identity change through the rearticulation of identity is touched upon. This part also explains critical discourse analysis as a theory. The methodology chapter will reveal the chosen methodology of critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis with the description of data – the speeches - and its collection processes. The section of empirical analysis is then followed, which introduces the findings from the analysis of the Commission discourse and provides insights into the identity rearticulation by the Commission. For this purpose, it first presents the findings on the Commission's identity articulation before the war, and second since the war. The last chapter consists of primary conclusions based on the findings and recommendations for further studies.

This study would add to this discussion by showing where the EU currently stands in terms of identity. The results are of importance due to helping scholars, policymakers, and analysts understand the potential implications of certain big-scale occurrences and crises on linguistic construction of identity, with it being increasingly relevant due to the latest acts of Russia towards Ukraine and EU's response to this matter. There is a wider debate about the EU's identity, the prevailing assessment is that it has been "normative" or "civilian". This study checks whether that's still the case or if something has changed in this identity perception.

The importance lies in whether the war has caused the EU to rethink itself and, if so, how as well as what will the implications lead to (e.g. greater emphasis on security and defence policy, treating Russia and China as rivals, not partners). This insight has a potentially extensive impact on policymaking. Assessing the consequences that followed this geopolitical turn, so as the changes in practices and policies, is an important factor as well - what has become possible that was not possible earlier. By finding out how war has impacted the reconstruction of identity as a geopolitical actor, this study provides insights into the changing nature of the EU and the integration project at large. While relevant for the EU as a foreign policy actor, it also has implications for wider political dynamics, e.g. citizens support/legitimacy, need for democracy and therefore core questions/challenges of European integration.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: a CDA approach to identity change**

In this section of the study, the theoretical background of identity formation, the EU's identity and the critical discourse aspect of the study is explored. The idea of EU's identity and its role in international spectrum is first explored. The second section deals with the changing of identity and becoming a more geopolitical entity. Finally, critical discourse analysis is covered in the last paragraph of the theoretical framework section, relying upon the works of theorists such as Fairclough and van Dijk, and explaining how language usage shapes and challenges identities and interests.

### **2.1. European Union's identity formation and it's international perspective**

Political scientists have long acknowledged the significance of tackling the subjective interpretation of identity to get a deeper comprehension of the problems that emerge in contemporary political research. It can be said that it is unclear what constitutes a political identity and if the traits that political players identify are inherent or whether they are the product of regional political organizations such as the European Union and multinational companies (Smith, 2004). These identities might be seen as naturally evolved or as ways of understanding that yet produce new identities reliant on the political community. Identity is often considered to be multiple and multi-layered by researchers. This is especially anticipated to be the case for newly formed political identities like European identity, which encourages the acceptance of pre-existing and sometimes conflicting national identity politics and cultures (Siklodi, 2018).

Since identity is a fundamental aspect of existence, it is also a key term in European Studies and International Relations. Identity is a difficult and elusive notion to define analytically, despite its importance. The term's overuse may cause uncertainty since it often has too much or too little meaning. Kowert (2010) defines identity as a unifying force that links members of a group based on the similitude principle, including both the sameness and diversity components of identification. Identity may be used as a pattern of behavior, meaning, purpose, image, or cohesiveness. Kowert (2010:4) states that there are two purposes for identity: regulative and

constitutive. Regulative indicates conduct toward other states meaning behavioral patterns and dictates who belongs to an identity. Constitutive identity informs us who we are and who others are, meaning identity as image. His view incorporates both the outward component, which sees identity in relation to others, and the internal dimension, which defines identity as a unifying power that unites members of a group based on likeness.

Peterson (1993) connects political identity to state identity and stipulates that identity is a multifaceted and paradoxical process that encompasses the establishment, strengthening, and reproduction of a state. The formation of a state's location and strategy is influenced by a range of factors, including political, economic, technical, and cultural elements. Additionally, transnational players and global capitalism play a significant role in this process. The process of state-making is continuous and encounters opposition, requires validation, and is never really "completed." Identity development is thus a continuous process that involves the interplay of psychological and socio-cultural factors. Politically, identities determine loyalties and competing loyalties influence the distribution of resources and power. In order to successfully sustain itself, the state must attain a certain degree of political centralization, economic accumulation, and ideological legitimation. Nevertheless, the development and importance of political identities are often discussed in relation to national identity and nationalism.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) have stated that identity can be seen in five aspects: as the foundation of social or political activity, as a group phenomenon, as a fundamental component of individual or group identity, as the outcome of social or political action, or as the result of several conflicting discourses. They also acknowledge the existence of various, flexible identities, in opposition to the frequent pursuit of uniqueness in order to reduce simple categories into exclusive groupings. This understanding acknowledges the diversity and fluidity of identities rather than enforcing strict classifications, challenging the conventional perspective that tries to place people into unchanging narratives and encourages a wider conversation about how identities change in response to shifting political and cultural environments.

Lebov (2008) mentions Carl Schmitt's (1976) claim that political identities are best established during violent fights against enemies, meaning identity development in political philosophy and political science has often been seen to entail the creation of "others." This can be illustrated by different political agendas, often racist and authoritarian, such as the wars of Afghanistan and Iraq

initiated by the Bush administration after 9/11. After 9/11, the discourse that was pushed through was that the world is divided into people who love freedom and dangerous terrorists by the administration, where the idea of “us” and “others” is clearly visible. This showed how it is possible to instill solidarity by creating fear of the “others” (Lebov, 2008). The idea of othering is also connected to group identity theories, as according to the group-based control theory, people will identify more with groups they believe are worthwhile in order to regain control over their lives when it is threatened (Correll and Park, 2005).

Connolly (1991) makes the case for the self-other binary, using Foucault's theory that discourses of deviance help to build identity. According to his theory, identity is a hazy, insecure experience that is dependent on its capacity to maintain distinction and is susceptible to entities' propensity to dispute or otherwise undermine these definitions. Identity maintenance requires power, which creates hierarchies that protect and spread approved discourses while stifling or marginalizing individuals who disagree with these secular facts. Connolly also makes a connection between religion and identity, contending that notions of good and evil are fundamental to both and manifest in the marginalization of those who disagree.

One way of identity construction is through different discourse, which is central to this study. Gee (2007) divided discourse into “discourse” (small “d” discourse) and “Discourse” (large “D” discourse). Discourse with a little “d” alludes to linguistic characteristics, while large “D” refers to “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are instantiations of particular identities (or 'types of people') by specific groups”. Concerning identity studies, Bamberg et al. (2011) distinguish between two views of identity construction: one that moves from existing social discourses to identity and sense of self, and the other that works from “small-d” discursive practices. Three dimensions of identity construction are further highlighted: the navigation of agency, the differentiation between self and other, and the navigation of sameness and change.

Having clarified the meaning of the term of identity and the place of discourse in its formation, this allows engaging with the more specific concept at stake in this study, namely the EU's international identity. In a first step, three meanings of the EU's identity can be distinguished. EU identity, European identity, and EU international identity. Though their scopes, focuses, and formations are different, EU identity and European identity are very closely linked and intertwined

ideas, that are hard to distinguish in certain contexts. The political and economic identity of the European Union, which includes a feeling of allegiance and belonging, can be referred to as EU identity. It alludes to organizations, laws, and emblems such as the euro. The union is founded with certain values that are established in the treaties and thus shared by the member states (Chopin, 2018). The wider cultural, historical, and social links that bind the countries and peoples of Europe together, however, are included in the concept of European identity (Chopin, 2018). It has developed because of European integration, which gives its members a feeling of community. Throughout Europe's history, common experiences, cultural exchanges, and wars have all influenced it. In this thesis, the author includes both notions according to the context of the ideas presented, as one cannot talk about the EU's identity without including European identity.

The EU's international identity is a specific facet of the EU's overall identity. A feeling of belonging to the European community has been developed by European integration over the last fifty years, but recent events like enlargements, institutional changes, social and political upheaval, and economic and financial turmoil have called into question the purpose and direction of the process (Carta and Morin, 2014). The European Union's foreign policy is often characterized by fragmentation, with its meaning being subject to debate. If we define EU foreign policy as the collective formal external interactions undertaken by independent actors, we quickly see that the EU's voice is comprised of diverse and pluralistic voices, consisting of several separate national and institutional players (Carta and Morin, 2014). Since the 1990s, the EU has gained significant influence in international politics and has been more visible and relevant both inside and beyond its boundaries. As a result, there has been increased attention on the EU's character, attributes, and role as an actor.

Fadeeva (2022) explains that when nine foreign ministers from the European Communities' member states signed the Declaration of European Identity in December 1973, the political process of forging an identity for Europe began. The proclamation claims that despite historical hostilities, European nations may come together as a single entity because of their shared objectives and concerns. At the 1984 Fontainebleau summit, proposals were made for actions aimed at fortifying European identity. These included the implementation of a single European passport, the adoption of the flag and anthem, and the mutual recognition of professional standards and certificates from

higher and vocational education. The formation of European identity is also the main goal of the Europe for Citizens initiative (Fadeeva, 2022).

Siklodi (2018) suggests comprehending European identity as near to reality as possible—that is, as a blend of many elements—instead of relying on the empty ideal of a single European identity that cannot be realized. More importantly, it suggests concentrating on three aspects of European identity: a shared understanding of the “other”—those people, cultures, and issues that are not a part of Europe or the EU—a sense of belonging to political communities in Europe, and a sense of “we” among the members of the EU's political community. Taking these three factors into account together can explain the diversity of European identity, both in theory and in practice. It can also highlight the important distinctions between the expectations of these identities and their actual contents, both inside and outside the EU.

The international identity of the EU has been shaped by various policy actors, including the European Commission. Two approaches dominate the Commission's discourse on European identity: one focuses on citizens' sense of European identity through a people-led, bottom-up process, and the other promotes the EU as a whole via an elite-led, top-down process (Siklodi, 2018). The elite have employed top-down procedures to foster a sense of belonging among current and potential union members. These procedures include the establishment of clear geographical borders, shared symbols (like the flag or currency), shared values (like democracy and peace), and the projection of a positive self-image both internally and externally (like democracy promotion beyond borders) (Siklodi, 2018).

Schmidt (2009) states that today the Member States have widely different approaches to questions concerning the nature, boundaries, and objectives of the EU. She categorizes these perspectives broadly into four fundamental discourses regarding the EU, referring to Schmidt, (2009) for the first three types of discourse and Sjursen (2007), and Howorth (2007) for the fourth. Among these are the pragmatic narratives common in the UK, Scandinavia and central and eastern European nations, regarding the EU as a problem-solving body without borders, that guarantees free markets and security; the normative discourse about the EU as being a bordered community of values, associated with countries like Germany, France, Austria, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg; the principle-based discourse about the EU as a post-national borderless union, which is usually attributed to the Commission and philosophers like Habermas (2001); and the

strategic narrative regarding the EU as a global player using multilateralism, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping for its manifestation.

It is possible to look at European identity being characterized as a civic identity that goes beyond national boundaries. Here it is essential to mention Jürgen Habermas' (2001) essay "*Why Europe needs a Constitution*" that makes the argument that the European Union has to switch to a new system of political government. He contends that the European Union is an organization of sovereign nations pooling their authority in certain areas, not a "federation". According to Habermas, the Union's institutional and political stability depend on a more extensive political framework. Additionally, according to Habermas, a "constitutional patriotism" would solidify the EU in the minds and convictions of its constituents, guaranteeing democratic citizenship and fostering ties of solidarity even among strangers. He also enumerates factors including the development of a European public sphere, a shared political culture, and an emerging European civil society that all contribute to the formation of European identities (Woudak and Boukala, 2015).

To conclude, this section examined the European Union's identity as an international actor, highlighting the complexities that shape its role in global politics. For the context of this study, it is important to grasp the main theoretical tenets of identity formation. Firstly, the ambiguity in defining political identity, influenced by both historical and contemporary factors was brought out. Different approaches to identity were stressed, as Smith (2004) suggests that political identities can evolve from regional political organizations like the EU, while Kowert (2010) describes identity as a unifying force that shapes group behavior and interactions based on either similarity or differences. Peterson (1993) portrays political identity as a multifaceted process integral to state formation, influenced by different factors, and continuously evolving through internal and external pressures. The concept of "othering," essential for identity formation in political science, is explored by Lebov (2008), who illustrates how identities are often established in opposition to perceived enemies. Connolly (1991) emphasizes the role of power in maintaining identity distinctions. Siklodi (2018) suggests a complex blend of European identity, focusing on the diversity and sense of belonging within the EU. This overview encapsulates how the EU's identity as both a constructed and evolving concept influences its international posture.

## **2.2. Constructivism and normative power EU**

When interested in the international identity of the EU, this calls for a constructivist perspective since, among international relations (IR) approaches, it has been constructivism that has highlighted the role played by identity. Various perspectives on global politics sparked a discussion in the field of IR in the 1990s, especially between rivaling theories of rationalism and reflectivism. Whereas reflectivists investigated intersubjective structures and institutions, rationalists concentrated on examining the international structure and determining causal linkages. Between these two schools of thought, constructivism arose as a middle ground. Constructivism as a theory posits that an individual's identity is formed and shaped by social interactions between different players in the field of IR. This theory suggests that identities are subject to change and instability, influenced by the characteristics of individuals in certain contexts and periods (Wendt, 1994). Identity is seen as an outcome of social and political behaviors, emphasizing the reciprocal process of collective comprehension formation (Wendt, 1994). The constructivist use of the word identity encompasses the following distinct qualities: it is deliberately created, constantly evolving, shaped by social environment and individuals, grounded in a certain “tradition” that has its own authority, intimately connected to historical events, and intricately tied to the political values system (von Busekist, 2004). Identity is established by delineating boundaries, generating prejudices towards those inside and outside the group, and is contingent upon the social environment and individuals involved.

Constructivism in itself can be divided into two – conventional and critical. Conventional constructivism entails that our understanding of the world is shaped by shared ideas and perceptions, using an approach focused on identifying causes and testing theories. Conversely, critical constructivists emphasize speech and critique of the state as the primary subject of analysis, emphasizing how individuals come to identify with certain identities and the stories that go along with them. Rather than pointing out the consequences of these identities, they also concentrate on how agents use them to defend foreign policy (Arkan, 2014). Fundamental ideas are shared by both strategies, while the technique is different. Critical constructivists examine how international practices shape global politics, closely examining texts to comprehend discourse's representational and meaning systems. Their emphasis on language as a mediator between the signifier and the

signified and the idea that meaning is formed via interactions between actors which sets them apart from traditional constructivism. It is essential to the processes by which people, communities, or states the sense of identity is created, thus the significance of othering in the development of identity is also stressed (Arkan, 2014). Critical constructivist researchers also emphasize the performative formation of identity through foreign policy. With the emphasis of this study being on discourse, critical strands of constructivism are better in capturing how language-use shapes identity, which is why this study is concerned with this facet.

An advocate of social constructivism, Ian Manners', idea of 'normative power' has shaped the European Union's identity and position in international affairs. The notion of a "normative power Europe" in the EU and European settings incorporates an inclusive approach to fostering a feeling of belonging, whether it is geographically, culturally, socially, or politically (Manners, 2002). Manners (2002) contends that the EU influences the global environment by enticing outsiders with its norms, beliefs, principles, and practices (Skolimowska, 2015). Manners (2002) aims to conceptualize the EU beyond the standard of how much it resembles a state, highlighting the significance of power, whether it is military or economic. This strategy, known as normative strategy, uses certain political tools to advance the norms and ideals of the European Union. Europe aims to establish international standards and regulations, rather than relying solely on military force. The 'Brussels effect' of the European Union can be divided into three categories: establishing laws and enforcing them on its territory, influencing the content of norms through international negotiation processes, and acting as a model of voluntary norms for the rest of the world (Cohen-Tanugi, 2021). The European project developed as a community of laws, emphasizing technology, economics, and law. The EU has a "territory" and consistent legislation through its Single Market, treaties, directives, and regulations (Cohen-Tanugi, 2021). These are all aspects that have a strong meaning in the sense of how the EU has wanted to be perceived and what its goals have been.

Through strategies like the normative approach, the EU seeks to establish itself as a model for international standards and regulations. This relates to the EU's broader goal of promoting values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This means the European Union's strategy for conflict resolution and peacebuilding prioritizes the promotion of collaboration, diplomacy, and adherence to the rule of law, rather than depending only on military intervention. For understanding the construction of the EU's identity in the context of the war, it is worth mentioning

that a largescale war happening geographically this close to its borders makes it a challenge to only follow normative power conceptions.

### **2.3. Change in identity: becoming a geopolitical actor**

Reuber (2009) explains how discourse analysis as a post-structuralist theory provides a theoretical framework for dissecting geopolitical representations. These views go against conventional ideas, which define geopolitics as the impact of geographical location on state politics. Political geography reasoning demonstrates how this conception results in philosophical and ideological impasse. The production of discursive and cartographic representations, as well as their interaction with political and social imaginations, are the main topics of post-structuralist approaches, which concentrate on the geopolitical discourses themselves. A wide variety of methodologies go beyond post-structuralist discourse analysis to examine geopolitical narratives and imaginations as experts' discursive techniques. They may play a problematic role in the geopolitical debate on power and space, both in political discourse and public opinion polarization, the more their relativity and nuanced function become obvious.

The European Union has become a significant actor in geopolitical debate by using its economic might and diplomatic connections to shape global agendas, all thanks to a determined effort to express a single voice on international matters. The EU has grown into a foreign policy actor through bilateral cooperation with individual states, international organizations, and interregional relationships (Renard, 2016). The union has been establishing several strategic partnerships with significant players in the international arena, like Canada, Japan, and India, as an important part of developing its foreign policy agenda (Renard, 2016). These efforts act as a major instrument in cultivating European values and interests.

Skolimowska (2015) points out that the European Union has seen a dramatic change in direction, moving from an external policy that was before mostly focused on economics to one that is more comprehensive and interconnected. The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 brought about a substantial change in European integration by establishing the European Union and modifying the structure for its political interactions with other countries. Today, the European Union functions in both its

economic domain and its foreign policy via the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). This transition has resulted in a change in the theoretical approach towards the European Union's position in foreign affairs. Experts propose that the European Union's identity should be characterized as a normative power or a silent superpower, instead of a 'civilian power', to more accurately represent its aspirations to enhance its military capabilities and reshape the global system (Skolimowska, 2015).

When it comes to military action, which is a significant part of becoming more geopolitical, it is useful to mention that twelve military actions have been carried out by the EU since 2003 as part of its Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). It was praised as a virtue rather than a sign of weakness when armed force was not used, as the goal of the EU was never to be a military power asserting its influence through military force. The EU's international influence was described using prescriptive terms like “normative power” and “civilian power” (Palm and Crum, 2019). While some observers contend that military intervention is intrinsically incompatible with the identity of a normative power, others think that the EU's normative authority may be strengthened by using military force, so enabling the union to participate in typical international power conduct (Palm and Crum, 2019).

According to the Palm and Crum (2019), the EU's military involvement has focused more on practical issues and the integration of the military tool into a larger toolkit for foreign policy. This means the EU has progressively distanced itself from any pretense of being a normative power, and its interests have taken center stage in its external relations (Palm and Crum, 2019). This is an important notion as in the previous section of this study, the normative direction of the EU was discussed meaning it can be argued that the direction of the identity of European Union is shifting with the missions, but also with the large-scale military conflicts.

It is evident that there has been a growing push for greater military cooperation and integration among member states in recent years. Stronger EU armed forces, according to supporters, are required to combat security issues including cyberattacks, terrorism, and regional instability as well as to improve Europe's capacity for independent action abroad. But discussions over national interests, sovereignty, and NATO's role have impeded the development of a unified EU security strategy. In addition, member nations still dispute issues related to budget, command structures, and the degree of integration. Despite these obstacles, the EU has moved toward deeper military

collaboration with programs like the European Defense Fund and Permanent Structured collaboration (PESCO), suggesting a possible change toward a more cohesive and effective European defence force.

Having established the geopolitical background of the EU's identity, let's turn to how it is constructed. The idea of identity formation and the geopolitical aspect from the perspective of discourse analysis is explored in this section of the study. Considering discourse analysis, it can be stated that acts of othering result in difference and are how identities are produced (Diez, 2004). Diez (2004) argued that while the European Union made it possible to construct a political identity through a less discriminatory practice of temporal difference, otherings based on geography and culture gained prominence in the discourse on European identity since the 1990s already, casting doubt on the notion of European integration. The situation created by the Constitutional Treaty's collapse in 2004 demonstrated how the Commission's several attempts to define a European identity had not been close to being particularly successful (Bee 2008). The various crises that the EU has encountered as it has expanded and deepened its goals has forced the Commission to continually adjust its approach as it forges its own character (Bee, 2008). Guzzini (2012) also states that the resurgence of geopolitical thought is best understood considering many foreign policy identity crises, or a form of ontological uneasiness. Parties attempt to resolve a foreign policy identity crisis in one of following ways: they either deny the existence of any crisis, define it as a misunderstanding and negotiate with the outside about it, adapt to it, or try to shape international society to fit their own identity discourses (Guzzini, 2012). When it comes to crises, Gehring (2021) also discovered that the external military threat presented by Russia in 2014 resulted in an increase in EU unity and higher levels of support for shared policies at the federal level.

This section presents various perspectives on the EU's evolving identity and role in international geopolitics, emphasizing its shift from a normative power to engaging more assertively in military actions and security policy. Geopolitical identity is first defined through post-structuralist discourse analysis, which challenges conventional geographic or military interpretations. It is positioned as a byproduct of discursive activities. This theoretical framework is helping to explain the EU's geopolitical tactics, such as the CSDP's greater focus on military assets. Discourse studies also show how crises and outside threats continuously influence the EU's identity, revealing a constant balancing act between established norms and developing geopolitical realities. The

intricate relationship between rhetoric, identity construction, and practical policy demonstrates how the EU positions itself within the international system.

## **2.4. Critical discourse analysis**

This thesis uses and relies on critical discourse analysis (CDA). With the emphasis on the discursive construction of identity, critical strands of constructivism invite for collaboration with strands of discourse theory that have explored in more detail the nature/workings of discourse in the making of identity and identity change. One such strand of theorizing is CDA. Emerging from the late 1980s, CDA is a theory and methodology for examining discourse, which looks at language as a means of social engagement and has become an established field in social science. CDA provides a theoretical framework but also serves as the method, meaning one cannot be separated from the other. Due to its dual character, researchers are able to actively participate in social criticism and action that transforms society in addition to comprehending the complexity of language and power. There are mainly three prominent authors in the studies of critical discourse analysis, whose descriptions and definitions have shaped the field and lead the academic field and will be discussed in this chapter. One of the most influential works on CDA is considered to be Fairclough's *Discourse and Social Change* (1992). His theories were strongly influenced by scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin, Michael Halliday in linguistics and by theorists Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu in sociology. Fairclough (1992) views CDA as a perspective that links the examination of linguistic texts with a social theory explaining how language operates within political activities.

When talking about discourse as such, he refers to language as social practice, rather than something happening on an individual level. This leads to the conclusion that discourse is a mode of action and representation, on which individuals can act upon. He also states that there is a strong connection between social structure and discourse, as the latter is shaped by social constructions and the social setting is a condition as well as an outcome of discourse. This interrelated relationship happens on all levels of society: class relations, relations acquired to different institutions, norms, and standards of various nature. According to Fairclough (1992), there are three aspects of the effects of discourse, as discourse affects and contributes to social identities for

social subjects, helps to produce social relationships and lastly contributes to structuring the systems of belief and understanding. These aspects correlate with the roles of language. The first role being “identity”, which refers to how social identities are constructed in discourse; the “relational” function is concerned with how negotiation of social relationships between discourse participants is carried out; and the “ideational” role deals with how texts represent the world and its entities and operations (Fairclough, 1992). It can be thus said that discursive practice transforms as well as reproduces society. For example, the relationships between politicians and the public and their identities, which make up the democratic system, largely depend on the persistent speech patterns found around these exchanges and can be challenged and reconstructed in different settings.

Discourse as a political and ideological practice is what concerned Fairclough the most. Political discourse preserves and modifies social conditions as well as collective entities (classes, blocs, communes, and groupings). As an ideological activity, discourse creates, normalizes, upholds, and modifies worldviews from a variety of power dynamics. This suggests that political and ideological practices are interdependent because power dynamics provide meanings for ideologies, which are a part of the battle for and use of power. Moreover, discourse as a political practice is both a site and an object of power struggles. Discursive practices normalize specific power relations and ideologies, and the struggle centers on these conventions and the ways in which they are expressed. He also suggests that discourse does not have to have particular political or ideological values, but it can become charged with these values in different institutional or social settings.

Fairclough also dissects the notion of ideology in his work, as it plays an important role in understanding discourse as a social practice. When referring to ideology, Fairclough refers to Althusser (1971) and brings out three aspects or theoretical bases. It is claimed that ideology has tangible existence in institutional activities, paving the path for discursive practices to materialize as ideologies. Secondly, the thought of ideology interpellating subjects gives rise to the idea that the construction of subjects is one of the most important ideological consequences. Lastly, he mentions the notion of class struggle, especially the claim of ideological institutions like the media are part of the class struggle, prompting them to be involved in and struggle in the sense of ideological discourse.

According to van Dijk (2004) critical discourse analysis can be defined as follows:

*Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a research enterprise which critically analyses the relation between language and society. More specifically, CDA is a type of discourse-analytical research that studies the way ideology, identity and inequality are (re)enacted through texts produced in social and political contexts (Van Dijk, 2001: 352).*

This definition touches upon all the most important sides and meanings behind the theory of CDA. Teun A. van Dijk has concentrated his efforts in the field of critical discourse analysis on the study of the discursive reproduction of racism by the so-called "symbolic elites" - which he considers to be politicians, journalists, researchers, and writers - as well as on the theories of context and ideology.

In his work he stresses the importance of context as opposed to being only focused on the text and talk. He understands the issue with the board and vague term of context as in everyday use it is referred to as multiple different concepts. In a broad sense context usually refers to a historical or political situation or environment in which something is taking place. When looking at discourse, context can be understood in two different ways. It can indicate to verbal context, meaning the words following and preceding sentences, words, or speech acts within the dialogue. Although this approach is linguistic centered and refers to traditional linguistics. The other idea is that context means "social situation" of discourse or more specifically a certain verbal communication or text. This thesis is centered around the second understanding of context with its situational aspects. He concludes that contexts that are traditionally referred to as "*the relevant environment of language use*" can contain a wide range of social situational characteristics at different levels (van Dijk, 2004). These characteristics can affect how discourse is produced, structured, and understood, regardless of whether the actors are always aware of them or whether scholars can identify them. van Dijk (2004) finally states that contexts are not objective social settings (like gender and age) that establish discourse but rather subjective interpretations of the relevant participants' social circumstances. Because every social actor is unique and has a personal past, there is always a difference in how they define the same scenario.

Wodak (2001) suggests that there is a reciprocal connection between the way language is used in discourse and the broader contexts in which it takes place, such as specific situations, institutional frameworks, and social structures. In her later work (2012) she mentions that the goal of CDA has never been to limit itself to one particular theory. The common ground between CDA and its

practitioners is thus not a rigid and narrow methodology or a specific theoretical framework, but rather shared objectives. These objectives involve critically examining and questioning dominant discourses, texts, and genres that perpetuate inequalities, injustices, and oppression in modern societies.

When it comes to political discourse, the examination of National Socialist language, which was necessary to comprehend the function of language and communication under totalitarian regimes and their propaganda, inspired the study of political speech after World War II. A key area of concentration for CDA is the methodical ethnographic and discourse analytical analysis of political institutions, daily life, and organizational decision-making. Because right-wing populist discourse is growing more and more prominent in many European nations, research in this area focuses on it. This study combines conventional datasets like newspapers and political speeches with novel approaches to CDA, including ethnography, narrative interviews and focus groups. (Wodak, 2012)

There are several similar studies conducted using CDA when analyzing different discourse. Olsson and Hammargard (2015) examined the rhetoric of the then President of the European Commission focusing on the period of the financial and eurozone crisis. According to previous studies, political actors at the national level frequently employ more charismatic speech in times of crisis to establish their legitimacy and authority. In this study, the authors investigated whether the European Commission during the financial and eurozone crises exhibits a similar trend. The study's major findings showed the opposite, as the Commission's rhetoric became less compelling as the crisis worsened and member states became more involved in its management.

Carta (2011) looked at the discourse used by Commission and EEAS civil workers to discuss the EU's foreign policy and its guiding principles. She examined the views that foreign policy actors have on foreign governance by using a critical discourse analysis approach thus identifying three prevalent patterns of discourse-making. Her work contributed to the understanding of the foreign policy identity building of the EU.

Barbé, Herranz-Surrallés, and Natorski (2015) conducted an analysis of political statements on multilateralism between 2004 and 2011, examining the evolving connotations attributed to the phrase. They discovered that the European Union's language employs contradictory stances and discussions, leading to challenges in implementing policy into tangible actions. These discussions

cover a variety of topics, including Europeanism, the community method, and intergovernmentalism.

Wodak and Boukala (2015) examine the resurgence of nationalism in Europe, a multifaceted occurrence including economic, socio-political, and historical elements. The researchers examine the EU-sceptic stances in Dutch and British discussions and evaluate the arguments that take place in European and national parliaments as well as in the media. They emphasize the conflicts and inconsistencies in present European policy and the influence of economic globalization and social division on discussions about European identity. The text emphasizes the influence of localism, xenophobia, social exclusion, and racism in influencing discussions about European identity. (Carta and Morin, 2014)

To sum up the theoretical part of the study, it can be said that identity transformation results from the intricate combination of social interactions, discursive practices, and geopolitical processes. Identity is not a static or isolated quality, but rather a dynamic construct that is continuously molded by discourse and interaction, as academic literature demonstrates. According to academics like Foucault and Connolly, discursive activities are crucial in forming and altering identity. Discourse is a powerful instrument in the construction and evolution of identities because identities are continually formed via language and representation. The significance of “us” versus “them” narratives in shaping identity development is especially noticeable in political circumstances.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This section explores the methodological approach of this study used by the author to gather data, analyze information, and answer the research question. Firstly, the case selection is explained and justified. The same paragraph also deals with the description of the data used to conduct the empirical analysis. Critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis, the two methodologies, are thus described to set up the framework for the analysis.

### **3.1. Case selection and description of data**

In order to find out how the ambition to turn to a more geopolitical union has influenced and altered the discursive reconstruction of EU's identity, this study is going to conduct a case study of the EU Commission's speeches delivered by Ursula von der Leyen. A case study examines a phenomenon in its natural setting and is particularly useful when it's difficult to draw clear distinctions between the phenomenon and its surroundings. The process of gathering and analyzing data is predicated on previously established theoretical frameworks. The case study should be viewed as a comprehensive research approach rather than just one kind of research design or method for gathering data (Laherand, 2008). Case studies may also use both quantitative and qualitative data and do not always have to involve direct observations (Laherand, 2008). Yin (2003) has explained the criteria for selecting a single-case design as the following: 1) the selected single case represents a critical case that helps test a well-formulated theory; 2) the single case selected represents a unique or extreme case; 3) the single case selected symbolizes a representative case; 4) the single case selected is a revealing case; 5) the single case is a longitudinal study (Yin, 2003). From the mentioned criteria the second point (a unique or extreme case) is fulfilled within the framework and idea of this study. The unit of analysis in this case study is the European Commission, which represents the directions of the European Union, meaning that the study incorporates the inclusive design, as there exist several sub-level analysis units.

This thesis is based on a single case study: the reconstruction of a geopolitical identity through discourse of the European Union by the European Commission over a specific time period of an event of interest in order to capture dynamics of change. The case of the reconstruction of identity against the background of the war is an insightful case to study as the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has been of great significance and intensity in Europe.

For the thesis, the speeches of the current President of European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, are central. The European Commission serves as the primary executive organ of the European Union, advocating for the shared interests of the union. When it comes to European Union's institutions, the Council of the European Union and European Council represent the governments of the Member States, the Parliament represents EU citizens, and the Commission stands for the European interest. Even though the European Council is the EU's decision-making

body in the domain of foreign policy, this institution is not the focus of this study, as the Commission conveys EU's overall priorities and policy initiatives. The speeches of the Commission's President reveal the EU's stance on global issues and its geopolitical priorities. This means that a geopolitical turn of the Commission is more significant than a similar turn of the Council would be, considering the supranational element. The Commission's role is more proactive in shaping the direction and policies of the EU thus this institution is chosen over the Council. In international forums and discussions, the EU is often represented by the European Commission. Its speeches are especially pertinent for examining how the EU portrays itself to the outside world since they are designed with the goal of presenting a cohesive EU identity on the international scene. Since the case study is focused on one specific event and the use of language around it, this study does not look at the speeches of other presidents of the European Commission but is focused on the current president because of the timeframe.

Even though the European Commission lacks direct control over foreign policy areas as its not one of its competences, the speeches are important for comprehending the EU's larger geopolitical identity because of its capacity to influence public opinion, represent the EU in many areas of EU's external relations, such as trade, development cooperation, etc., and supervise policy areas with global ramifications. Although the Council and member states have authority over the foreign policy field, the Commission has the ability to shape discussions and exert influence on policy decisions via its statements. It has a role in determining the topics and shaping the concerns that might influence the course of EU policies.

The Commission also represents and speaks for "the community", which brings out the supranational side of EU. This means representing the interests of the EU rather than, as the Council, of the sum of EU member states. Since the identity in question is also the EU's international identity, in the sense of the identity of the integration project as such (rather than of concrete foreign policy), this puts the Commission in the center of interest.

Some CDA theorists like Fairclough (1992) and Wodak (2001) contend that it is feasible for researchers using CDA to provide a thorough and in-depth analysis of language with a smaller sample size. As a result, other institutions such as the European Parliament or European Council were not chosen for this thesis. The European Parliament or European Council undoubtedly wield

substantial influence over EU policymaking and its discourse, meaning these institutions are anticipated to be included in future academic research.

The data of this study are thus the speeches of Ursula von der Leyen delivered in the time period of February 2021 until February 2023, as the conflict between Russia and Ukraine escalated on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022. According to Wodak (2001:11), identity politics on all fronts needs integrating the past, present, and future in a variety of spheres of our life. This entails dissecting as well as comprehending the connections among dominant narratives and intricate historical processes. The time period of one year before and one year since the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 is chosen to explore the changes in discourse affected by the conflict. The speeches are first selected according to the chosen time period and then filtered through corpus analysis. Speeches focusing on foreign relations of the EU are the most important in the context of this study. Sorting the speeches according to this criterion also reduces the number of speeches and makes the corpus for CDA more meaningful.

In order to get an understanding of the identity formation, it is also important to briefly look at how the EU's identity developed and formed before the war began. Already since 2016, the EU has taken a more active role in ensuring national security, with a primary emphasis on the idea of strategic autonomy (Lefebvre, 2023). China was labeled a "systemic rival" by the European Commission in 2019, and Ursula von der Leyen, the newly appointed Commission President, referred to the Commission as a "geopolitical" entity (Lefebvre, 2023). Due to the COVID-19 epidemic in 2020, the notion of strategic autonomy was expanded from a political-military to an economic one. This means that signs of an idea of a more geopolitical identity have been on the table for some time now, but the question is how and to what extent it has been articulated in the discourse of EU's strategy shaper, the Commission.

The speeches can be accessed and downloaded on the official webpage of the European Commission. Conducting a search with the criteria of the chosen timeframe resulted in a total of 267 speeches, which were all used for the corpus analysis. However, all the speeches have very different purposes and contexts. This means that not all the 267 speeches of this time period are completely and fully relevant for this study. The corpus analysis is carried out using all the speeches while performing CDA, the most relevant speeches, meaning speeches containing articulations of EU's geopolitical identity e.g. speeches about and connected to the foreign

relations of the EU, are chosen based on the results of corpus analysis with the keywords. A total of 10 speeches were singled out for a more thorough critical discourse analysis.

Using the AntConc corpus analysis tool, which is explained further in the section on corpus analysis and CDA, this study looks at the frequency of different keywords and phrases referring to the notion of a geopolitical union: *border, defence, external, foreign, foreign policy, geopolitics, geopolitical, global, identity, integration, military, power, Russia, sanctions, security, war*. The keywords can be connected to the ways in which the EU positions itself and is perceived on the global stage. The relevance of each of the keywords is illustrated in the following table:

**Table 1.** Reasoning of the keyword selection

Border and security	Emphasizing how important it is to the EU to safeguard both its internal and external borders. The way the EU handles these issues during times of crisis shapes public opinion of the union.
Defence and military	The EU's identity as an organization capable of protecting its interests and ideals, independent of foreign forces, is largely shaped by the growth and rhetoric around its military capabilities.
External and foreign policy	The EU's relations with the outside world require an awareness of both external factors and foreign policy. Its foreign policy strategy, particularly during times of crisis, establishes its place in international affairs.
Geopolitical and geopolitics	The EU's geopolitical attitudes and discourse provide insights into its understanding of and responses to regional and political developments, as well as current dangers.
Global and power	The EU's identity ambitions are reflected in its strategies (trade, diplomacy, sanctions, etc.) and its aim to influence global events.
Identity and integration	These terms are closely related to the operational coherence and self-perception of the EU. The level of integration, particularly in areas of military and foreign policy, is a clear indicator of the EU's unity.
Russia and sanctions	The EU's approach to sovereignty, territorial integrity, and human rights is reflected in its dealings with particular countries, including Russia, and in the means by which it employs sanctions. Relevant in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war.
War and security	The EU's ability to handle crises and resolve disputes is shown by its answers to issues pertaining to war and security, thus helping to define its identity.

Frequent mention of certain keywords or objectives shows how geopolitical identity has expressed itself through language use and helps to systemize the big number of speeches retrieved with the criteria. When concordance lines are pulled from the text, it gives an opportunity to look at the language around these keywords – in what context they appear, is the context rather similar etc. This helps to carry out critical discourse analysis and enables drawing more significant conclusions

when it comes to the results. Quantifying the linguistic features, such as word frequencies and key terms, enables to examine the linguistic construction of EU's self-perception as a geopolitical actor.

In using CDA, the selection of the attributes, qualities, and features attached to subjects; and the methods of reasoning used to support and legitimize the representations in discourse are important (Aydın-Düzgit, 2014). The rearticulation of the EU's geopolitical identity entails characteristics like strengthening its global positioning, reaffirming its values, stressing strategic autonomy and defence capabilities, thus, the study analyzes and looks for attributes that entail these identifications through the use of language. The re-articulation into a geopolitical identity entail (a) a change in how the Commission articulates a different identity than before, and (b) an articulation of identity which is more geopolitical, meaning focusing on military presence, alliances, geographic borders, diplomatic relations and dependencies. These markers are looked upon throughout the analysis and then detected where present. When found, these contexts are presented in the analysis in the form of excerpts from the speeches that have connotations of a geopolitical identity. The frequency of the chosen keywords also indicates how the discursive identity construction has shifted throughout the time period.

The results are expected to unravel if and how the Commission used geopolitical rhetoric to construct the identity of EU before and during a military crisis in the European Union. In times of conflict, political entities often reassess their roles and objectives on the global stage. Wars can prompt shifts in priorities, alliances, and the perception of geopolitical responsibilities. The significance of the speeches of the Commission's president encompasses diplomatic ties, public perception, and the continuous discussion surrounding the democratic legitimacy and governance of the European Union. Through the lens of priorities and identity creation, these speeches provide an insightful perspective on how the EU is positioned within the geopolitical environment.

### **3.2. Overview of the corpus**

The whole corpus consisted of 267 speeches delivered by the president of the Commission during February 2021 until February 2023. The corpus consisted of speeches in English, French and German. The speeches in French and German were machine translated into English for the author

to be able to include these speeches in the analysis as well. Machine translation in its essence might not be fully accurate, especially when it comes to grammar, but today it produces results that make the text understandable. The accuracy is even better if translated into English from other languages, as this is the most used and common direction of translation. There were two speeches in French and 14 speeches in German. This means that the speeches in German and French did not make up a substantial amount of the corpus thus not affecting the results due to being translated. The corpus consisted of 335 293 words, which can be considered a small corpus. As the empirical part of the study is mainly divided into two parts meaning the time before the start of the war and the time after, the focus will not be on the corpus as a whole. It is still important to give an overview of the whole corpus and not only separate the speeches to understand the scope of the study.

The speeches were further categorized into two sub-corpora: the discourse before the war and the discourse since the war. This was done to separate the periods, making it possible to analyze the differences between the periods. All the speeches were read through to further categorize their purpose and context, as all the speeches from this two-year period did not include vital or essential markers. The files of the speeches were then further named according to their theme and the content they included to make separating the files possible.

The corpus of speeches before the war consisted of 122 501 words and the corpus of speeches since the war consisted of 212 792 words. This means there exists a substantial difference between the two corpora. As part of corpus-based research, it is crucial to ensure that counts are similar when analyzing frequencies across texts and registers. Frequency counts from texts within a corpus are not directly comparable, especially if those texts differ in length (Biber et. al, 1998). Frequencies come in two varieties: normalized, or relative, and raw, or absolute. The total results of a term in a corpus are considered its raw frequency. According to McEnery and Hardy (2011), normalized frequency displays the frequency of a certain term per x words of text. The process of "normalization" is thus needed, which involves modifying the raw frequency counts of texts with varying length to enable precise comparisons (Biber et. al, 1998). When normalizing frequency counts, each text's overall word count must be taken into account and the raw frequency count has to be divided by the text's word count and then multiplied by the norming basis of choice (Biber et. al, 1998). The equation used to calculate normalized frequencies is the following:  $nf = (number$

*of examples of the word in the whole corpus ÷ size of corpus) x (base of normalization)*. The base of normalization in this thesis is 1000.

The speeches gathered from the periods include all the speeches delivered during that time period, meaning no filtering is done in the initial phase of collecting the data. This means the speeches include various themes as well as many different purposes as the content of the speeches largely depends on the event they are written for. This however does not mean that they could not include notions important for analyzing the geopolitical discourse formation, which is why all the speeches are used during the initial phases of the analysis meaning the corpus analysis.

### **3.3. Critical discourse analysis and corpus analysis**

This study uses mainly qualitative methods but also touches upon quantitative study methods with mere corpus analysis. When it comes to text analysis, it is not uncommon to combine different methods, even though it has not always been the usual practice as discourse analysis tends to be rather qualitative. The technique presented in this study aims to enhance, rather than replace, the conventional approaches used in CDA. It is important to acknowledge the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, rather than pitting them against one other. The study aims to explain the notions of qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis methods and what it means to use both respectively.

Corpus-based study is a method for analyzing big amounts of text. Corpus-based software helps to measure the frequency of certain linguistic occurrences (different word groups, rhetorical devices). Using corpora and software for discourse analysis gives the researcher various options to carry out qualitative study with the texts, as it helps to analyze large volumes of words in a way that would be impossible to do manually. Many of the corpus linguistic techniques are quantitative and/or rely on statistical tests, which are run using computer programs. But the majority of corpus analysis techniques need a significant amount of human input, often including qualitative analysis, for example looking at concordance lines (Baker et al. 2008). For this study, the AntConc analysis tool, which forms concordance lines based on the chosen keywords, is used for the corpus analysis to systemize the speeches on linguistic basis. AntConc is an effective tool for identifying clusters

in texts meaning frequency patterns of certain words. This study is limited to using AntConc as its main tool for the corpus analysis conducted.

Baker (2006) states that previously, critical discourse analysis focused primarily on analyzing individual texts or small text collections. Nevertheless, researchers in CDA are increasingly recognizing the potential of corpus analysis to enhance their findings or as a standalone methodology. Employing a corpus-based approach facilitates the provision of quantitative evidence regarding the presence of discourses, as it enables researchers to identify repetitive patterns of language usage, such as through looking at collocations. Corpus linguistics also permits the identification of linguistic evidence supporting majority discourses, as well as minority discourses, since a large corpus mostly encompasses a range of ideological positions. This cannot be done by analyzing a single text, which is not prone to show such variation.

Public speech, including political speeches, advertisements, newspaper articles, official documents, and so on, is the primary emphasis of CDA (Sharififar and Rahimi, 2015). The goal of CDA is to investigate how language, ideology, and power are related to one another. CDA provides a set of analytical tools and techniques for systematically examining texts and discourses, meaning it serves as a method in addition to its theoretical nature. CDA not only describes linguistic features but also critically evaluates them, emphasizing the relationship between discourse and social practice and power relations, which is why this method is very useful considering the aim of the thesis.

According to Hansen's (2006: 85) typology of genre in discourse analysis, there are three criteria in discourse analysis: articulation of identity/policy, the degree of formal authority, and the extent to which the text is read and attended to. Political speeches, as opposed to legislative discussions and official statements or foreign policy texts, satisfy all three of Hansen's requirements by requiring strong political power, clearly stating identities and policies, and speaking to a large audience (Hansen, 2006). The speeches made by the European Commission may also be classified as belonging to a particular kind of newly emerging political speech subgenre. Wodak and Weiss (2004: 235–242) call it the "visionary/speculative speeches" about Europe. According to the characteristics that set this genre apart, they are generally consensus-oriented and heavily rely on argumentative strategies aimed at "drawing borders" (inside/outside distinction), "organizing

Europe" (institutional forms of decision making and political framework), and "making meaning of Europe" (idea and substance).

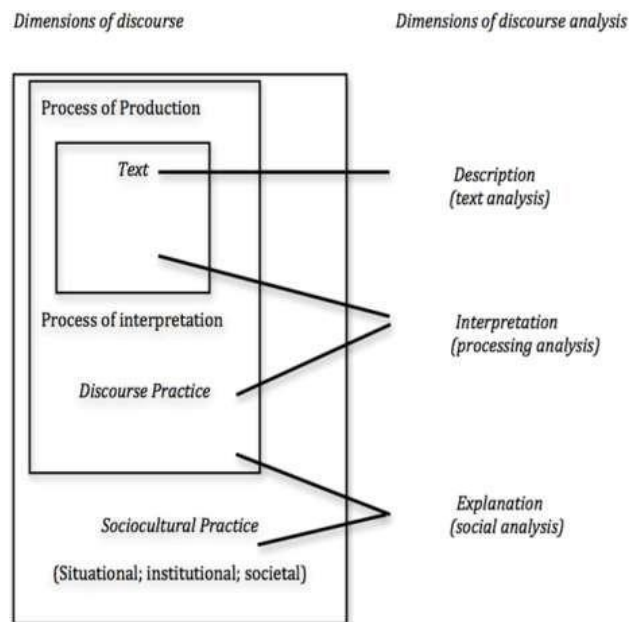
When it comes to defining critical discourse analysis as a method, it can be said that it's an interdisciplinary approach, which refers to a method that utilizes knowledge and principles from several academic areas (Wodak, 2001). For instance, CDA is grounded in both linguistic and social science. In conventional sense, critical discourse analysis cannot be viewed as a distinct academic field with a predetermined set of ideas, classifications, presumptions, or research techniques. Rather, CDA may be viewed as an agenda-driven, problem-oriented, multidisciplinary research program that encompasses a range of methodologies. Their common interest in the semiotic aspects of power, injustice, and political-economic, social, and cultural transformation in our increasingly globalized world and cultures is what binds them together. (Wodak, 2001)

Wodak (2012) also brings out that the fundamental problem-focused multidisciplinary approach of CDA is a key distinction between it and discourse studies as a whole. Consequently, CDA studies social phenomena rather than language units since social phenomena are inherently complicated and call for a multimethodical and multidisciplinary approach. It is a common misperception of the purposes and objectives of critical discourse analysis and the term "critical," which in its essence does not refer to "negative" as in everyday usage, that the objects under investigation must be connected to negative or severe social or political experiences or occurrences (Wodak, 2012). The term "discourse" is also understood differently by different scholars, whether it be considered as something linguistic and rhetorical or used for both oral and written texts (this study focuses on the latter as speeches can fall under both divisions).

This study mainly follows Fairclough's model for conducting critical discourse analysis. Fairclough (1992) proposes three stages for critical discourse analysis - description, interpretation, and explanation. The first level can be described as discourse-as-text which entails the linguistic structures and qualities of the discourse so the linguistic description of the text's properties. Interpretation analyzes the connection between language-based activities and written or spoken material, taking into account the surrounding circumstances. The explanation stage examines the connection between the way people communicate and the way they behave in society, with a specific emphasis on how social factors shape and influence communication patterns. It is essential in CDA to conduct a thorough analysis of the decisions and patterns made in vocabulary (such as

phrasing and usage of metaphors), grammar (such as transitivity and modality), cohesion and text structure. This study does not focus on grammar as such due to the focus of the study and the limitations of it.

**Figure 1.** Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional framework



Source: Fairclough (1995)

It is also important to acknowledge the methodological challenges inherent in CDA. The interpretation of discourse is innately subjective, and scholars must navigate issues of representation and reflexivity with care. Transparent and reflexive research practices are essential for ensuring the validity of CDA analysis. By acknowledging their own positionality and biases, researchers can mitigate potential sources of distortion and enhance the credibility of the findings. The primary target of criticisms are CDA's stated social and political objectives. Accordingly, one of the main critics of CDA, Widdowson (1995) contends that critical discourse analysts unjustly “privileges” their own understandings of texts, which are viewed differently by diverse readers. He criticizes the tilted perceptions that CDA creates. According to him, the ideological

commitment of researchers leads to deliberate selection of texts that would support their desired interpretations, and this makes CDA biased (Widdowson, 1995).

Fairclough (1996) responds to Widdowson's criticism of CDA by stating that his viewpoint ignores the fact that researchers using the CDA approach are always clear about their positions, in contrast to other social research techniques like content analysis, where researchers' underlying assumptions are frequently more hidden or not known in advance. Critical discourse analysts integrate social theories and empirical studies into their research in an effort to explain why texts might be the way they are and change the way they do, while, searching for the answers to these questions in the social and political spheres (Wodak, 2012).

#### **4. A GEOPOLITICAL ACTOR IN THE MAKING: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE EU**

Russia's annexation of Crimea and its backing of separatists in the Donbas conflict marked the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War in 2014. Over the course of eight years, the conflict has intensified and in February 2022 Russia launched a full-scale invasion to further occupy Ukraine. The conflict in Ukraine has had a profound effect on the European Union, sparking a wave of compassion and unity across the continent. In addition to approving Ukraine's bid for membership, the EU has demonstrated its "hard power" by adopting unprecedented sanctions against Russia (Lefebvre, 2023). For the European project, which is going through an existential crisis as a result of the recent shocks, this is a major shift. By standing up to Russia, the EU exhibits its "liberal power" status.

When it comes to the EU's response, it has a lot to do with how the EU has identified itself previously. The EU has always placed a strong emphasis on political and economic cooperation, but in light of these large-scale security challenges, the need for a united military capacity has become more and more apparent. A unified military force, according to supporters, would improve the EU's capacity to handle crises, bolster its standing internationally, and lessen its need on outside partners for security. Nonetheless, discussions on the EU's military aspirations often focus on issues of budgetary allocation, sovereignty, and possible overlap with current NATO structures.

It is evident that the conflict of Russia and Ukraine brought up the military debates and purposes of the European Union even more strongly. One of the most important ways to convey messages and ideas of the union is by giving speeches on these essential and burning topics. Decision-makers as well as the overall public listen to the speeches of high officials in the EU and make their conclusions and assumptions, based on what the direction of the EU can be shaped and debated on. The next chapters include the corpus analysis and critical discourse analysis of the speeches delivered by the Commission's president Ursula von der Leyen. The empirical analysis tries to find out if and how the eruption of the conflict has affected the discursive construction of EU's identity.

As Ursula von der Leyen promised to lead a "geopolitical Commission", it is important to understand what was meant under that and how the idea could realize itself. There is an underlying idea that the internal and external aspects of policymaking were to be connected more. The EU can only exercise authority or set a positive example for the outside world if it is cohesive internally (Koenig, 2019). The member states need to implement and stick to the goals and norms for the EU to be able to put pressure on the outside world on these concrete matters. Koenig (2019) has concluded the external priorities of the Commission based on mission letters to the Commissioners, bringing out different fields and their respective geopolitical outcomes that were expected – for example energy (increase the use of the euro in energy markets), budget (finance the EU's external policy areas), economy (work on a carbon border tax to ensure that EU companies can compete on a level playing field), home affairs (develop stronger cooperation with countries of origin and transit) (Koenig, 2019).

#### **4.1. Discourse of the European Commission before the war**

In this section the focus is on the speeches delivered by von der Leyen before the full-scale war in Ukraine began. These addresses are crucial for understanding the diplomatic stance and the European Union's policy orientations just before the conflict escalated, which illustrate how the identity of the EU was portrayed at that time.

### 4.1.1. Corpus analysis of the speeches before the invasion

For the time period of one year before the war, a total of 110 speeches were recovered. It is further analyzed how the Commission constructed its identity before the influential occurrence and how much focus has been put on the geopolitical discourse. This enables us to compare and contrast the two time periods. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this sub-corpus consisted of 122 501 words. After inserting the speeches into the Antconc software, the analysis of the keywords and concordance lines followed. Keywords connected to the notion of a geopolitical union were searched from the corpus. The following keywords were looked at through the Antconc toolkit: *border, defence, external, foreign, foreign policy, geopolitical, geopolitics, global, identity, integration, military, power, Russia, sanctions, security, war*. No longer phrases were searched from the corpus as the concordance lines already reveal the context in which the words appear, meaning what words are surrounding the keyword. Long phrases also tend to minimize frequency and thus not show much about the discourse.

**Table 2.** Keyword frequency in the corpus of speeches before the war

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Normalized frequency</b>
border	34	0,27
<i>defence</i>	11	0,09
<i>external</i>	6	0,05
<i>foreign</i>	17	0,14
<i>foreign policy</i>	5	0,04
<i>geopolitical</i>	10	0,08
<i>geopolitics</i>	3	0,02
<i>global</i>	345	2,82
<i>identity</i>	11	0,09
<i>integration</i>	6	0,05
<i>military</i>	10	0,08
<i>power</i>	67	0,55
<i>Russia</i>	42	0,34
<i>sanctions</i>	16	0,13
<i>security</i>	60	0,49
<i>war</i>	30	0,24

Looking at the normalized frequencies, it can be seen the markers are not particularly high. The central theme in the speeches of the time period before the war was essentially the COVID-19 pandemic, with the word “*pandemic*” mentioned 204 times in the corpus. This is an important observation as the notions of imminent crises are intertwined in the discourse and touched upon the most, which is reflected in the discourse of the speeches evaluated in this study. It's essential to note that the prioritization of issues can vary depending on the context and specific political agendas of the EU and the current urgency of an issue. As of 2021, the most important challenge in Europe and the rest of the world was the COVID-19 pandemic. It is also the central theme of the speeches from this period, being reflected in the discourse used.

What became apparent is also the fact that the speeches consisting of the most keywords were mostly institutional speeches, meaning from the Parliament’s plenary sessions, State of Union speeches. These speeches represent formal platforms where leaders need to show accountability and transparency, which is why the discourse used in these speeches needs to be thought out on every level. There is also the international aspect of these speeches, as the focus is not on one member state only, but rather on the EU’s positions, strategies, and objectives.

After collecting the frequencies of the keywords, the surrounding words and context of the keywords is looked upon. Observing the context reveals recurring themes and topics associated with a keyword. This information can guide deeper analysis as well as show conclusions about how certain concepts are portrayed. In addition, it enables to sort out the most relevant speeches for this study, as the corpus consists of speeches from a wide range of happenings – plenary speeches of the Parliament, different summits, forums and days, remembrance days, tributes, and memorial services – as well as different themes like climate change, health, economics, transportation, fashion, security, technology.

**Table 3.** The context in which the keywords appeared

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Context</b>
<i>border</i>	border with Belarus, cross-border health threats, military build-up along Ukraine's border, border crossing points, external order of EU, cross-border rail transport
<i>defence</i>	European defence ecosystem, partnership with NATO, European defence summit, European Defence Union, cyber defence, decreasing dependencies in defence, European defence tools
<i>external</i>	external action, external aggression, external border of the EU, external threats, external funding
<i>foreign</i>	European and American foreign policy, health diplomacy, sanctions regime, foreign and security policy, trade, Russian foreign minister

<i>foreign policy</i>	European and American foreign policy, foreign policy community, foreign policy experts
<i>geopolitical</i>	geopolitical tensions, tools, players and power play, geopolitical issues, geopolitical arena, cooperation beyond geopolitical divides
<i>geopolitics</i>	changes in the view of geopolitics, dominating politics, sustainability
<i>global</i>	global health, global warming and climate action, global markets and economy, global goals, global leadership, global commitments, Global Gateway initiative
<i>identity</i>	digital identity, European identity, historical and cultural identity
<i>integration</i>	future of Europe, European integration, historical linkages, overcoming the past, integration leadership
<i>military</i>	Russian military threats, military spending, organization of military security, military figures, military build-up in the Indo-Pacific, integration of military efforts
<i>power</i>	geopolitical and global power, technological and digital power, energy and renewables, military power, democratic power, economic power, power of being an example
<i>Russia</i>	EU-Russia relations, energy dependency, sanctions and their global impact, military threat, security concerns, international cooperation
<i>sanctions</i>	existing sanctions effectiveness, Belarus and migration, sanction packages, coordination and expansion, immediate response, economic impact
<i>security</i>	NATO and EU security, global health security, cybersecurity, energy security, social security, trade and economic security, autocracy
<i>war</i>	Russia and Ukraine conflict, World Wars and reconstruction, Cold War legacy, climate change, unity and values, peaceful cooperation, human costs

The context is further analysed in the next chapter of speeches since the war, as the two tables and results can be compared. Some geopolitical elements are visible in these contexts, taking into account the keywords are already geopolitically loaded, although they are less directly related to the conflict. More attention is being paid to geopolitical tensions and cooperation, but with a larger focus that taking into account actors and instruments outside of the then slowly emerging Ukraine-Russia conflict. The geopolitical focus can also be attributed to the fact that a few months before the escalation of the war, the theme was already present as the armed forces were already accumulating at the border, which was also addressed by the president.

After looking at the keywords and their context, there were evidently some speeches that included the most relevant concordance lines and keywords, making them stand out of the corpus. These speeches are further analyzed in the following subsection of the thesis. A more thorough insight into the keywords and their frequencies is given in the chapter about the speeches since the war as then the comparison of the periods is possible, which is important for this study.

**Table 4.** Breakdown of the keyword occurrences in the chosen speeches based on frequency

Speech	Keyword															Total number of keywords	
	border	defence	external	foreign	foreign policy	geopolitical	geopolitics	global	identity	integration	military	power	Russia	sanctions	security		war
State of the Union 2021		7	2			1		21	1		1	5			10	1	<b>49</b>
Plenary COVID-19	2	1	1			1		4			1		7	3	1		<b>21</b>
Plenary situation in Belarus	9			1										6	2		<b>18</b>
Plenary EU-Russia relations								1			2		23	3	3	4	<b>36</b>
Munich Security conference			1									1	5	1	5	5	<b>18</b>

**4.1.2. Critical discourse analysis of the selected speeches**

The critical discourse analysis is carried out based on Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework described also in the method chapter. The dimensions of this model are the following: text analysis (description), discourse practice (interpretation), and sociocultural practice (explanation). As the file names of the speeches were coded according to the themes of the speeches, the author could distinguish the files that consisted of the most keywords, thus were the most relevant, from the Antconc system. With every keyword, the speeches in which the words appeared would be visible, thus enabling to choose the most relevant speeches for the analysis. Five speeches were chosen for a more thorough analysis. The chapter ends with conclusions on the key themes and takeaways from the analysis.

*State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, 15 September 2021*

The State of the Union speeches are considered in this analysis as they are the key speeches of the Commission’s president. They occur once every year during September and address the achievements of the past year while also looking to the future and stating the priorities for the upcoming year (European Commission, 2024). These speeches are one of the longest in the corpus, which is why they consisted of many keywords and made it to the top of the lists of speeches including the most keywords. There was a total of 49 keywords included in this speech.

To communicate themes of unity and resiliency, von der Leyen used rhetorical tactics and strategic wording in her 2021 State of the Union address. The frequent use of pronouns like "we" and "our" can be spotted and it is intended to create a feeling of shared responsibility among the member

states of the European Union and to create a feeling of “us” through collective identity formation. Several identity theorists also refer to the notion of “we” in their explanation of identity characteristics (Lebov, 2008; Connolly 1991). The word "soul" (*European values as part of its soul; our union needs a soul and a vision they can connect to; a union with a soul*) is repeatedly and metaphorically used in the speech and can be viewed as Europe that is based on common principles and values. To further illustrate the idea, the catchphrases "Team Europe" and "go it together" highlight cooperation, portraying EU's joint efforts during times of crisis. Moreover, optimism and realism are shown by the juxtaposition of successes ("*more than 70% vaccinated adults*") with difficulties ("*pandemic lingering,*" "*geopolitical threats*"). The focus of the speech is on themes connected to the pandemic.

Another rhetorical device used is analogy, which contrasts the present difficulties with a "marathon" as opposed to a "sprint" highlighting the need of consistent work in addressing long-term issues like the epidemic. Anaphora is used to establish rhythm and emphasize a point, meaning von der Leyen uses comparable words to start many sentences. As an example, the phrase "We delivered to Europe" and "We delivered to the world" at the beginning of the statements emphasizes how far the EU has come together when it comes to the epidemic.

Von der Leyen's speech emphasizes a unified European approach to global challenges and is directed to several groups, including members of the EU Parliament, citizens, and foreign partners. The discourse employs rhetorical strategies to recognize challenges and uphold universal principles such as solidarity, democracy, and human rights. With the claims that "*Europe just did it*" and "*Europe is ready,*" it portrays the EU as a competent leader. Additionally, the speech makes use of intertextual elements to place the EU in a historical continuity and link the past and present (for example referencing previous crises – financial and refugee). This can be viewed as a geopolitical notion of portraying unity to the rest of the world.

When it comes to social practices, the speech offers a response to an environment that is changing quickly. According to von der Leyen, we are living in an "*era of hyper-competitiveness,*" when disinformation and the rise of dictatorial governments are all usual. Her clear reference to the objectives of the EU, especially the European Defence Union, indicates her awareness of the growing dangers to security posed by instabilities.

To conclude, the idea of a geopolitical Commission von der Leyen first used to frame her mandate is not present in the speech. This was also noted by Hirsch (2021) in his analysis of the State of the EU speech. Health concerns surrounding the pandemic were the main topic of discussion in her speech, as the priorities of the Commission, and the rest of the world, changed rapidly with the pandemic's start. This shows that the geopolitical aspects were not that present in the discourse of the Commission.

*Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the conclusions of the October European Council and the situation in Belarus and at its border with the EU, 23 November 2021*

With the first dimension of the used CDA model including text analysis, the following language qualities can be brought out. When touching the theme of vaccination, von der Leyen uses expressive language to convey sympathy for COVID-19 victims. When it comes to the situation in Belarus, adjectives such as “*outrageous*” and “*cynical blackmail*” are used to describe the border dispute with Belarus. This portrays the Lukashenko administration in a negative light. The EU's reaction is presented as prompt and well-coordinated, with an emphasis on border security, sanctions, and diplomatic outreach, which all fall under the geopolitical markers. Rhetorical emphasis is placed on resilience and togetherness as phrases like “*protect themselves and others,*” “*act together to protect our European borders*” are present.

The power dynamics inside the EU are reflected in this speech by placing the Commission in the lead role in coordinating responses to the pandemic and geopolitical problems. In the address, the EU is portrayed as a single, cohesive institution that is determined to resist foreign dangers, especially those posed by authoritarian governments in this context. The EU's significant funding for border control, with for example bolstering Frontex and prioritizing assistance for frontline member states, is an important notion as well. This clearly illustrates the geopolitical aspects that are stressed, which causes the receiving audience to connect the identity of the EU to this context.

The president's remarks do not involve direct threats to Belarus, but rather, it denounces the acts of the Lukashenko government and those who support it. The speech describes these acts as a “*hybrid threat*” and highlights the efforts taken by the EU to counter it. These measures include

border security, humanitarian assistance as well as sanctions. The EU's will to defend its borders and ideals, as well as its commitment to uniformity with impacted member states, are emphasized in the address.

Von der Leyen ends the speech with putting the focus on unity and the extensiveness of these burning issues:

*“These actions represent a real and present danger to our Union's security. These actions go beyond Belarus. They are testing our resolve and unity. But the European Union has the will, the unity and the resolve to face this and future crises.”*

By depicting the EU as a moral actor guarding its borders and ideals from outside dangers, Von der Leyen helps member states feel more united as a group. The narrative that portrays Europe as an establishment that demands unity and is strengthened by portraying Belarus as an aggressor attempting to disrupt the EU. This goes back to the idea of othering, (Lebov 2008, Arkan 2014), as portraying Belarus as a country with different set of values. A recurrent theme is the strength that comes from crises, highlighting the EU's will to resist outside pressure.

*Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the preparation of the European Council and EU's response to the global resurgence of COVID-19, 15 December 2021*

Textually, the speech includes many technical terms and language, like “Omicron variant” and “vaccination rates”, showing the competences of EU. The speech combines formal tone with emotional tone, having a balance between the different audiences that the speech reaches. The speech first deals with the imminent COVID-19 theme, acknowledging the challenges – rising cases, new variants – then talking about the EU’s responses highlighting the progress made in developing and distributing vaccinations. She concludes with broader issues, especially the tensions with Belarus and Russia. There is a notion of connections between public health and security that are portrayed.

When it comes to the second dimension, interpretation, several themes can be spotted. Von der Leyen is often calling to action and outlining the steps being taken to combat resistance of citizens to vaccines and the spreading of disinformation. Showcasing the EU's successes in controlling the

epidemic and its ability to take on future challenges are the key points in the speech. The geopolitical challenges are also already mentioned, which is illustrated by handling Russia's military buildup and tensions with Belarus. The EU is positioned as a stabilizing factor in the area. By summarizing successes and presenting future plans, the speech aims to offer comfort for the EU people and member states.

Touching upon power dynamics, it can be referenced that according to von der Leyen, the EU is a strong group that is handling the epidemic with effectiveness, meaning it deals well with outside threats. By using this kind of discourse, the EU validates its governance model as well as its function as a defender of overall regional stability. By bringing up geopolitical instability, particularly in relation to Russia and Belarus, the EU is able to set itself apart from its neighbors' aggressive and unpredictable actions by emphasizing its well-reasoned reaction. Thus, it can be said that the internal narrative or discourse revolves on accomplishments and a positive outlook for the future, whereas the exterior narrative focuses on being cautious and defensive.

There is an important message in this speech concerning the tensions surrounding the conflict between Ukraine and Russia already:

*“Of course, we want good relations with Russia. But whether this is possible depends first and foremost on Russia's behaviour. At this point in time, Russia is choosing an aggressive posture vis-à-vis its neighbours. And as the European Union and its G7 partners have made very clear, further aggressive acts against Ukraine will have massive costs for Russia.”*

...

*“And of course, we are ready to take additional, unprecedented measures with serious consequences for Russia. But above all, I call on Russia to deescalate, to pursue diplomatic channels and to abide by its international commitments. Conflicts must be solved peacefully.”*

As the speech was delivered in December of 2021 when Russia had not yet taken the step of starting a full-scale war in Ukraine, it can be seen that the EU is still trying to stay hopeful. There exists a wish to keep good relations with Russia, as the goal is to have a cooperative relationship. But at the same time von der Leyen sets a clear expectation that Russia needs to act in accordance with international norms. The consequences are highlighted as the president warns of severe repercussions if any further aggressive steps are taken by Russia. This shows that the EU and its

partners are ready to fight against these harmful actions, as massive costs are probably referring to cooperation and sanctions. Mentioning G7 partners also shows a unified front among the nations, which stands for a strong international response.

*Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on EU-Russia relations, European security and Russia's military threat against Ukraine, 16 February 2022*

The speech makes use of lexical selections to frame the story and initiate different strong emotions. Words that emphasize the seriousness of the situation and evoke compassion include “*tragedies of the twentieth century*,” and “*darkest days of the Cold War*”, as these expressions are linked to the painful memories of the past. By framing Ukraine and the EU as targets of Russian aggression, these language choices help to create a narrative of victimization and threat perception. There are several metaphors used that convey a powerful message, such as “*ghosts of the last century*,” which portrays the Russian approach to international relations, portraying it as outdated. On the other hand, the EU is the modern and progressive entity with its values that it embodies.

In response to Russian aggression, the EU member states are characterized as showing their solidarity and unity throughout the used discourse. Citations to transatlantic alliances, diplomatic initiatives, and coordinated measures against Russia underscore the EU’s commitment to mutual defence and collective measures. An example of von der Leyen emphasizing the important partnerships and their state, showing how the emerging conflict has already strengthened cooperation:

*“The Transatlantic Community has for a long time not been so united.”*

Another important excerpt from the speech that is connected to the attitude towards Russia and its actions is the following:

*“We now have two distinct futures ahead of us. In one, the Kremlin decides to wage war against Ukraine, with massive human costs – something we thought we had left behind after the tragedies of the twentieth century. Moscow's relations with us would be severely damaged. Tough sanctions would kick in, with dire consequences on the Russian economy and its prospect of modernisation.*

*But another future is possible. A future in which Russia and Europe cooperate on their shared interests.”*

It is illustrated how von der Leyen is framing the identity of both Europe and Russia regarding their potential actions and the consequences. The sanctions, as well as isolation, are already mentioned as a logical repercussion. The speech also offers a different scenario in which Russia and Europe may collaborate. This implies that despite their differences, Russia and the EU could be united by a similar set of interests. Von der Leyen is appealing to a common identity or a future where disputes are settled cooperatively rather than violently.

The othering of Russia is also starting to be more evident here. The speech employs discursive strategies to “other” Russia and portray it as a hostile actor seeking to undermine European security. References to Russian aggression, intimidation tactics, and attempts to divide EU member states serve to delegitimize Russia's actions.

*Speech by President von der Leyen at the Munich Security Conference, 22 February 2022*

This speech was the last speech delivered before the invasion of Ukraine by Russia started on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2022, which also means the fears of the attack happening were already present. This speech is also briefly looked into because of this reason, as well as its inclusion of keywords. Using well-chosen language, Ursula von der Leyen highlights the serious problems the European Union faces. Terms like “*freedom*,” “*democracy*,” and “*independence*” embody the fundamental principles of the EU, whereas words like “*intimidation*,” “*aggression*,” and “*coercion*” characterize Russia's strategies. Von der Leyen characterizes Moscow's activities as outmoded and dangerous by often drawing comparisons between Russia's “*dark past*” and Europe's goal of a modern, rules-based international order.

She emphasizes important points repeatedly, saying, “We cannot let this stand,” and urging group action. The differences between the “rule of law” and the “rule of the strongest” serve to emphasize the moral gap that exists between authoritarian aggressiveness and democratic ideals. Her allegories seek to make difficult geopolitical tactics more understandable. For example, she uses “diversification” in the energy industry to guarantee “Europe's strategic independence.” She uses powerful rhetorical framing when she describes China's and Russia's geopolitical goals as a “*new*

era” that threatens the status quo in international relations. By articulating the EU's aims, von der Leyen inspires EU’s transatlantic allies to respond in unison.

The speech is very aware of the current political climate, as she acknowledges that Russia's activities have the potential to “*reshape the entire international system.*” This presents the problem as having global implications. She uses the country's independence as a point of reference for democratic resilience in Ukraine, connecting its future to the larger future and defence of European security. Building agreement around strong action, the address strategically highlights the EU's coordinated strategy with the US and NATO. The EU's interests are reflected in the speech, especially regarding Russia's military build-up near Ukraine's borders. She emphasizes that this is a direct assault on world principles rather than merely a Ukrainian conflict by presenting Russia's actions in this manner.

The president frames her support for Ukraine as being both morally and strategically necessary. By linking Ukraine's fight with the larger defence of European ideals, von der Leyen frames the EU's assistance for Ukraine as protecting the “*values that are at stake in this crisis.*” The EU's pledge to penalize Moscow financially is shown by the planned financial and economic sanctions on energy and technologies. By promoting less reliance on Russia, von der Leyen's focus on energy diversification tackles one of the weaknesses of the EU. This speech is where the geopolitical themes start to present themselves more as the danger of war is very real and imminent.

Briefly concluding the CDA of the speeches before the war, it can be said that the EU’s identity is shaped by its crisis management practices, when looking at the speeches analyzed. Von der Leyen portrays the EU as a competent and dependable leader in terms of political stability and during this period stressing the health security by as well, while showcasing the EU's accomplishments in handling the epidemic and confronting great challenges. The closer the escalation of the war, meaning a new and more dominant crisis, came, the more the focus of the discourse shifted to markers of security and defence. By using Fairclough's approach, it was shown how language both shapes and is shaped by the socio-political environment, reflecting and constructing political reality.

## 4.2. Discourse of the European Commission since the war

Since the war, many important and influential steps have been taken to give a clear message of not supporting the aggressor and condemning the activities of it. Russia is no longer a member of the Council of Europe, which now has 46 members as a result of the conflict in Ukraine. Changes like this reflect new developments in Europe's institutional frameworks. With €3 billion raised to pay for the delivery of weapons to Ukraine, the European Peace Facility has been heavily used in helping Ukraine. As part of a new strategic compass that was agreed in March 2022, the EU has started training 15,000 Ukrainian troops. The conflict in Ukraine has made Europeans realize they need to invest more in their security and improve their readiness to use “hard power” (Lefebvre, 2023).

### 4.2.1. Corpus analysis of the speeches since the invasion

It is clear Europe's geopolitical consolidation has increased because of the conflict in Ukraine, with the EU resurrecting its defensive capabilities. It is now analyzed how this has been delivered through the discourse of the President of the Commission since the conflict escalated. This sub-corpus consisted of 212 792 words, which is nearly half the size of the corpus consisting of speeches before the war. There was a total of 157 speeches delivered during the time period of one year since the escalation of the conflict. This shows that the president of the Commission made more public speeches, which were also longer taking into account the number of words, during the year since the war, which can be considered logical due to the war escalating. This means the position of the EU needed to be established more frequently and strongly than before.

The first step was inserting the same keywords into the Antconc corpus tool to see how the data differs from the period before the war. The frequency and normalized frequency findings can be seen in the following table:

**Table 5.** Keyword frequency in the corpus of speeches since the war

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Normalized frequency</b>
border	43	0,2
<i>defence</i>	31	0,15

<i>external</i>	13	0,06
<i>foreign</i>	52	0,24
<i>foreign policy</i>	6	0,03
<i>geopolitical</i>	25	0,12
<i>geopolitics</i>	10	0,05
<i>global</i>	494	2,32
<i>identity</i>	9	0,04
<i>integration</i>	24	0,11
<i>military</i>	70	0,33
<i>power</i>	142	0,67
<i>Russia</i>	378	1,78
<i>sanctions</i>	84	0,39
<i>security</i>	208	1,00
<i>war</i>	425	2,00

The same process as with the keywords in the speeches before the war was done concerning the context in which the keywords appeared. This means the concordance lines were analyzed and main topics chosen for each of the keywords. The results of the analysis can be seen in the table below (Table 6).

**Table 6.** The context in which the keywords appeared

<b>Keyword</b>	<b>Context</b>
<i>border</i>	Russian invasion of Ukraine, cross-border cooperation, Good Friday agreement, border management, security and sovereignty, human impact of borders, economic integration
<i>defence</i>	defence and democracy, defence spending, strengthening defence capabilities, European security, support for Ukraine, trade defence, self-defence rights
<i>external</i>	external borders, external threats and security, external policy dimensions, external influence on democracy, external factors affecting economy
<i>foreign</i>	foreign investment, autocratic and foreign threats, foreign influence, foreign policy, strategic partnerships, foreign relations in conflict regions
<i>foreign policy</i>	rethinking foreign policy agenda, trade as foreign policy priority, geopolitical tensions, resource dependencies, unified foreign policy voice, foreign policy community engagement
<i>geopolitical</i>	geopolitical shifts and risks, geopolitical weight, strategic dependencies and diversification, geopolitical Commission and Union, geopolitical importance and implications
<i>geopolitics</i>	impact on economics and security, beyond Europe, climate change, changing geopolitics, geopolitics and common values, trade wars
<i>global</i>	Global Gateway initiative, global market and competition, global climate and energy, global security, global infrastructure and connectivity, global governance

<i>identity</i>	European unity, inclusiveness, historical reimagining, rights and self-identification, cultural identity, identity under threat, national identity
<i>integration</i>	economic integration, EU expansion and enlargement, technological integration, cultural and social integration, regional cooperation, European values, conflict resolution
<i>military</i>	support for Ukraine, sanctions and Russia, geopolitical tensions, European security, war crimes and human rights, military innovation
<i>power</i>	economic power, energy power, democratic power, mobilizing and military power, soft power, value-driven investment power, transformative power
<i>Russia</i>	war of aggression, geopolitical threat, economic sanctions, global impact, human rights violations, impact on energy, broader conflict of ideals
<i>sanctions</i>	severity and impact, coordination, scope and precision, persistence, support for Ukraine, broad political support, caveats
<i>security</i>	energy security, food security, economic and global security, military and defence security, human security
<i>war</i>	Russian aggression, global impact, support for Ukraine, values and democracy, war crimes, energy and economic consequences, historical perspective

The table reflects and shows with the context themes the European Commission's geopolitical direction. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has foregrounded the importance of several themes like border management, cross-border cooperation, and security, while the Commission simultaneously emphasizes economic integration and the issues concerning its borders. The Commission's foreign policy seeks a unified voice while tackling and balancing trade questions, geopolitical tensions, and global resource dependencies. Simultaneously, the Commission prioritizes European unity and cultural identity amid the threats such as imposed by Russia. With Russia's invasion underscoring the importance of sanctions and unified responses, the EU commits to security in its broadest sense. The notion of the Ukrainian war revealed itself in different contexts and it can be said that with growing challenges like the situation in Ukraine, the Commission prioritizes supporting democratic allies and strengthening international collaboration to promote peace and uphold its values. It also emphasizes the importance of economic resilience and protecting strategic partnerships. The context is evidently connected to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which reflects itself in many contexts of different keywords.

The context of the keywords in the speeches since the war discuss defence in terms of bolstering capacities and aiding Ukraine. The Indo-Pacific area and strategic investments are examples of military environments that emphasize a more all-encompassing security approach.

The table based on since the war speeches lists security, markets, and climate change as the three main global challenges and the table with before the war discourse emphasizes commitments, objectives, and global health in addition, demonstrating a more comprehensive approach before the escalation of the war. This means other themes were also more evident and with the war, the discourse shifted the focus more on the geopolitical crisis at hand. The attention of the before the war speeches is more specialized with different aspects of European identity concerns, such as the process of European integration and digital identity.

The sorting of the speeches consisting the most keywords was followed, with the results determining speeches for the critical discourse analysis.

**Table 7.** Breakdown of the keyword occurrences in the chosen speeches based on frequency

Speech	Keyword																Total number of keywords
	border	defence	external	foreign	foreign policy	geopolitical	geopolitics	global	identity	integration	military	power	Russia	sanctions	security	war	
Plenary Russian aggression	2	4		2			1			2	2	10	5	3	8	<b>39</b>	
State of the Union 2022	2	1	2	6	1		10			3	7	5	2	3	17	<b>59</b>	
State of the Union 2023	3	1		1		5	1	18		3	2	3	2	1	12	10	<b>62</b>
Speech at Princeton University						1		15			4	2	13	7	2	14	<b>58</b>
Speech on EU-China relations	1	2		3	1		1	16			8	3	3	1	22	2	<b>63</b>

The normalized frequencies of the keywords in the corpus of since the war speeches are relatively higher, which was anticipated as the war has had its definite implications on the discourse presented by the Commission. After completing the keyword search with both corpora, the normalized frequencies were compared in the following table to illustrate the differences between the two corpora.

**Table 8.** Comparison of the normalized frequencies of the keywords in the two corpora

Keyword	Before the war	Since the war
	Normalized frequency	Normalized frequency
border	0,27	0,2
defence	0,09	0,15
external	0,05	0,06
foreign	0,14	0,24

<i>foreign policy</i>	0,04	0,03
<i>geopolitical</i>	0,08	0,12
<i>geopolitics</i>	0,02	0,05
<i>global</i>	2,82	2,32
<i>identity</i>	0,09	0,04
<i>integration</i>	0,05	0,11
<i>military</i>	0,08	0,33
<i>power</i>	0,55	0,67
<i>Russia</i>	0,34	1,78
<i>sanctions</i>	0,13	0,39
<i>security</i>	0,49	1,00
<i>war</i>	0,24	2,00

In the following paragraph, the comparison of the keyword data is presented to see the differences between the time periods. The data is marked with red and green to make the distinction clearer. With green are marked the higher frequencies, while the lower frequencies are indicated in red. Out of 16 keywords, 12 keywords have higher frequencies in the speeches since the escalation of the war, resulting to 75% of the total. Based on initial observations, it can be said that the speeches since the war were more directed to geopolitical themes and ideas. Since the war, there is a noticeable rise in the word “*defence*,” which is probably due to greater military action and the elevated security worries that the war brought along. Even though references to “*foreign policy*” declined during the war (but only by 0,01 nf), the phrase is important as it implies continued diplomatic efforts and maybe a reassessment of post-war international relations. Following the conflict, there was an upsurge in the phrases “*geopolitical*” and “*global*,” suggesting a wider outlook or a greater understanding of the repercussions and engagement on a worldwide scale. Since the war, there was a decline in the mention of “*identity*” but an increase in “*integration*,” which may indicate a change in attention from more internal and identity problems to external cooperation initiatives. There exists a noticeable rise in keywords connected to the war itself – “*military*,” “*power*,” and “*security*,” – suggesting that these areas are given more importance because of the conflict's influence and effect on security matters. Mentions of “*Russia*” and “*sanctions*” considerably rose since the war, indicating a change in emphasis toward the conflict's geopolitical ramifications. It is also evident there is a sharp increase of the keyword “*war*”. This

increase is attributed to discourse about addressing the causes, impacts, and aftermath of the war and its start.

Overall, the comparison of keywords shows a change in the discourse from pre-war subjects that can be seen as “softer” like identity and global concerns to post-war subjects like security, defence, and geopolitical dynamics, with special focus on Russia and the effects of sanctions.

#### **4.2.2. Critical discourse analysis of the selected speeches**

Analysis in this chapter is also based on Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework. Based on the corpus analysis of the speeches, five speeches were chosen for more in-depth view and critical discourse analysis. The most important takeaways concerning identity construction from the speeches are discussed in the following paragraphs. The author has selected statements showing the geopolitical stance of the EU, correlating to the geopolitical markers, thus how it perceives itself and wants to portray its identity in the wake of the war. The analysis is then concluded with the main takeaways from the empirical analysis.

*Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the Russian aggression against Ukraine on 1 March 2022*

In this corpus, one of the most important speeches is the speech delivered right after the start of the war, which also included many keywords: a total of 36 occurrences of different keywords (see Table 7 for the breakdown). This speech portrays the initial and immediate stance of the EU and how it has chosen to address the situation and what messages are conveyed.

The description dimension of Fairclough’s model includes textual analysis. There are strong references to ideological positioning. The speech conveys emotional language to incite powerful sentiments of empathy as well as solidarity. There is a definite polarization of opposing forces: “democracies” vs “autocracies,” “rule of law” vs “rule of the gun,” and “a rules-based order” vs “naked aggression.” Theories of othering, which draw a boundary between “us” and “them,” promote group identification. This dynamic is important for fortifying the EU’s unity and putting

it in a defensive posture against enemies (Lebov, 2008; Correll & Park, 2005). This strengthens the EU's perspective by drawing a sharp contrast between the perceived moral views.

Already historically, Russia has been an important part of European identity and is often seen as a political and economic pillar of the continent. It has also been seen as a possible danger to European security, especially with regard to military and energy issues. Russians struggle to reconcile their idea of Russia as a great power with their acceptance of the position of Europe's follower.

The speech establishes a clear power dynamic between the EU and Russia, being especially evident in phrases like "*a clash of two worlds, two polar sets of values.*" The speech also uses a variety of rhetorical devices to highlight important ideas and increase its persuasive power, such as repetition ("*never let that happen,*" "*freedom is priceless*"). The speech frames the conflict as a struggle between EU's and the aggressor's principles, referring to the attitude and understanding of ideas of freedom, democracy, and solidarity. This in turn evokes a feeling of shared identity and purpose among the union. Additionally, it emphasizes specific actions made to resolve the situation, showing the speaker as proactive and resolute. The vision for the future, thus emphasizing investments in energy independence, defence, and humanitarian aid, is presented. It positions the EU as taking proactive steps to address the challenges ahead.

An important statement connected to identity formation was the following: "*How we respond today to what Russia is doing will determine the future of the international system.*" It implies that Russia's actions pose a threat to the established international system's institutions and norms, and the way in which this is handled will have an effect on the alliances and power dynamics in the near future. Focus on alliances shows the geopolitical component. The EU implies that it's crucial how it acts and how immediate the actions are, as this will give out a strong message to the rest of the world, meaning influence on the outer world.

There is a concrete distinction established between "Putin's Russia" and the other Russia, that does not support his actions. With this the EU wants to give a clear signal that it contends the violent Russia: "*There is another Russia besides Putin's tanks. And we extend our hand of friendship to this other Russia. Be assured, they have our support.*" It suggests that there are aspects of Russian society that are different from Putin's assertive foreign policy, maybe signifying a more progressive faction. Regarding the European Union's identity formation, this statement indicates a wish to keep

lines of communication open with Russian civil society and other groups that might disagree with Putin's policies. This illustrates the aspect of “othering” from a different perspective, meaning excluding the “good” side and people of Russia from the narrative of an aggressor.

When it comes to interpretation and reception, it can be concluded that the discourse aims to influence the audience's perspective on the Ukrainian situation and the EU's involvement in resolving it. It aims to mobilize public opinion in favor of the EU's measures. The speech illustrates more general social practices in the areas of international affairs, crisis management, and diplomacy. It thus exemplifies how language is used as a tool to manage power dynamics and inspire group action in response to large-scale geopolitical issues. The speech employed moral dichotomy, framing the EU's actions within a broader narrative of *good* versus *evil*, which illustrates Connolly's (1991) idea on how identity is constructed through discourses that establish deviance.

The last dimension is explanation, meaning how the discourse reflects social-political structures. The speech illustrates well the dynamics of power inside the EU as well as between the EU and Russia. It tries to strengthen internal unity while projecting the EU as a geopolitical force and moral leader that is prepared to counter foreign challenges like war. The speech marginalizes opposing viewpoints while upholding ideas that support EU activities via the used discourse. This means that von der Leyen still also sticks to the normative power of the EU, showing how EU has established international norms.

What is worth noting is also the theme of reducing reliance on Russian energy supplies and ensuring energy security. This aims to lessen the geopolitical influence that Russia has over Europe. This could be done by focusing on renewable energy investments and diversifying energy sources. This has been one of the great challenges of the war for EU, as Russia has controlled the majority of Europe's natural gas exports. Jack et. al (2024) bring attention to the latest sanction package, that aims to restrict EU ports reselling Moscow LNG. The goal of the LNG sanctions is to hinder Moscow's profitable industry, which is responsible for the global transportation of its energy shipments. However, the fines as outlined in the draft proposals would account for around 25% of Russia's LNG earnings. Stressing strategic autonomy is one of the geopolitical markers that illustrates a switch in the focus and portrayal of the EU.

*2022 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, 14 September 2022 and 2023 State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen, 13 September 2023*

As this period included two State of the Union speeches, they are analyzed together to get a more comprehensive overview of the prevalent discourses of the addresses, as some themes are overlapping in the speeches. Both speeches evidently touch upon many different motifs, but usually have an undertone which emerges from the current state the world is in meaning the biggest crises and worrying situations.

Both speeches reflect a reaction to problems and a vision for a unified future, depicting word choices that highlight resilience and European identity. In 2022, the European Union's reaction was framed as prompt and coherent by the prevalent language of war and its urgency (*“war on our energy, a war on our economy, a war on our values, and a war on our future”*). The rhetoric is forceful and includes military elements. The use of the word *“war”* repeatedly helps to unite the audience against a shared enemy while also escalating the feeling of urgency. With the topic of accomplishments and future-focused objectives, the tone of the 2023 speech significantly changes (*“We have seen the birth of a geopolitical Union – supporting Ukraine, standing up to Russia's aggression”*). The idea of a geopolitical union runs strongly through the 2023 speech as von der Leyen uses phrases like *“Geopolitical Union”*, *“Geopolitical Commission”*, *“Geopolitical Europe”*. As this is stressed in several different ways and various sections of the speech, it is clear that von der Leyen is trying to persuasively show through the discourse how the EU's identity has changed and reformed to a more geopolitical one. These recurring themes are intended to give the EU's policies and activities legitimacy in the eyes of its people as well as in the eyes of its allies and enemies.

Both speeches' intertextuality ties them to broader discussions of European crisis management and flexibility. The 2022 speech aligns with prior EU discourses on economic stability and security by emphasizing urgent dangers and action against Russian aggression. The EU is positioned as a constantly adapting and responding entity, learning from, and building upon its previous experiences. This is done by often bringing up prior difficulties and the solutions they were met with – for example the financial crisis and more recently the pandemic. In contrast, the speech from 2023 incorporates the EU's most recent policy successes into the idea of a forward-thinking Europe. Brubaker and Cooper's (2000) idea of identity as both the product of social action and the

basis for political engagement is consistent with the way the EU's identity is developed via its reaction to crises. The 2023 speech emphasizes policy successes and a vision for future stability, navigating the EU's identity through stages of crisis management and the 2022 speech is consistent with earlier EU narratives of unity in the face of crises, especially the pandemic.

In her 2022 speech, von der Leyen also stresses what the EU has done, mentioning financial and military support to Ukraine:

*“So far Team Europe have provided more than 19 billion euros in financial assistance. And this is without counting our military support.”*

In total, EU, together with its member states, have mobilized 32 billion euros in military support to help Ukraine fight Russia (European Commission, 2024). The defence industry of the EU has also increased its manufacturing capacities for ammunition by a remarkable 40%. This is much needed to be able to provide the delivery of ammunition and missiles. The speech wants to stress these activities of the EU as showing how it is able to step up if needed, even in the sense of military support. These steps demonstrate the EU's ability to provide assistance, when necessary, also highlighting its significance as a key player on the global scene. Von der Leyen's mentions of these accomplishments underscore the EU's resolve to defend international law and stand by its friends, while being firm about its position against aggression.

There is a distinction between the overall tone of the addresses. The shift in tone between the two speeches – from one emphasizing an urgent reaction (2022) to one focusing more on development and resilience (2023) – reflects a larger plan of the EU to stabilize its geopolitical narrative. The 2023 address outlines a distinct and upbeat vision for the future, when the 2022 speech strives to mobilize support in the face of the dangers of external influences, in this context especially Russia.

*Keynote address by President von der Leyen at Princeton University, 22 September 2022*

In this speech, the head of the Commission purposefully used harsh language to emphasize the seriousness of the situation in Ukraine and to elicit strong emotional reactions. With terms like “*mass graves*,” “*Putin's war*,” and “*brutal scars*,” the lexicon is emotionally charged and intended to create a distinct division between Russia as in the role of the aggressor, and Ukraine as the

sufferer. This opposition is also applied to the more general picture of world politics, which is presented as a conflict between “*autocracy and democracy*”, which has been present in several speeches that have been analyzed in this study. Such contradictions place the EU squarely on the side of democracy and rule-based order, serving as rhetorical devices in the construction of identity.

It is also crucial to consider the backdrop of the speech's delivery during UN General Assembly week when it comes to the context of the address. It shows how important the international scene and the views of the general public are to the legitimacy of the EU's position. The president is reporting important topics and events as well as presenting diplomatic maneuvers to consolidate alliances—especially with the US—and garner support against Russia.

In this speech, the president makes it known how pivotal the cooperation of their great ally, US, is and how it has affected the course of the response:

*“From day one on, the United States and the European Union and many other friends have stood at Ukraine's side with weapons, /.../. Let me tell you that these sanctions have only been possible because of a very, very close cooperation with our friends in the United States.”*

The idea emphasizes how important efficient international collaboration is while addressing world challenges. The successful application of sanctions is attributed to the cooperation of key players such as the EU and the US, demonstrating a unified front. Stressing the *very, very close cooperation* between the EU and US shows how important this alliance is to the EU, with this stance being a key factor behind the successful implementation of sanctions and military assistance.

A very pivotal theme in the speech is the energy dependence of EU on Russia, which is discussed in several paragraphs. Illustrating this is the following excerpt:

*“This blackmailing has really united us. And it is a turning point, because we have decided, as a European Union: We will end our reliance on Russian fossil fuels. /.../ So in sum, the era of Russian fossil fuels in Europe is coming to an end. And this is a big geopolitical shift, because if you look at the map, the demand and supply from Russia is coming to an end. This demand from the European Union will now switch towards the Global South.”*

When talking about how the EU is responding to its reliance on Russian energy, the president emphasizes a deliberate move in the direction of increased independence, taking into account the sustainability factor. The EU's intention to stop relying on Russian fossil resources is presented as a geopolitical declaration of its independence. It is stressed that this change in energy supply chains is both strategic and essential, and that it is likely to have long-term effects on international relations. The story of transforming a crisis into a “turning point” serves to strengthen the EU's reputation as a progressive entity that is dedicated to meeting its energy demands while at the same time not forgetting its core values. This development is consistent with Siklodi's (2018) proposal that European identity is a combination of many components and facets, demonstrating the diversity of European identity but also its capacity to adapt and plan forward in the face of geopolitical difficulties.

*Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre, 30 March 2023*

The language used in the speech shapes views of both China and the EU while outlining the EU's position on the latter. The president starts by praising European think tanks for their efforts in interpreting world problems and stressing the value of factual analysis in the formulation of public policy. This establishes the framework for an analysis of the EU-China relations. The President uses labeling to differentiate between the EU and China, framing the EU in terms of democracy and rationality (“*knowledgeable*”, “*independent-minded*”, “*deeper understanding*”), while China is often associated with aggression and assertiveness (“*assertive actions*”, “*strategic posture*”, “*repressive at home*”). Contrasting is also used as a stylistic device throughout the speech to portray the differences between China and the EU and to compare the past and present (comparison of historical peaceful approaches versus current assertive strategies).

In order to represent the identity of the EU via particular language choices and contrasts between the EU and China, the speech makes use of Gee's (2007) idea of "Discourse" (big "D"). With China portrayed as a contrast marked by forceful and authoritarian acts, this discourse strategy helps to develop a narrative that strengthens the EU's identity as rooted in democratic ideals. Von der Leyen then expresses worry when it comes to China's strategic intentions:

*“We have seen a very deliberate hardening of China's overall strategic posture for some time. And it has now been matched by a ratcheting up of increasingly assertive actions.”*

The EU is deeply concerned about the principles of international relations, which is reflected in China's more aggressive geopolitical stance. China's new strategy, marked by tougher measures, puts the EU under pressure to restate its positions and stress its values. The EU's reaction to these changes is linked to the building of its identity as a coherent force in the international arena. This of course has to do with foreign policy decisions, but also the moral footprint of the EU. She highlights the EU's rising worry about China's geopolitical actions and their potential impact on global stability and the balance of power.

There are also remarks on the friendship between China and Putin, that is problematic for the EU:

*“Far from being put off by the atrocious and illegal invasion of Ukraine, President Xi is maintaining his ‘no-limits friendship’ with Putin.”*

As things stand, China's stance on Russia's conflict in Ukraine runs counter to its basic diplomatic tenet of respecting territorial integrity. The used words *“atrocious and illegal”* highlight how strongly the EU is opposed to the invasion and how serious of a violation of international law it is, putting the conflict in a moral and legal context. Von der Leyen directly challenges China's stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, implying that China has not changed its strong ties with Russia in spite of the western world's condemnation of the attack. She draws attention to the phrase *“no-limits friendship,”* which emphasizes the scope and unconditional nature of China's support for Russia.

The following statement by von der Leyen further stresses the influence China-Russia relations have on the cooperation of China and EU:

*“How China continues to interact with Putin's war will be a determining factor for EU-China relations going forward.”*

This discourse suggests that the EU is keeping a careful eye on China's foreign policy and will modify its diplomatic and maybe economic ties accordingly. By characterizing it as *“Putin's war,”* any narrative that may imply a wider level of public or national support for the struggle inside Russia is obviously distanced from. The statement serves as a diplomatic alert informing China

that the EU is ready to adjust its policies and ties with China in response to China's position on the Ukrainian crisis. This thus demonstrates the EU's strategic orientation and determination to uphold international law and common principles in its foreign policy. The EU has also been working to increase its ability to act on its own behalf in foreign affairs. Von der Leyen's remarks may be seen as a part of this larger plan, indicating that the EU would not base its foreign policy just on economic convenience, but rather on its strategic principles.

In addition, the speech underscores how crucial cooperation and solidarity are for the EU as it negotiates its relationship with China. Coordination between EU institutions and member states is mentioned, highlighting the need for a unified foreign policy strategy: *“A strong European China policy relies on strong coordination between Member States and EU institutions and a willingness to avoid the divide and conquer tactics that we know we may face.”*

To conclude the empirical part of the study on speeches since the war, it can be said that the geopolitical markers of military presence, alliances, geographic borders, diplomatic relations and dependencies were mostly present in the discourse analysis, which is shown in the excerpts of the speeches, illustrating a change in identity formation. The discourse surrounding Europe's reliance on Russian energy and its strategic shift to renewable energy sources highlight the geopolitical aspect of identity formation. With these discursive changes and turns to a more security-oriented construction of the EU, it can be said that the European Union's advancement towards strategic autonomy, or the ability to act independently in the political-military sphere, is being expedited by the conflict in Ukraine. The address on China-EU relations is also an important marker when it comes to the idea of alliances, with articulating a cautious stance on the matter.

The main findings from the corpus and critical discourse analysis were the following:

- **“Self” vs “other” meaning positioning:** The speeches by von der Leyen stressed very strongly the idea of depicting the aggressor, whether it be Belarus or Russia, as the “other” and the “self” meaning EU as the morally just character that shapes the international political field. This is explained by Lebov (2008), stating that political identities are best developed during conflicts, pushing for the creation of opposite groupings. The Ukraine-Russia war inflicted that formation, portraying Russia as an “autocracy” and EU as a

“democracy” to the world, thus molding the identity of the EU as a holder of democratic principles in stark contrast to its Eastern counterpart.

- **Emphasis on partnerships:** the speeches during the time period of the escalation of the war focused on strengthening ties with important allies, especially with the US. This reference not only places the EU inside a global security framework that favors collaboration with established military powers, but it also reinforces the strategic priorities. A more geopolitically constructed EU wants to ally itself closely with its important partners. This can be connected to one of Siklodi’s (2018) identity formation aspects – the sense of “us” and also with the geopolitical marker illustrating the discursive focus on alliances.
- **Strategic autonomy:** the Russia-Ukraine conflict has highlighted how dependent the EU has been on outside sources, especially in the energy and defence industries. While explicit mentions of defence capabilities were rather limited, the discourse incorporated the idea of strategic autonomy. The discursive articulation was much concentrated on the need to gain dependance focusing on renewable energy investments and diversifying energy sources, for example seeing the potential of the Global South. This shift is not just an economic decision but a strong geopolitical statement.
- **Sense of unity and reaffirmation of values:** Ursula von der Leyen frequently stresses the important values of the EU that guide its external (and internal) actions, like democracy, rule of law, human rights and commitment to a rules-based international order. As during the war, the aggressor goes against these values, there is an evident contrast between the EU and Russia, which is insisted on by the president to create a sense of unity among the union. This stance not only defines the EU's approach to global governance but also helps to consolidate its identity as a mediator and moral leader in international affairs, promoting peace, stability, and cooperation. This is also important in the face of diplomatic relations as it reinforces the EU’s credibility and influence on the global stage.
- **Crisis management:** the idea that crises shape the identity formation were evident in speeches before and after the escalation of the war – before the war the main discursive focus was on COVID-19, whereas after this narrative switched and war became central, thus also intensifying the appearance of geopolitical markers and discourse around military presence, geographic borders and alliances. The speeches emphasize the EU's ability to

successfully handle crises by making several allusions to collaboration and resilience. There is also a sense of Europe as a geopolitical space that is ideally both stable and peaceful inside and on the other side we have a crisis-ridden world.

### **4.3. Implications of the war on EU's identity formation**

As stated in the methodological part of the study, the rearticulation of the EU's geopolitical identity was examined via CDA, looking for characteristics like strengthening its global positioning, reaffirming its values, stressing strategic autonomy and defence capabilities. Attributes like military presence, alliances, geographic borders, diplomatic relations and dependencies were considered as geopolitical markers and references to these ideas were searched throughout the analysis.

A stronger focus on security, military capabilities, and a proactive role in international politics are characteristics of this geopolitical shift. The statements made by the Commission throughout the time period of the escalation of the war demonstrate how the EU's discourse has evolved significantly from a focus on internal integration and rather economic concerns to an active role in addressing and influencing global security dynamics. This change affects the EU's internal dynamics as well as its interactions with other world powers. The EU's strong position on foreign challenges, particularly those from Russia, demonstrates the regulative side of identity formation (Kowert, 2010), which defines who belongs within a specific identity and mandates conducted towards other states. The focus of the speeches since the war is on the EU's forceful acts and presents the EU as a decisive entity.

What was also seen, was that the closer the Russian threat was coming, the more the speeches focused on these geopolitical markers, like its strategic autonomy, alliances as well as highlighting its moral values. This means that the speeches from the period before the war started to be focused on this construction of EU a few months ahead the invasion. The forming of public opinion via the gradual identity shift thus started already before the war.

When there is a change in power dynamics, the relationships between various forms of discourse also change and are used in new ways. Discourse is considered to be the catalyst for creating unique genres, which may then be assimilated into new methods and identities, leading to innovative modes of existence and identities (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer, 2004: 34). Essentially, discourse functions as both a mirror and an initiator for societal transformation. As the distribution of power changes, the methods, and meanings of various types of communication also change. This impacts the fundamental structure of the identities of communities and individuals. Zotzmann

and O'Regan (2016) bring out the illustrating example of 9/11 terrorist attacks as the events of 9/11 resulted in a sequence of changes in communication and discussion, including increased focus on security and heightened public alertness, which have influenced the development of new identities and ways of thinking. These conditions initiate the development of new genres that provide fresh subject positions or identities for people to engage and communicate with.

What has happened in the EU and around EU's identity formation since the war can be considered similar in this sense. Even though the geopolitical aspect was mentioned by Ursula von der Leyen since she took office, it got substance with the big change in power dynamics with Russia due to the conflict in Ukraine. As power relations change and geopolitical tensions increase, the identities of impacted players are unavoidably transformed by the emerging discourse. The EU's actions and policies in reaction to the conflict had substantial impact on forming these identities, acting as both as a source of unity and a cause for disagreement. The discussion on EU engagement, whether by sanctions, military involvement or humanitarian assistance, impacts the way people see their position in the wider European context. For many, the EU symbolizes a source of optimism and unity, which means the feeling of collective identity.

With the war escalating, Russia strongly became the "other" when looking at the discourse of the EU since the war and right before it. This is an important facet of identity formation as also explained in the theoretical part of the thesis by Lebov (2008) and Schmitt's (1976). The emergence of an "other" might serve as a potent trigger for self- or in-group definition. With the conflict escalating, this dynamic became especially noticeable in the context of EU-Russia ties. This enhances the common narrative, thus bringing the states of the EU together. Differentiation is a common method of constructing identity, wherein the stability of the "self" is achieved by comparison with the "other". A political body, the Commission in this context, defines itself via resistance, which the EU's growing hostilities with Russia indicate.

Therefore, the EU's reaction to the conflict and the discourse used is a kind of identity consolidation, as portraying Russia as an adversary, the EU upholds its own standards and values—such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights—and sets them apart from those that it believes Russia holds.

All the steps that have been taken since the war escalated have affected the future identity of the EU and how it's going to perceive itself and how it wants to be viewed. For the first time, a state

has received direct military support from European institutions thanks to the EU's military assistance to Ukraine (Wintour, 2023). With this action, opposition to military help for a war-torn state has ended. Instead of trade restrictions or debt issues, the topics of discussion at EU council meetings have shifted to weapon systems, ammunition supply networks, and sanction loopholes (Wintour, 2023). This means the discourse at every level, expanding further from the speeches, has shifted as the priorities of the union have turned to a more security-based approach due to the imminent danger of conflicts happening on European soil.

What Gehring (2021: 30) found in his study as well, was that the presence of a military threat from Russia had a substantial impact on the collective identity formation of the European Union when Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014. There was evidence that established a cause-and-effect relationship between an external danger and factors such as war, military service, or occupation. This effect maintained its stability over time as the event window grew. Enhanced cohesion within a collective group fosters more confidence in shared institutions and increased endorsement of collective policies (Gehring, 2021). Furthermore, it has an influence on the collective identity for fostering collaboration among groups and endorsing shared institutions. A similar implication can be seen in the discourse of the Commission, as the contrast between us as the EU and the opposite side as the aggressor is highly present in the speeches delivered since the war.

Gehring (2021) further states that the inhabitants of the European Union belong to many categories, such as member states, regions, and the EU itself. When faced with a crisis or a threatening situation, people may identify with groups they consider useful in order to regain control. Social psychology indicates that as the EU is often linked to ideals like democracy, individual freedom, and peace, the danger may reinforce the EU's identity. This means that by geopolitical events, identity is largely affected. The discourse analysis of the speeches showed the idea of unity being very prevalent and stressed in the speeches, which illustrates this assumption of threats strengthening collective identity formation.

Another important partnership that defends the eastern EU nations from Russia is NATO. Throughout the discourse of the speeches, references to NATO's importance and the transatlantic partnership are often made. It is enough that membership in the EU lessens the danger to some extent to cause an increase in EU identification. Ash et. al (2023) also found that the Americans and European have similar outlooks on major global crises.

#### 4.4. Socio-political consequences of the discursive change in identity

As the discursive change is happening in real time and is still on-going, this chapter tries to investigate the potential consequences, as well as consequences we have already discovered of the war's influence on the discursive change. The way the EU presents itself has big influence and implications when it comes to international relations, as the union has great power. As seen from the analysis, the war has had great influence on the discursive construction of the identity of the EU, as the underlying tone of the speeches has become more geopolitically loaded.

What Jonatan Vsevirov, the secretary general in Estonia's directorate of the ministry of foreign affairs, has said resonates with the question of a changing EU identity as well as the identity of all members of the union: *"Furthermore, our own identity as Europeans is being tested. We are being tested, and we will be seen on the world stage through the lens of how we behave today in the context of this conflict"* (Wintour, 2023). Changes to the EU's identity might have a significant impact on its member states. It can be argued that a stronger sense of European unity and cohesion would improve the EU's capacity to exert influence and shared objectives internationally.

What the geopolitical shift has already done is facilitate EU member states' cooperation to express their influence on the international scene. This means adopting a the more geopolitical role may further help the union become more united, meaning also strengthening the feeling of unity among the member states. This can result in advanced cooperation between the member states and also between the EU and its strategic partners. In the pursuit of shared goals, a more geopolitically constructed EU wants to ally itself more closely with its partners, such as the US. The EU and the US have already strengthened their relationship when coming together in the fight for a free Ukraine and the transatlantic contribution has been crucial to Ukraine's military effort against Russia. NATO has also bolstered due to Finland's and Sweden's membership, in addition to its strong reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Thompson, 2023). This goes together with one of Siklodi's (2018) three identity formation aspects – the sense of "us".

The question of international relations with other big players and powers is also relevant when it comes to the identity of the EU. If a more geopolitical EU causes greater rivalry or conflict over resources or influence, ties with other world powers may be affected and even strained. This influences the way other strategic partners communicate with the EU as well as with Russia. So,

the discursive changes of the European Union can lead to the changes of its allies as well, as the stances taken, and their articulation have a significant implication and meaning.

The EU has also taken several significant steps in its foreign, security, and defence policy, such as using the European Peace Facility (EPF) to provide weapons to a war-torn country and fund new joint artillery procurement for Ukraine. This highlights the Union becoming a more mature foreign, security, and defence policy actor, creating an opportunity for new steps in the European integration process. Due to the change in EU's self-perception, priorities have been and will be reevaluated in the future in light of a move toward a more geopolitical posture, meaning also that resources may need to be distributed accordingly. This might include making even more investments in military and security capabilities or concentrating on strategically important fields like energy security and technology.

The EU's increasing influence, which has been illustrated by the steps taken to fight the war, could make it more visible and effective, but it may also work against it. Member states' ability to influence discussions may be restricted if they believe that the coordination of Common Foreign and Security Policy stances is too strict (Delaere and Schaik, 2012). This is particularly important when member states find it difficult to come to a consensus or believe that the High Representative or their deputies are not adequately representing their interests (Delaere and Schaik, 2012). Therefore, the EU's goal should be to strike a careful balance between meeting the interests and preferences of its member states and at the same time projecting a significant foreign policy character on the international scene.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Against the backdrop of the Ukraine-Russia war that escalated at the beginning of 2022, the goal of this master's thesis was to find out how the apparent turn to a geopolitical union had influenced and altered the discursive reconstruction of EU's identity due to the escalation of the full-scale war, while also taking into account the war. The research question this study put forward was the following: *how did the Commission re-articulate the EU's identity in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war?*

To answer the research question, a total of 267 political speeches delivered by the Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen were analyzed. The selected keyword (border, defence, external, foreign, foreign policy, geopolitics, geopolitical, global, identity, integration, military, power, Russia, sanctions, security, war) frequency comparison illustrated a change in the discourse from pre-war subjects that can be seen as "softer" like identity and global concerns to post-war subjects like security, defence, and geopolitical dynamics, focusing on Russia and sanctions. After corpus analysis, a further 10 speeches were chosen based on the chosen foreign policy keyword frequency to conduct critical discourse analysis. The CDA focused on dissecting the speeches based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model while drawing on identity formation theories and geopolitical marker such as focusing on military presence, alliances, geographic borders, diplomatic relations and dependencies.

The main findings from the corpus and discourse analysis were the following: the "self" vs "other" narrative was reinforced in the speeches, highlighting the contrast between Russia as an autocrat and the EU as an anchor of democracy. This fits with Lebov's (2008) claim that political identities are often reinforced by conflict, since the EU presents itself as being morally superior to Russia and Belarus, considered as aggressors. The EU's strategic aims are enhanced by its focus on partnerships, especially with the US, which places it inside a global security framework that gives priority to alliances with established military powers. The cooperative approach embodies Siklodi's (2018) concept of identity construction via a collective feeling of "us". In addition, the idea of strategic autonomy was stressed, particularly in light of the EU's dependence on outside energy and military suppliers. A major geopolitical statement is the change in emphasis toward attaining independence via investments in renewable energy and diversifying energy sources.

Furthermore, by consistently restating EU principles like democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, von der Leyen helps to strengthen the union's unity and reputation as an ethical leader in the world. The EU can be more credible and influential in world affairs as a result of this approach. Lastly EU's reputation as a strong and stable geopolitical actor in a world challenged by crises has been strengthened by its capacity to handle crises, from COVID-19 to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia.

Based on the empirical findings, geopolitical identity was manifested and expressed in the speeches through different forms, however, normative and value-based discourse was also embedded within the speeches and accompanied the formulation of geopolitical identity, as von der Leyen stressed the importance of the norms and principles established and carried on by the EU. While present already before the invasion, the geopolitical characteristics of the EU's international identity were further reinforced in the context of the invasion. The geopolitical identity was not only mainly focused on the military aspect, as the idea of a geopolitical identity goes beyond discourse on military capabilities, as illustrated by the findings. The re-articulation of the EU's identity, taking into account the war, shows a shift in how the Commission is positioning the EU globally. It can be thus concluded that the Commission re-articulated the EU's identity in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war as a more geopolitical identity by reinforcing the geopolitical elements of the EU's international identity.

With these findings, the study adds to the body of current social science literature on identity formation, especially concerning the influence on external threats. It shows how the occurrence of a disruptive event can inspire the re-articulation of identity, even challenging long-held beliefs or firmly established identity conceptions such as, the self-understanding of the EU as a “civilian” or “normative power”. As for a long time seen and portraying itself as an antidote to geopolitics, the war was sufficient to trigger a transformation of the EU's identity into a geopolitical one. This helps to better understand how big-scale events might affect identity formation and what are the implications of this.

The EU is growing increasingly geopolitical, with the involvement of the military aspect, which is transforming the EU's international character. As seen before the beacon of and acted as a “civilian” power, the findings of the study suggest there to be a change in the nature of the

integration project as such. The worries of the EU becoming “militarized” seem to no longer be this relevant as the EU openly adopts a more geopolitical role and participates in power politics.

Considering these findings, it is important to also acknowledge relevant limitations of the study. One limitation is the short timeframe of the speeches analyzed. The limited timeframe meant that the more long-term discourse on the EU as a geopolitical actor, and therefore the more long-term discursive conditions upon which the re-articulation of the EU’s identity in the context of the war was built, could not be taken into account. But this might matter for understanding the specific way in which the EU’s geopolitical identity is articulated at present. At the same time, the time period is still justified for this study, as a shorter timeframe ensured a concentrated analysis of how the specific event of the invasion influenced the EU's identity. Another limitation is the number of speeches analyzed through CDA, as looking at a bigger amount of different discourse would make drawing general conclusions more valid. As this study combined corpus analysis with CDA, the amount of 10 selected speeches, five for the pre-war period and five for the post-war timeframe, was sufficient. A more focused analysis of speeches or similar texts exclusively focused on external policy could also be a step forward that would help to further accentuate geopolitical elements of the EU’s international identity while reducing the presence of identity features.

Turning to avenues for future research that follow from the findings of this study, it can be said that even though looking at the European Union's emerging identity and ideals from the statements made by its main executive body, the Commission, gave valuable insight into the geopolitical elements in its identity formation, it's also important to recognize that the Council plays a big role in how EU policies and decisions are made. Furthermore, statements made by the Council could provide different viewpoints on EU identity, especially when considering the goals and interests of member states and would be a great direction for further research. A longer timeframe could also be included in further research to more deeply understand how the identity of the EU has formed, making it possible to compare the finding to a bigger set of data.

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