

Normative Power or Geopolitical Actor?

The Construction of EU Identity in Official Discourse on Strategic Autonomy Before and After the War in Ukraine



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August 2026

Word count: 16530

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how the European Union uses strategic autonomy to construct its identity as an international actor and whether this identity has shifted in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It is based on the hypothesis that a gradual reconstruction of identity toward a more geopolitical dimension does not replace the EU's normative identity. Drawing on constructivist discourse analysis, this thesis considers identity as discursively constructed. It examines EU official discourse on strategic autonomy through strategic documents and speeches issued by European institutions and representatives, using a systematic coding framework. The analysis traces the evolution of EU identity across two periods, before and after the war.

The findings show that, in the aftermath of the war, the EU's representation as an international actor shifts toward a more geopolitical stance. At the same time, the protection and promotion of values and norms remain central for the Union, indicating that its normative identity persists. Importantly, the EU reaffirms both dimensions of its identity by constructing itself in relation to other international actors, specifically the United States and Russia. The thesis concludes that the EU uses strategic autonomy as a discursive concept through which it constructs itself as a geopolitical actor, while its normative identity is not replaced but becomes progressively integrated with its geopolitical identity.

Keywords: European Union, Russia-Ukraine conflict, EU identity, strategic autonomy, geopolitics

List of Abbreviations

CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
IR	International Relations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
SA	Strategic Autonomy
UN	United Nations
US/USA	United States/United States of America

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of strategic autonomy (SA) has gradually become more prominent in the European Union's discourse. Over time, the debates around this concept, its meaning and its function have been numerous and at times contradictory, turning strategic autonomy into a "buzzword", which has been used in different contexts.¹ One important thing to point out when discussing this topic is that, despite its growing relevance in the EU's context, the use of this term is hardly new. The first surge of European discussions on the concept of strategic autonomy occurred in the context of the Yugoslav Wars, indicating an aspiration for a more developed European military capacity and independence from the US.² Later, the concept of strategic autonomy appeared in the 1994 French White Paper on Defence, as a suggestion for France to remain autonomous from the dependency on NATO guarantees.³ The White Paper was also the first document to provide a definition of strategic autonomy, as "the capacity to act independently in an interdependent world".⁴

It later appeared in the 1998 British-French St. Malo declaration, which was a structural moment for the creation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). This document provided no specific definition of strategic autonomy, as it only focused on the capacity for autonomous action in the military field.⁵ It was with the publication of the 2016 Global Strategy that the concept of strategic autonomy really gained traction in EU policymaking and has been featured in many policy documents and think tank analyses.⁶ The profound transformation of the international environment, with the advent of multipolarity and the declining alliance with the United States, has increased the calls for European strategic autonomy, with some authors describing it as "necessary" or as "a critical

¹ Giedrius Česnakas, 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story', in *European Strategic Autonomy and Small States' Security: In the Shadow of Power*, ed. Giedrius Česnakas and Justinas Juozaitis (Routledge, 2022), 14

² Hoang Le Thai Vu et al., 'A Spectrum of Autonomy: Towards a Theoretical Framework of Strategic Autonomy', *International Journal* 79, no. 2 (2024), 233

³ Česnakas, 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story', 17

⁴ Tara Varma, 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe', *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024), 73

⁵ Niklas Helwig and Ville Sinkkonen, 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor: The Evolution, Debate and Theory of a Contested Term', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, no. Special Issue (2022), 3

⁶ Michał Rekowski, 'Conceptualizing European Strategic Autonomy', *Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej*, no. 17 (2023), 363; Niklas Helwig, 'The Ambiguity of the EU's Global Role: A Social Explanation of the Term "Strategic Autonomy"', *European Foreign Affairs Review* 27, no. Special Issue (2022), 21

requirement for sustaining and fostering European integration”.⁷ For others, in an increasingly competitive environment, Europe seems to be developing a stronger “geopolitical” self-awareness.⁸

In this context, many discussions are centred around the topic of security and how it may affect the role of the European Union in the international system. For example, it has been highlighted that the EU has been conceived as a “peace project” with a focus on economic and social development, therefore an economic and normative power, while the protection of its security has been perceived as a responsibility of NATO. For this reason, in a changing global environment, the EU should rethink its “capacity to act”.⁹ The need for the EU to become more autonomous has been increasingly highlighted by different international crises, most recently, and no less significantly, by the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ Indeed, this attack has repeatedly been pointed out by scholars as a reality check about European security and the EU’s strategic autonomy ambitions.¹¹ It has certainly represented a shock for European countries and has resulted in a more shared threat perception among member states toward Russia,¹² accelerating the implementation process for the Strategic Compass in Security and Defence, which represents an important component of European strategic autonomy.¹³

However, while the term was originally associated with the study of the EU’s security and defence policy, it has been increasingly employed to address issues of a different nature, such as economic questions,¹⁴ as well as the necessity to reduce European energy dependencies.¹⁵ An example of this broadening tendency of the use of strategic autonomy is the promotion by the European Commission of the concept of open strategic autonomy,

⁷ Nathalie Tocci, ‘European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It’, Istituto Affari Italiani, 2021, 10-11; Giovanni Grevi, ‘Strategic Autonomy for European Choices: The Key to Europe’s Shaping Power’, EPC - European Policy Centre, 2019, 3

⁸ Bruno Dupré, ‘European Sovereignty, Strategic Autonomy, Europe as a Power: What Reality for the European Union and What Future? (European Issues No. 620)’, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2022, 3

⁹ Varma, ‘European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe’, 80

¹⁰ Helwig and Sinkkonen, ‘Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor’, 1

¹¹ Eva Michaels and Monika Sus, ‘(Not) Coming of Age? Unpacking the European Union’s Quest for Strategic Autonomy in Security and Defence’, *European Security* 33, no. 3 (2024), 386

¹² Calle Håkansson, ‘The Ukraine War and the Emergence of the European Commission as a Geopolitical Actor’, *Journal of European Integration* 46, no. 1 (2024), 31

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35

¹⁴ Helwig, ‘The Ambiguity of the EU’s Global Role’, 21-23

¹⁵ Michał Rekowski, ‘From Narrative to Policy: The Role of the EU Institutions in Building of the European Strategic Autonomy’, *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska, Sectio K – Politologia* 32, no. 2 (2025), 16

which has been developed to focus on economic rather than defence policies, with the objective of managing strategic interdependencies and reducing the EU's vulnerability in different areas, such as energy and technology.¹⁶ This is also based on the idea that the EU needs to protect its interests as a global player in an international system based on multilateralism.¹⁷ Therefore, in an increasingly complex and aggressive international environment, strategic autonomy is the term used by the EU to describe the Union's response to global challenges.¹⁸

At the same time, numerous studies have been conducted on the identity of the European Union as an international actor. In particular, significant attention has been drawn to the EU's identity as a normative power, notably through the work of scholars such as Ian Manners.¹⁹ This concept rests on the idea that the EU is capable of shaping understandings of what is considered "normal" in international relations through the promotion of its norms and values, thereby distinguishing itself from other conceptions of power, such as military and civilian power.²⁰ However, the relevance of strategic autonomy within the European context has led some scholars to focus on its role in the potential reassessment of the EU as an international actor. The development of important strategic documents, such as the 2022 Strategic Compass, and the ongoing Ukrainian conflict have worked as a catalyst for the growing attention paid to the EU's role in the security and defence field,²¹ with a particular focus on the geopolitical aspect of its identity in this area.²² However, limited attention has been paid to the analysis of the EU's broader discourse on strategic autonomy and what part it plays in the construction of the EU's identity.²³ In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it

¹⁶ Česnakas, 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story', 17; Tomás Gutiérrez Roa, 'From Vulnerability to Strategic Autonomy: Discursive Transformations in Eu Energy Security (2003–2024)', *Energy Strategy Reviews* 64 (2026), 3

¹⁷ Rekowski, 'From Narrative to Policy', 20

¹⁸ Helwig and Sinkkonen, 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor', 1

¹⁹ Ian Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 40, no. 2 (2002)

²⁰ Richard G Whitman, 'The Neo-Normative Turn in Theorising the EU's International Presence', *Cooperation and Conflict* 48, no. 2 (2013), 172

²¹ Pierre Haroche, 'A "Geopolitical Commission": Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition', *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 61, no. 4 (2023); Calle Håkansson, 'The Ukraine War and the Emergence of the European Commission as a Geopolitical Actor'

²² Radoslav Ivančík and Vladimír Andrassy, 'Discussing EU's Security Identity: Defence Spending, Strategic Autonomy and Transition From Normative Ambition to Geopolitical Reality', *Entrepreneurship and Sustainability Issues* 13, no. 1 (2025); Filip Tereszkievich, 'EU Identity in the Context of the Russian–Ukrainian War: A Constructivist Analysis of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence', *International Politics*, ahead of print, 2025

²³ Paulina P. Kalugina and Egor A. Sergeev, "EU in Search of Identity: Theoretical and Philosophical Aspects of Strategic Autonomy", *Concept: Philosophy, Religion, Culture* 9, no. 1 (2025). Original title in

is relevant to analyse how the EU uses discourse on strategic autonomy to reconstruct its international identity into a more geopolitical one and whether a potential reconfiguration of identity entails a rejection of its normative nature. Consequently, it becomes important to examine whether the concept of strategic autonomy in the EU's discourse constitutes a shift in its construction as an international actor.

1.1 Purpose and Research Question

Due to its growing importance within the European context, strategic autonomy has gained traction in studies about the European Union. The 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has especially contributed to strengthening the attention paid to this concept. Some scholars have chosen to focus more on specific aspects of SA, such as security and defence or the economic dimension, while others have emphasised the EU's broader ambitions to become a geopolitical actor and have highlighted both its achievements and its limitations, especially in terms of its military capacity.²⁴ Less attention has been afforded to whether and how the presence of the strategic autonomy concept in European official discourse can contribute to the construction of the EU's identity and potentially reflect a reconfiguration of this identity in the international system, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Consequently, this research intends to analyse the evolution of the EU's discourse on strategic autonomy, focusing on two distinct periods, namely before and after 2022. This distinction is based on the relevance of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the type of triggering event it constituted for the EU. Under these circumstances, the role of discourse becomes important because it can be used as a tool to construct the identities and interests of actors.²⁵ Accordingly, if discourse can shape identities and interests of actors, in this context it can reveal a transformation in the way the EU is constructed as a global actor. This study will therefore attempt to answer the following research question:

English; document text in Russian. Translations of the cited passages were generated with the support of DeepL and verified by the author.

²⁴ Česnakas, 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Origins Story'; Ivančík and Andrassy, 'Discussing EU's Security Identity'; Tadeusz Zieliński, 'Strategic Autonomy of the European Union in Security and Defence', *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 18, no. 1 (2020)

²⁵ Jeffrey T. Checkel, 'Constructivism and EU Politics', in *The SAGE Handbook of European Union Politics*, ed. Knud Erik Jørgensen et al. (SAGE Publications, Limited, 2007), 65; Caterina Carta and Ruth Wodak, 'Discourse Analysis, Policy Analysis, and the Borders of EU Identity', *Journal of Language and Politics* 14, no. 1 (2015), 7

- How does the European Union use strategic autonomy to construct its identity as an international actor?

In order to address this, a secondary question is also considered:

- Has this identity shifted in the aftermath of the Ukrainian war?

By drawing on a social constructivist perspective, this thesis intends to approach strategic autonomy as a discursive concept through which the EU articulates its identity and interests in the international environment. Rather than evaluating whether the EU has achieved strategic autonomy in practical terms or what actions the EU should take to achieve this objective, the analysis will focus on how the concept has been employed in official discourse to construct the EU's international identity. Importantly, this research is not intended to refute the existence of the normative identity of the European Union, but rather to determine if the Union employs strategic autonomy in its official discourse to construct itself as a more autonomous global actor. Therefore, this thesis hypothesises that the EU's discourse on strategic autonomy reflects an ongoing redefinition of its international identity as a more assertive geopolitical actor, while not entirely replacing its normative identity. By analysing the evolution in the discourse surrounding strategic autonomy before and after 2022, this thesis intends to contribute to ongoing discussions about the EU as an international actor.

1.2 Thesis Outline

The following chapter presents important existing research relevant to the objective of this thesis. The chapter reviews research concerning strategic autonomy and the European Union's identity as an international actor. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the research gap that this thesis tries to address. The third chapter outlines the theoretical framework of the study. Accordingly, it begins by discussing how social constructivism approaches the concepts of identity and discourse. Furthermore, it focuses on how constructivism has been applied to the study of the EU's identity. Chapter four presents the methodology and the selected material for the study. It explains the use of qualitative discourse analysis, and it outlines the selection of EU documents, the operationalisation of concepts, the analytical strategy, as well as the limitations of the methodology. Chapter five presents the analysis conducted for this study. The chapter is structured into two separate chronological sections. The first presents EU discourse prior to the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion of

Ukraine, and the second centres around discourse produced after the beginning of the war. Both sections have been divided into further subsections to facilitate the tracing of the evolution of European identity construction across the documents. The following discussion section presents the interpretation of the findings by taking into account the theoretical constructivist approach to identity. Finally, the conclusions summarise the findings, answer the research questions and present some suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strategic Autonomy: debates and understandings

When observing literature discussions on the term ‘strategic autonomy’, it becomes apparent that, despite its growing presence in academic literature, its operationalisation remains a complex matter. Existing literature on strategic autonomy has explored different dimensions of the concept, while trying to explain its functions, applications and shortcomings. For the purpose of this thesis, a core debate to highlight regards the lack of a general consensus on a clear definition for strategic autonomy, as scholars have considered different implications when approaching this topic. Within this context, it is important to highlight that the concept is not limited to the EU, as it has been applied to many other geopolitical scenarios. In fact, Vu et al. define strategic autonomy as “a way for states to cope with an environment increasingly more characterized by abrupt political changes and widespread socioeconomic disruption on regional and global levels”.²⁶ Specifically, they identify two key factors to attain strategic autonomy: robust national capabilities, which combine military power, economic strength and diplomatic influence, and independent policy orientation, which indicates the need to act unilaterally when deemed necessary, despite the constraints imposed by international norms and external pressures.²⁷ However, they note that, in existing literature, no authoritative definition of strategic autonomy has emerged as dominant and

²⁶ Vu et al., ‘A Spectrum of Autonomy’, 231

²⁷ Ibid., 242-243

that strategic autonomy has been conceptualised differently depending on the objective of each analysis.²⁸

Indeed, this becomes particularly evident in the European context, since strategic autonomy is an expanding concept that has progressively encompassed different policy areas. While its original conceptualisation was connected primarily to the EU's security and defence policy and the development of European military capabilities,²⁹ in the present context the concept has been applied to areas beyond the field of security and defence. An example of this expansion is the promotion of the concept of open strategic autonomy by the European Commission. This is a central concept to address market-oriented policies, through which the EU intends to exercise its political power to protect its interests and reduce some of its dependencies while remaining open to global trade with other actors.³⁰ The multifaceted nature of strategic autonomy in the European environment seems to be the reason behind the contrasting understandings of the concept, as scholars who try to explain what strategic autonomy refers to focus on different dimensions of the same concept. For example, Zieliński, who studies strategic autonomy within the field of security and defence, does not provide a proper definition of strategic autonomy but explains that in the European context it can be understood as “a set of discourse and strategies aimed at safeguarding the freedom of actions taken in using defence capabilities in order to attain security of the Member States of the EU”.³¹

Instead, Lippert et al. emphasise the importance of security and defence in their definition of SA, but they expand the concept by highlighting the EU's need to focus on international cooperation. Accordingly, they understand SA as “the ability to set one's priorities and make one's own decisions in matters of foreign policy and security, together with the institutional, political and material wherewithal to carry these through, in cooperation with third parties, or if need be alone”.³² Autonomy is therefore understood as the ability to make independent

²⁸ Ibid., 231

²⁹ Sven Biscop, ‘Strategy: What Can Europe Do, What Does Europe Want?’, in *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power* (Routledge, 2019), 34; Helwig and Sinkkonen, ‘Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor’, 3; Éric Van den Abeele, ‘Towards a New Paradigm in Open Strategic Autonomy? (Working Paper No. 2021.03)’, European Trade Union Institute, 2021, 13

³⁰ Charlotte Beaucillon, ‘Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor’, *European Papers* 8, no. 2 (2023), 420; Helwig, ‘The Ambiguity of the EU's Global Role’, 25-26

³¹ Zieliński, ‘Strategic Autonomy of the European Union in Security and Defence’, 7

³² Barbara Lippert et al., eds, ‘European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests (SWP Research Paper, 4/2019)’, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) - Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, 2019, 5

decisions based on one's own priorities and, on that basis, to select which partners and alliances to pursue.³³ Mauro takes a different approach and identifies three predominant interpretations of strategic autonomy: SA as international crisis management, as military independence and as autonomy in a broader sense, with the emergence of the Commission's promotion of open strategic autonomy.³⁴ While he observes that much emphasis has been put on the defence aspect of strategic autonomy, as a necessity for the European Union to protect its security interests and avoid being hostage to other actors' decisions, he ultimately notes that a more consensual understanding of SA must include a more varied combination of factors, including political will, ability to decide and capacity to act.³⁵ Therefore, Mauro seems to consider that a more universal definition of the concept can be achieved by expanding the understanding of SA, instead of concentrating mainly on the military aspect of strategic autonomy. Effectively, these authors associate different characteristics with the understanding of SA, but no common definition seems to emerge.

The complexity of conceptualising strategic autonomy is further reflected by the debate about its interchangeable use with the concept of 'sovereignty' and other terms, such as 'independence'. Indeed, pursuing strategic autonomy has often been understood as the EU's effort to reinforce the basis for "European sovereignty" in the changing international environment.³⁶ Within this context, some scholars agree that different terms such as "European sovereignty", "European strategic autonomy", "strategic sovereignty" and "strategic agency" have emerged and are used to express the concept of European power.³⁷ Additionally, the concept of strategic autonomy is often combined with terms such as "independence", "unilateralism" and "autarky".³⁸ The use of the term 'sovereignty' may appear improper when applied to an institution such as the EU, because it is most commonly a characteristic possessed by states. For instance, Helwig argues that, while strategic autonomy and European sovereignty are often used interchangeably, this raises concerns in

³³ Ibidem

³⁴ Frédéric Mauro, 'Europe's Strategic Autonomy: That Obscure Object of Desire (Analysis No. 13)', Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, 2021, 3-6

³⁵ Ibid., 10-11

³⁶ Grevi, 'Strategic Autonomy for European Choices', 10

³⁷ Dupré, 'European Sovereignty, Strategic Autonomy, Europe as a Power', 2; Varma, 'European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe', 66

³⁸ Tocci, 'European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It', 8

terms of political legitimacy in some parts of Europe, as not all member states have the same understanding or acceptance of the use of these two terms.³⁹

However, while the EU is certainly not a state and is not attempting to pursue statehood, some scholars point to the EU's nature as an international organisation to explain the compatibility between SA and sovereignty. For instance, Beaucillon notes that the EU's purpose is to foster integration between member states through law. To this end, the EU is allowed to exercise its supranational authority, because member states have agreed to exercise part of their sovereignty collectively.⁴⁰ Therefore, Beaucillon asserts that strategic autonomy is not aimed at identifying the holder of sovereignty, but rather at ensuring its effective exercise. Strategic autonomy can therefore be understood as "European sovereignty" because it is employed by EU member states to collectively protect their interests.⁴¹ Similarly, Tocci argues that, since autonomy can be understood as "the ability of the self (*autos*) to live by its laws (*nomos*)", it essentially constitutes a prerequisite of sovereignty, because sovereign actors are generally capable of ensuring their own autonomy. Within the European context, autonomy is "strategic" because "in living by its laws, the EU aims to pursue its strategic interests".⁴² This suggests that strategic autonomy can be understood as a form of sovereignty, while not confusing the EU's sovereign powers with those of a traditional state.

Regarding the understanding of strategic autonomy as independence, Fiott argues that this formulation of autonomy, which involves the EU's ability to select its partnerships and alliances, while also putting in place wedging strategies aimed at weakening other actors when necessary,⁴³ is inapplicable to the EU, since it is not yet capable of competing with other actors, such as the US or China.⁴⁴ However, other scholars argue against the conceptualisation of European strategic autonomy as complete independence or isolation, stating instead that SA involves collaboration. They assert that, while the European Union should strive to strengthen its own resilience,⁴⁵ it should not avoid partnerships and alliances

³⁹ Niklas Helwig, 'EU Strategic Autonomy: A Reality Check for Europe's Global Agenda (Working Paper No. 119)', FIIA - Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2020, 7

⁴⁰ Beaucillon, 'Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor', 421

⁴¹ *Ibidem*

⁴² Tocci, 'European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It', 8

⁴³ Daniel Fiott, 'The Three Images of EU Strategic Autonomy: Perspectives on Wedging, Binding and Hedging', *Journal of European Integration* 47, no. 6 (2025), 832

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 833

⁴⁵ Grevi, 'Strategic Autonomy for European Choices', 11

with others, especially key partners such as the United Nations, the United States and NATO.⁴⁶ This is because strategic autonomy should be a way for the EU to protect and promote its own values and interests while remaining interdependent with countries who share and defend the same values.⁴⁷

Although a large part of the existing literature on European strategic autonomy has focused on its complex conceptualisation and its multiple understandings, in more recent years, further attention has emerged around what the concept represents for the role of the EU in the international environment. In particular, the 2022 Russian war against Ukraine has represented a significant turning point in discussions on strategic autonomy in the field of security and defence.⁴⁸ Accordingly, some scholars have concentrated on the impact of war on the EU's ability to increase its capacity as a security actor. For example, Perera examines whether the Ukrainian war positively impacted the implementation of European strategic autonomy and concludes that the EU does not yet possess the ability to face Russia without the assistance of the USA.⁴⁹ Similarly, Michaels and Sus examine the EU's development as an autonomous security and defence actor in the context of the war. However, they argue that while different perceptions and goals among EU member states persist, significant progress has been achieved in different aspects of EU security and defence policy.⁵⁰ Other scholars have instead focused on how the war has strengthened the role of the European Commission. In this sense, both Haroche and Håkansson argue for a supranationalisation of the domain of security and defence policy by asserting that the Ukrainian conflict has influenced the geopoliticisation of the European Commission's role in the domain of security and defence.⁵¹ Nevertheless, while these studies offer an important insight into the application of strategic autonomy as a policy concept and explore the geopolitical role of an important European institution, less attention has been directed to the study of European discourse on strategic autonomy and what it indicates about the construction of the EU as an international actor.

⁴⁶ Tocci, 'European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It', 9

⁴⁷ Lippert et al., eds, 'European Strategic Autonomy: Actors, Issues, Conflicts of Interests (SWP Research Paper, 4/2019)', 5; Dupré, 'European Sovereignty, Strategic Autonomy, Europe as a Power', 6

⁴⁸ Helwig and Sinkkonen, 'Strategic Autonomy and the EU as a Global Actor', 6

⁴⁹ H. R. L. Perera, 'Impact of Ukraine War on European Strategic Autonomy', *Journal of Multidisciplinary & Translational Research* 8, no. 1 (2023), 91

⁵⁰ Michaels and Sus, '(Not) Coming of Age?', 396

⁵¹ Haroche, 'A "Geopolitical Commission": Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition', 983; Calle Håkansson, 'The Ukraine War and the Emergence of the European Commission as a Geopolitical Actor', 38

2.2 EU's international identity

The existing literature that centres around the identity of the European Union as an international actor is extensive and focuses on multiple different developments of this topic. Indeed, the interest in the international categorisation of the EU is not a recent concept. Since the 1970s, the relevance of the EU in the international system has produced debates in the IR field on how to categorise it.⁵² Within the context of this thesis, it is important to note that, since the EU is not a traditional actor, studies focusing on its identity consider it as an original and unique international actor that requires new conceptual classifications to better explain its role in the international system.⁵³ Specifically, at least two relevant conceptions have emerged, namely civilian power and normative power. The former concept was originally conceived by François Duchêne in the 1970s to describe the then European Economic Community (EEC) as an entity whose foreign policy was not grounded in the primary use of military force, but rather relied on diplomacy, economic and political instruments and favoured multilateralism.⁵⁴ This definition was based on the implausibility of Europe ever developing nuclear power and the attempt to change the decentralised international relations between sovereign states to reduce the risk of new conflicts in Western Europe.⁵⁵ Effectively, Duchêne's conceptualisation of Europe as a civilian power indicated a particular type of international actor, whose ambition was to promote and encourage international stability through economic and political instruments.⁵⁶

However, the civilian conception of Europe has been deemed problematic by some scholars. For instance, one problematic aspect of European civilian power identified in existing literature was the attempt at "civilising international relations",⁵⁷ which was perceived as a form of neo-colonialism, creating the impression that Europe was trying to civilise less

⁵² Richard G. Whitman, 'The Fall, and Rise, of Civilian Power Europe?' (National Europe Centre Paper No. 16. Paper presented to conference on 'The European Union in International Affairs', National Europe Centre, Australian National University, Canberra, 3–4 July, 2002), 3

⁵³ Ibidem; André Gerrits, 'Normative Power Europe: Introductory Observations on a Controversial Notion', in *Normative Power Europe in a Changing World: A Discussion*, ed. André Gerrits (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009), 1-2

⁵⁴ Sören Philipps, 'The Birth of the European Union: Challenging the Myth of the Civilian Power Narrative', *Historical Social Research* 34, no. 2 (2009), 206; Anna Skolimowska, 'The European Union as a "Normative Power" in International Relations. Theoretical and Empirical Challenges', *Yearbook of Polish European Studies* 18 (2015), 115-116

⁵⁵ Whitman, 'The Fall, and Rise, of Civilian Power Europe?', 3; Karen E. Smith, 'Beyond the Civilian Power EU Debate', *Politique Européenne*, no. 17 (2005), 70

⁵⁶ Whitman, 'The Neo-Normative Turn in Theorising the EU's International Presence', 174

⁵⁷ Smith, 'Beyond the Civilian Power EU Debate', 74

developed areas of the world.⁵⁸ A further critical aspect was that the concept of civilian power seemed to be based on a purely state-centred idea of international politics,⁵⁹ despite the unique nature of the EU as an international actor. Moreover, the growing ambitions of the European Union to expand the military aspect of its integration appeared detrimental to the credibility of its civilian identity.⁶⁰ In this sense, as Whitman emphasises, the creation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the 1990s was perceived as the European intention to move beyond a civilian conception of its international identity.⁶¹ Progressively, the normative categorisation of the EU's identity emerged as an alternative to the previous civilian concept.

From this perspective, the events and developments in international relations of the 1990s, including the changes in the post-Cold War political environment, have been seen as influential for the formation of a new conceptualisation of the EU.⁶² Normative power Europe was formulated by Ian Manners to define the European Union as an actor capable of shaping the conception of "normal" in international relations,⁶³ by centring universal norms and principles in its relations with its Member States, as well as in its external relations through foreign policy.⁶⁴ Accordingly, the EU's normative power is built upon five core principles, namely peace, freedom, democracy, human rights and rule of law.⁶⁵ This conceptualisation of the EU is intended to move beyond the state-centred framework offered by concepts such as military power and civilian power and focus the study of the EU's identity on more ideational factors, such as norms.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Manners argues that, while normative power is an ideational concept rather than physical and should be exercised

⁵⁸ Richard G. Whitman, 'Norms, Power and Europe: A New Agenda for Study of the EU and International Relations', in *Normative Power Europe: Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Richard G. Whitman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4

⁵⁹ Chris J. Bickerton, 'Legitimacy Through Norms: The Political Limits to Europe's Normative Power', in *Normative Power Europe - Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Richard G. Whitman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 27

⁶⁰ Skolimowska, 'The European Union as a "Normative Power" in International Relations.', 116

⁶¹ Whitman, 'The Fall, and Rise, of Civilian Power Europe?', 20

⁶² Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', 236; Gerrits, 'Normative Power Europe: Introductory Observations on a Controversial Notion', 3

⁶³ Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', 239

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 241

⁶⁵ Ian Manners, 'The EU's Normative Power in Changing World Politics', in *Normative Power Europe in a Changing World: A Discussion*, ed. André Gerrits (Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael, 2009), 12

⁶⁶ Whitman, 'The Neo-Normative Turn in Theorising the EU's International Presence', 172

through persuasive actions,⁶⁷ in practice it is often employed alongside material incentives and physical force.⁶⁸

Consequently, the concept of normative power has attracted criticism. For example, Diez argues that the connection between normative power and military power is problematic because the more the EU exercises the two together, the less its power will be distinguishable from other more traditional powers, as it will not be solely based on the power of norms itself.⁶⁹ Sjursen contends that the European concept of normative power can be perceived as biased and Eurocentric because it tends to frame the EU as a “force for the good”. However, the promotion of norms and values does not necessarily imply that the EU’s foreign policy is genuinely motivated by normative rather than strategic interests.⁷⁰ From a different perspective, Wood argues that the EU’s capacity to exercise its normative power can be hindered by external dependencies.⁷¹ In this sense, while the EU presents itself as a promoter of universal values and norms, it may appear as a weak normative power when faced with resistance from other actors.⁷² Overall, the concept remains contested. Nonetheless, despite the criticism surrounding normative power, this concept continues to be a key element of studies on the EU’s international identity. For instance, normative power appears as a central part of Arkan’s constructivist study of European discourse, through which she analyses how EU identity has been represented in foreign policy discourse,⁷³ demonstrating the continued relevance of this concept within the European context.

In the existing literature on the European Union as an international actor, the emergence of the concept of strategic autonomy appears as a central concept in new studies on the evolution of the EU’s international role and identity. However, scholars approach these topics from different perspectives. Particularly, some scholars address EU identity by treating strategic autonomy as a concept within specific policy contexts. For example, Ivančik and Andrassy analyse documents on defence spending and military aid and discuss

⁶⁷ Manners, ‘The EU’s Normative Power in Changing World Politics’, 11-12

⁶⁸ Ibid., 15

⁶⁹ Thomas Diez, ‘Constructing the Self and Changing Others: Reconsidering “Normative Power Europe”’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (2005), 621

⁷⁰ Helene Sjursen, ‘The EU as a “Normative” Power: How Can This Be?’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 13, no. 2 (2006), 241-242

⁷¹ Steve Wood, ‘The European Union: A Normative or Normal Power?’, *European Foreign Affairs Review* 14, no. 1 (2009), 116

⁷² Ibid., 128

⁷³ Zeynep Arkan, “‘Via Media’ vs. The Critical Path: Constructivism(S) and the Case of EU Identity”, *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 3, no. 2 (2014)

the evolving nature of the Union's identity in the context of security and defence policy during the ongoing Ukrainian conflict.⁷⁴ They contend that, while the Ukrainian conflict has influenced the transformation of the EU into a more assertive and capable security actor, this evolution does not indicate a complete departure from the EU's foundational values. In this sense, they argue for a "recalibration" of EU identity, which combines its normative objectives with a more practical security approach,⁷⁵ suggesting a combination of normative identity and security identity. From a different perspective, Helwig employs a constructivist approach to role theory to examine what the growing presence of strategic autonomy in EU policy debates indicates for the EU's global role. Notably, he argues that the EU is experiencing an identity crisis, because several narratives about its identity exist, namely market power, normative power and realist power.⁷⁶ As Helwig recognises the contested nature of SA, he ultimately asserts that this same nature accommodates different understandings of the EU's international identity, and therefore allows its diffusion in EU policy debates.⁷⁷ Similarly, Rekowski uses constructivism and discursive institutionalism to examine how European strategic autonomy has become a guiding concept in EU policymaking practice. Accordingly, he argues that European institutions have strongly contributed to shaping SA as a central part of EU policies, in an attempt to enhance the EU's role as an international actor toward a more geopolitical framework.⁷⁸

Rather than treating strategic autonomy as a policy concept, a limited number of scholars examine the evolution of EU identity by grounding it in EU discourse on strategic autonomy. In this respect, Tereszkiewicz employs content and language analysis and the constructivist notion of identity to examine how the representation of the EU's identity and role is articulated in the Strategic Compass document. Specifically, he suggests that the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 has influenced the redefinition of the EU's identity and role in the field of security and defence,⁷⁹ because of the perceived threat to EU security.⁸⁰ Consequently, Tereszkiewicz argues that, following the beginning of the invasion, the Strategic Compass has served as a form of discourse through which the EU constitutes a narrative that constructs its own collective identity against the opposing representation of

⁷⁴ Ivančík and Andrassy, 'Discussing EU's Security Identity'

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 421-422

⁷⁶ Helwig, 'The Ambiguity of the EU's Global Role', 24-25

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37

⁷⁸ Rekowski, 'From Narrative to Policy', 20-21

⁷⁹ Tereszkiewicz, 'EU Identity in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War', 2

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 7

Russia.⁸¹ Additionally, Kalugina and Sergeev consider strategic autonomy as a discursive tool through which the EU reconstructs its identity amid a current period of internal and external crises.⁸² Within this context, they regard the EU's normative identity as a crisis-prone concept, not only because of existing issues within the Union, but also because of the universality of certain norms and values, which challenges the separation between the EU-self and the Other.⁸³ Therefore, they argue that strategic autonomy serves as a way for the EU to reconstruct its identity as a global actor in relation to others.⁸⁴ While these are important contributions to the study of the EU identity within the context of EU discourse on strategic autonomy, this part of the literature appears limited and underexplored.

2.3 Research gap

Considering the existing literature on both strategic autonomy and EU identity, it becomes apparent that both concepts have been extensively studied in certain respects. Specifically, strategic autonomy has been examined for its contrasting understandings and conceptualisations, as well as for its complex implementation, especially in the field of security and defence. At the same time, EU identity has been considerably investigated and consequently criticised in relation of its civilian and normative conceptions. While the concepts of SA and EU identity seem to have been mostly analysed separately, recent studies have progressively connected the two to try to understand what role strategic autonomy plays in the process of EU identity formation. Accordingly, some scholars have begun to draw connections between strategic autonomy as a concept in policy debates and the potential reassessment of the EU's global identity and role.

However, less consideration has been afforded to a purely discourse-based approach for the analysis of EU identity construction within the context of strategic autonomy. This is precisely the understudied area that this thesis intends to address. In this sense, this study will employ a discourse-based constructivist approach in order to examine the EU identity construction in its official discourse on strategic autonomy. However, rather than analysing a single strategic document,⁸⁵ this study will examine a broader corpus of EU documents

⁸¹ Ibid., 12

⁸² Kalugina and Sergeev, "EU in Search of Identity", 30

⁸³ Ibid., 36

⁸⁴ Ibid., 41

⁸⁵ Tereszkievicz, 'EU Identity in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War', 2

and speeches, divided into two chronological periods, namely pre- and post-2022, which are structured around the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Furthermore, the present study does not argue that the development of strategic autonomy serves as a means to resolve a normative identity crisis.⁸⁶ Rather, it argues for a progressive redefinition of the EU's identity toward a more geopolitical framework, without a full replacement of its normative identity.

3. Theoretical Framework

Since this thesis aims to analyse strategic autonomy as a discursive concept used by the EU to construct its identity, it is important to concentrate on the concept of identity and how it can be constructed. The chosen theoretical approach for this study is social constructivism and its approach to identity formation and discourse. This theory also connects to the construction of the EU's identity. This chapter therefore explains what constructivism is and how it connects to the construction of identities, as well as what role discourse plays in the construction process. It then illustrates how constructivism has been applied to the EU identity and how this connects to strategic autonomy and the possible reconstruction of the EU's identity.

3.1 Social Constructivism

Considering its objective, this study's development is based on the theoretical framework of social constructivism. As such, it is important to note that, while constructivism as an IR approach was mostly associated with large social groups in the form of states,⁸⁷ it has progressively been employed as a theoretical approach to study the European Union. In fact, it was conceived as an alternative theoretical project due to the dissatisfaction with established theoretical frameworks used for the study of the EU and European integration.⁸⁸ Importantly, constructivists hold a particular conception of the nature of actors' interests,

⁸⁶ Kalugina and Sergeev, "EU in Search of Identity", 41

⁸⁷ Arkan, "Via Media" vs. The Critical Path', 23

⁸⁸ Ben Rosamond, 'Theorizing the European Union after Integration Theory', in *European Union Politics*, ed. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford University Press, 2022), 342

according to which interests are not given, but are rather produced through social interaction between actors. For this reason, they are critical of neo-realist and neo-liberal approaches, as they see interests as “materially given”.⁸⁹ According to constructivists, politics is affected as much by ideas as by power;⁹⁰ therefore, constructivists are interested in investigating the ways in which identities are constructed through the use of language and ideas, and the establishment of norms.⁹¹ For constructivists, institutions, discourses and intersubjectivity are important factors to consider in the analysis of international relations. They argue that the way political problems are “talked about” is in itself a source of influence for policy decisions made by political actors.⁹² The relevance of discourse for the construction of identities is further explained in this chapter. However, it is important to understand how conventional constructivism has originally approached the concepts of identity and interests.

In the international system, to understand the formation of identities, one needs to consider the importance of norms. According to Wendt, norms are “shared mental models”⁹³ and as such constitute collective knowledge shared by states.⁹⁴ Norms can be defined as “collective expectations for the proper behaviour of states with a given identity”, which means that norms define how states with particular identities are supposed to act. Through the internalisation of norms, states acquire their identities and define their interests.⁹⁵ This occurs through the process of socialisation, making identities inherently relational.⁹⁶ Identities are formed through the interactions between how states define themselves and how they are defined by others, which means that an actor understands other states according to the identity it attributes to them.⁹⁷ Consequently, Wendt understands identities as relatively stable conceptions of the self, based on specific social roles which have expectations tied to them. Most importantly, identities constitute the basis of interests.⁹⁸ For their role identity to

⁸⁹ Ibid., 356-359

⁹⁰ Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, eds, *European Union Politics*, 7th edn (Oxford University Press, 2022), 1494

⁹¹ Rosamond, ‘Theorizing the European Union after Integration Theory’, 361

⁹² Carsten Strøby Jensen, ‘Neo-Functionalism’, in *European Union Politics*, ed. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford University Press, 2022), 276

⁹³ Alexander Wendt, “‘Ideas All the Way down?’: On the Constitution of Power and Interest”, in *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 96

⁹⁴ Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics’, *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992), 399

⁹⁵ Rosamond, ‘Theorizing the European Union after Integration Theory’, 361

⁹⁶ Ibidem; Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It’, 397

⁹⁷ Alexander Wendt, ‘The State and the Problem of Corporate Agency’, in *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 224; Ted Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, *International Security* 23, no. 1 (1998), 175

⁹⁸ Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It’, 397-398

function, states have to determine what actions are appropriate according to the situation they find themselves in.⁹⁹ Stable intersubjective identities also influence the behaviour of states, helping to sustain expectations in their social interactions. In fact, the identity of a state not only implies its interests, but also its consequent actions.¹⁰⁰

Identities and interests, however, are not entirely fixed. Constructivism assumes that identities are “a variable”, because they depend on the historical, cultural, political and social context.¹⁰¹ This means that, depending on the social context, an identity may be transformed by social interactions.¹⁰² Given that interests are based on a state’s identity, having a specific identity implies developing a particular set of interests.¹⁰³ A state’s identity also influences its interpretation of international events. As previously stated, identities are based on socialisation, and therefore states understand other states according to the identity they associate with them. Effectively, this means that actors act differently toward enemies than they do toward friends, because they have a different perception of each.¹⁰⁴ Identities are self-understandings which constitute interests, which in turn allow the identification of other actors and events.¹⁰⁵ As an example of this, Hopf emphasises the different understandings of communism in the so-called ‘third-world nations’ of the United States and Western Europe: where the US saw an arena for battling communism, Europeans saw third-world states as economic actors and former colonies.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, according to Hopf, actors’ foreign policy is shaped by the shared social norms and practices on both the national and the international levels. In this sense, an actor’s foreign policy is a social practice that helps define its identity.¹⁰⁷ The role of foreign policy in an actor’s identity formation is particularly relevant in the context of this research, because foreign policy can be understood as a discursive practice through which actors construct identities for themselves and others, define their relationships with one another and shape a particular understanding of the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 398

¹⁰⁰ Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, 174-175

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 176

¹⁰² Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It’, 409

¹⁰³ Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, 176

¹⁰⁴ Wendt, ‘Anarchy Is What States Make of It’, 397

¹⁰⁵ Wendt, “‘Ideas All the Way down?’”, 122

¹⁰⁶ Hopf, ‘The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory’, 187

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 179

international reality, thus making certain policies appear possible.¹⁰⁸ This emphasises the importance of discursive construction in social constructivism.

While Wendt's conceptualisation of identity remains a relevant concept in social constructivism, this research is based on a more critical approach to constructivism. Critical constructivism has a more discursive approach to identity, as it conceives identity as a result of discourse.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, it is necessary to consider how discourse is involved in the process of identity construction. Discourse becomes relevant within the constructivist approach when it involves the identification and operationalisation of social elements, such as ideas, identities and norms, and proves that these elements are constructed through discursive practices and shared meanings, rather than being naturally constituted.¹¹⁰ According to Holzscheiter, discourse can be defined as "the space where intersubjective meaning is created, sustained, transformed, and, accordingly, becomes constitutive of social reality." In other words, discourse is not mere language. Rather, it is a process through which shared meanings are produced, shaping social reality itself. Discourse can therefore be considered an essentially social concept.¹¹¹

According to Risse, to understand and explain the social behaviour of actors, it becomes necessary to consider discursive practices as an important factor. Indeed, it is through discursive practices that actors understand the world and give meaning to their activities.¹¹² Language is an important object of study when it comes to the construction of identities, because the constructivist approach assumes that it is not possible to study meaning outside of language itself. Accordingly, actors' views and identities are constructed in discourses, which are shaped and changed in social interactions.¹¹³ Importantly, actors' understanding of the social world is based on the way they categorise the social world itself. Their understanding therefore changes depending on the historical or cultural circumstances they experience and could lead to the redefinition of identities and social relations. Consequently,

¹⁰⁸ Senem Aydın-Düzgit, 'Social-Constructivist and Discursive Approaches to European Foreign Policy', in *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy*, ed. Knud Erik Jørgensen et al. (SAGE Publications, 2015), 137

¹⁰⁹ Arkan, "'Via Media' vs. The Critical Path", 26

¹¹⁰ Anna Holzscheiter, 'Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification: Discourse Theory and Analysis in International Relations', *International Studies Perspectives* 15, no. 2 (2014), 145

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 144

¹¹² Thomas Risse, 'Social Constructivism and European Integration', in *European Integration Theory*, ed. Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (Oxford University Press, 2009), 149

¹¹³ Henrik Larsen, 'Discourse Analysis in the Study of European Foreign Policy', in *Rethinking European Union Foreign Policy*, ed. Ben Tonra and Thomas Christiansen (Manchester University Press, 2004), 64-65

different understandings of the social world are connected to different social actions and forms of social organisation.¹¹⁴

The discursive approach of constructivism and its theoretical assumptions are particularly relevant when studying the identity construction of the European Union as an international actor. In fact, although the EU is not a state and it is rather considered an “unprecedented political entity”,¹¹⁵ its identity has progressively become the object of interest in constructivist studies.

3.2 Constructivist approach to EU identity

Despite the fact that constructivism has been mostly focused on the construction of states’ identities, the same theoretical model can also be applied to the European Union. In fact, the study of the EU’s global role can be traced to scholars’ attempts to move beyond the state as the only model in the international system. Consequently, they increasingly focused on the European Union as a non-state actor for their analyses and tried to understand its impact on world politics.¹¹⁶ For example, as Rosamond noted, the rise of EU external action and the evolution of the CFSP have highlighted the role of the EU as an international actor, therefore stimulating the use of approaches such as constructivism in IR.¹¹⁷ While some IR and EU theories have struggled to study and define the EU as an international actor, constructivism has appeared to be better suited to study this topic. This is due to its focus on actors’ social construction of shared and common values, as well as norms, practices and identity at the European level.¹¹⁸ For this reason, it is relevant to explain how constructivism has been applied to the process of identity-construction of the European Union.

Within the European context, Diez notes that identities are discursively constructed rather than being naturally formed. Therefore, discussing European identity is not a neutral act, but rather a political expression that constructs the EU’s identity and inserts it into the political debate. Furthermore, he reaffirms that identities are never entirely fixed, despite being

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 63-64

¹¹⁵ Arkan, “‘Via Media’ vs. The Critical Path”, 22

¹¹⁶ Brian White, ‘Foreign Policy Analysis and European Foreign Policy’, in *Rethinking European Union Foreign Policy*, ed. Ben Tonra and Thomas Christiansen (Manchester University Press, 2004), 45-46

¹¹⁷ Rosamond, ‘Theorizing the European Union after Integration Theory’, 343

¹¹⁸ Ana E. Juncos and Anna Maria Friis, ‘The European Union’s Foreign, Security, and Defence Policies’, in *European Union Politics*, ed. Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán (Oxford University Press, 2022), 977-979

generally understood as relatively stable. This means that a certain dominant identity can be subject to change due to the discursively constructed nature of identities and that there are always alternative constructions possible. Most importantly, Diez explains that an actor's identity construction is usually formed in contrast with the identity construction of an "other".¹¹⁹ In this sense, European identity is constructed against the parallel construction of other actors' identities.¹²⁰ In Europe's specific case, the process of identity othering has been primarily exercised on its own temporal other. As a form of othering, it is considered a part of the construction of the European self.¹²¹ This practice relates to the representation of the post-war period, when Europe attempted to move beyond its own troubled past and overcome the danger of war, therefore constructing a new type of identity based on peace and respect for human rights.¹²² However, this self-understanding of European identity also connects to the EU's foreign policy and a geopoliticisation of othering. In fact, since the 1990s, the EU has progressively constructed itself as an international promoter of human rights, especially in terms of the abolition of the death penalty, creating tension with the United States. This effectively created a form of othering between the norms-based power of the EU and the military-based power of the US. In this sense, the European Union presented itself through the concept of normative power.¹²³

Indeed, one of the main contributions constructivists have brought to the study of the Union's international identity is the concept of the EU as a normative power.¹²⁴ The concept of Normative Power Europe, formulated by Ian Manners, is considered a third alternative to the previously conceptualised dichotomy of the EU as a military power or as a civilian power, which indicated the traditionally military-based power of states and a type of power based on economic influence and resolution of international issues through diplomacy instead of military force.¹²⁵ Normative Power Europe is instead based on the idea that the EU possesses the "ability to shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations".¹²⁶ This conceptualisation of the EU's identity addresses the fact that the formation of the Union as

¹¹⁹ Thomas Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2004), 321

¹²⁰ Thomas Christiansen et al., 'The Social Construction of Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (1999), 540

¹²¹ Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', 321

¹²² Ibid., 325

¹²³ Ibid., 330-331

¹²⁴ Juncos and Friis, 'The European Union's Foreign, Security, and Defence Policies', 979

¹²⁵ Whitman, 'Norms, Power and Europe', 1; Whitman, *The Fall, and Rise, of Civilian Power Europe?*, 4

¹²⁶ Manners, 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?', 239

a political entity has primarily occurred as “an elite-driven, treaty based, legal order”. Its foundational norms and principles, anchored in the 1973 Copenhagen Declaration, are perceived as being constitutive elements and therefore determinative of its international identity.¹²⁷ Essentially, the idea of the EU as a normative power moves beyond the discussions on whether the EU is an international actor and instead focuses on the EU’s objective of setting standards for others through the spread of norms, rather than utilising military or economic powers.¹²⁸

As civilian and military power are considered to be overly grounded in the state-centric view of the Cold War period, the conceptualisation of normative power replaces this state-centric view of the world and concentrates on the ideations and power of norms. The concept of normative power is ideational at its core and is inspired by ideas, such as “sustainable development” and “humanitarian intervention”, which can be found in the UN system.¹²⁹ Consequently, norms and principles are considered as the centre of the EU’s identity and shape its foreign policy and its role in the international system.¹³⁰ According to Manners, discourse on normative power has been particularly important for the construction of the EU’s international identity. The increasing emphasis on principles such as democracy, human rights and rule of law has influenced the evolution of the EU’s foreign policy and the discursive construction of its external relations.¹³¹ Furthermore, the repeated inclusion of EU values in different forms of official discourse has progressively embedded those values in the EU’s action and has therefore reshaped the EU’s understanding of itself and its role in the international system.¹³²

As previously discussed, similarly to any identity, European identity is not fixed. Instead, it is specifically constructed in time and space and therefore changes depending on the social and political context in which it is performed.¹³³ According to Diez, language plays an important role in the construction of the European Union. In fact, an actor’s understandings of the world are rooted in certain discourses. This means that the meaning of the language expressed depends on a specific discursive context, which is not fixed, but changes, even if

¹²⁷ Ibid., 241

¹²⁸ Whitman, ‘Norms, Power and Europe’, 4

¹²⁹ Ibid., 2; Manners, ‘The EU’s Normative Power in Changing World Politics’, 11-12

¹³⁰ Whitman, ‘Norms, Power and Europe’, 2

¹³¹ Manners, ‘The EU’s Normative Power in Changing World Politics’, 19

¹³² Ibid., 20

¹³³ Risse, ‘Social Constructivism and European Integration’, 156

slowly. Consequently, the shift in the discursive context enables the construction of the EU.¹³⁴ This directly connects with the aim of this research. In fact, this study's objective is to analyse EU discourse on strategic autonomy to determine how it impacts on its identity in the international context and whether it constitutes a reconstruction of its identity as a more assertive geopolitical actor. Indeed, while the EU's identity has been mostly represented as normative, strategic autonomy has started to be perceived as a factor that could potentially indicate a transition in the construction of the EU as a global actor.¹³⁵ Particularly in the context of the Ukrainian war, the discourse on strategic autonomy could indicate a change in the EU's identity.¹³⁶ If identities are not given and can be discursively constructed depending on the social and political context in which they are expressed, analysing EU discourse on strategic autonomy appears to be relevant to assess whether there has been a discursive shift in the construction of the EU's identity.

4. Methodology

The following chapter presents the methodology used to conduct the analysis. Since the focus of this research study is based on the constructivist approach to identity, the chosen methodology is qualitative discourse analysis. This is applied to official documents and speeches of European institutions and representatives, in order to present how the concept of strategic autonomy is discussed in official EU discourse. The chapter also presents the operationalisation of the most important concepts for this thesis, as well as the analytical strategy and the methodology's limitations.

4.1 Qualitative Discourse Analysis

As the objective of this study is to understand how the EU's discourse on strategic autonomy shapes its identity construction, the methodology adopted for this analysis is qualitative discourse analysis. Specifically, considering the theoretical framework, this study is based

¹³⁴ Thomas Diez, 'Speaking "Europe": The Politics of Integration Discourse', *Journal of European Public Policy* 6, no. 4 (1999), 610

¹³⁵ Ivančik and Andrassy, 'Discussing EU's Security Identity', 412

¹³⁶ Tereszkievicz, 'EU Identity in the Context of the Russian-Ukrainian War', 2

on constructivist-inspired discourse analysis. This methodology can help analyse the hidden dimensions of language and how they influence the less evident aspects of world politics.¹³⁷ Within the distinctive context of social constructivism, discourse analysis has been frequently employed to analyse processes of identity-building and their transformations.¹³⁸ This is because, as previously discussed, in constructivism identities are not naturally produced, but rather discursively constructed.¹³⁹ Accordingly, constructivism considers discourse as the space where actors create intersubjective meaning and where this meaning constitutes social reality, making discourse an intrinsically social concept.¹⁴⁰ For this reason, an analysis of discourse is intended to examine how specific forms of expression can generate social and political effects. Moreover, it considers how these effects influence the identities and actions of individual actors and groups.¹⁴¹ In fact, contrary to the belief that discourse merely involves words and not much more, words and language are inevitably linked to the social world, as language itself is considered a social practice.¹⁴² Consequently, discourse analysis is important because it can be of assistance when analysing discourses as practices, to examine what they produce, especially in relation to the production of identities.¹⁴³ As Mogashoa notes, discourse is socially constructive, as it constitutes situations and objects of knowledge and constructs social identities of individuals and groups, as well as the relationships between them.¹⁴⁴

As noted by Dunn and Neumann, the focus on discourse in the constructivist framework is based on the idea that knowledge cannot be separated from the social realm, and it is instead constitutive of reality. As such, discourse is understood as a system that produces and temporarily anchors meaning and allows actors to make sense of the social world around them.¹⁴⁵ In analysing discourse, it is essential to remember that, rather than uncovering objective truths, language provides a set of shared codes and conventions through which the elements contained in discourse, such as objects, subjects and social realities, acquire

¹³⁷ Audrey Alejandro et al., 'Discourse Analysis', in *International Organizations and Research Methods: An Introduction*, ed. Fanny Badache et al. (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 162

¹³⁸ Holzscheiter, 'Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification', 145

¹³⁹ Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', 321

¹⁴⁰ Holzscheiter, 'Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification', 144

¹⁴¹ Ibidem

¹⁴² Stephanie Taylor, *What Is Discourse Analysis?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 79; Tebogo Mogashoa, 'Understanding Critical Discourse Analysis in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)* 1, no. 7 (2014), 106

¹⁴³ Alejandro et al., 'Discourse Analysis', 163

¹⁴⁴ Mogashoa, 'Understanding Critical Discourse', 106

¹⁴⁵ Kevin C. Dunn and Iver B. Neumann, 'Discourse Analysis', in *Routledge Handbook of International Political Sociology*, ed. Xavier Guillaume and Pinar Bilgin (Routledge, 2016), 262

meaning and specific identities.¹⁴⁶ Importantly, as noted by Larsen, since meaning is constituted by language, conducting discourse analysis does not entail identifying the real meaning behind a particular text or statement, but rather focusing on the meaning expressed through language, because it is not possible to access meaning outside of the linguistic expression.¹⁴⁷ Effectively, discourse analysis is based on the analyst's interpretation of texts. In fact, the constructivist approach to discourse usually involves a more interpretative analysis rather than a critical one.¹⁴⁸ This may pose some limitations for the analysis, which will be addressed at the end of this section.

There is not a single, generalised way to approach discourse analysis.¹⁴⁹ However, conducting discourse analysis always entails identifying discourses within specific texts. Therefore, after selecting the appropriate texts for the analysis, it becomes necessary to map socially reproduced meanings within the texts, which can also be referred to as representations.¹⁵⁰ These are the recurring statements and practices through which certain ways of representing reality become established and standardised.¹⁵¹ The process of analysing discursive data involves noticing and marking the existence of connections between different parts of the material one is working with. This process is referred to as coding.¹⁵² Through this operation, a researcher's job is to identify patterns in the data and mark them with the purpose of constructing an argument. The argument emerging from the discourse analysis is therefore based on the researcher's interpretation of language; however, it must be anchored in the evidence contained within the analysed material.¹⁵³ Accordingly, the documents employed in the analysis need to be carefully sampled to closely follow the goals of the research.¹⁵⁴ Especially in the European context, the materials on which the analysis is conducted can include speeches and political documents. This is because, as identities are determined by discursive practices,¹⁵⁵ official discourse can become a relevant medium to examine the construction of EU identity. In fact, previous examples of discourse

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem

¹⁴⁷ Larsen, 'Discourse Analysis in the Study of European Foreign Policy', 65

¹⁴⁸ Senem Aydın-Düzgit and Bahar Rumelili, 'Discourse Analysis: Strengths and Shortcomings', *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace* 8, no. 2 (2019), 289

¹⁴⁹ Dunn and Neumann, 'Discourse Analysis', 264; Taylor, *What Is Discourse Analysis?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 67

¹⁵⁰ Iver B. Neumann, 'Discourse Analysis', in *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, ed. Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 61

¹⁵¹ Ibidem

¹⁵² Taylor, *What Is Discourse Analysis?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 70

¹⁵³ Ibid., 71

¹⁵⁴ Aydın-Düzgit and Rumelili, 'Discourse Analysis: Strengths and Shortcomings', 300

¹⁵⁵ Holzschetter, 'Between Communicative Interaction and Structures of Signification', 145

analysis applied to the European Union have employed forms of official EU discourse, such as foreign policy documents, reports and speeches, including those of politicians and policy-makers, to analyse the construction of EU identity.¹⁵⁶

4.2 Selection of material

This analysis is anchored in EU official documents and speeches. Specifically, the analysis focuses on two separate periods, considering 2022 as the line of demarcation between the two. The reason behind this division is the apparent intensification of discussions on strategic autonomy following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁵⁷ The documents selected include two strategic documents, namely the 2016 Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass, three European Council Conclusions and three European Commission communications, as well as speeches given by some of the main representatives of the European Union, specifically the President of the European Commission, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the President of the European Council. A total of sixteen texts were selected, with eight texts included in each chronological period. This variety is designed to provide the standpoints of different institutions and representatives of the EU. While these documents fulfil different purposes within the EU context, they are all analysed as sources of discursive representation for the construction of the EU's identity.

4.3 Operationalisation of concepts

In relation to this study, 'strategic autonomy' is a necessary concept to operationalise. In fact, at the time of writing this thesis, strategic autonomy does not appear to have a common definition that has been universally agreed on, whether in previous literature or in official EU documents. Nevertheless, it is important to consider that the idea of EU strategic autonomy is based on the assumption that Europe is an entity with the capacity to take its own decisions and determine its own future.¹⁵⁸ For this reason, strategic autonomy is considered a relevant concept within the EU discourse, especially in relation to the field of

¹⁵⁶ Senem Aydın-Düzgit, 'Social-Constructivist and Discursive Approaches to European Foreign Policy', in *The SAGE Handbook of European Foreign Policy*, ed. Knud Erik Jørgensen et al. (SAGE Publications, 2015), 137; Arkan, "'Via Media' vs. The Critical Path", 30

¹⁵⁷ Michaels and Sus, '(Not) Coming of Age?', 386

¹⁵⁸ Mario Damen, 'EU Strategic Autonomy 2013-2023: From Concept to Capacity', in *European Parliament Think Tank* (European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), 2022), 1

EU external action.¹⁵⁹ Strategic autonomy is not a notion that can be considered permanently fixed. In fact, its meaning can evolve following changes in political dynamics and the geopolitical context.¹⁶⁰ With the growing number of crises in the international system, strategic autonomy is considered a response to the EU's need to develop a range of tools that can protect its interests.¹⁶¹

A clarification is necessary about what the notion of strategic autonomy entails within the European context. Although the term may wrongfully suggest so, European strategic autonomy does not involve any form of protectionism, isolation, unilateralism or autarky.¹⁶² This study considers the concept of strategic autonomy in its expanded version, which encompasses different policy areas. This includes both the field of security and defence and the economic field, following the concept of 'open strategic autonomy'.¹⁶³ Overall, in its expanded version, European strategic autonomy is intended as an encompassing framework that can help the EU develop the necessary elements to achieve its broader objectives in the global system.¹⁶⁴ Essentially, the pursuit of strategic autonomy is connected to the functioning of the EU as a polity in the international environment and can be understood as an effort to strengthen its sovereignty.¹⁶⁵

The second concept to be operationalised is 'identity'. With regard to this study, identity is a concept that needs to be understood within the context of social constructivism. Since this thesis is based on a more critical approach to constructivism, identity is consequently understood as a discursively constructed concept.¹⁶⁶ An important thing to note is that, while the European Union is a non-state actor and constructivism has primarily studied states' identity-construction, the constructivist understanding of identity has been progressively applied to the EU's specific case, to study its identity as an international actor.¹⁶⁷ In the context of this thesis, the EU's identity is primarily understood in two ways. The first is

¹⁵⁹ Beaucillon, 'Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor', 417

¹⁶⁰ Rekowski, 'From Narrative to Policy', 11

¹⁶¹ Rekowski, 'Conceptualizing European Strategic Autonomy', 369

¹⁶² Council of the European Union. Analysis and Research Team, 'Strategic Autonomy, Strategic Choices: Issues Paper', in *Consilium* (General Secretariat of the Council, 2021), 2

¹⁶³ Zieliński, 'Strategic Autonomy of the European Union in Security and Defence'; Beaucillon, 'Strategic Autonomy: A New Identity for the EU as a Global Actor'

¹⁶⁴ Michał Rekowski, 'Building Strategic Autonomy in the European Union', *Studia Europejskie – Studies in European Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2025), 263-264

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 253; Rekowski, 'Conceptualizing European Strategic Autonomy', 369

¹⁶⁶ Arkan, "'Via Media' vs. The Critical Path", 30

¹⁶⁷ White, 'Foreign Policy Analysis and European Foreign Policy', 45-46; Juncos and Friis, 'The European Union's Foreign, Security, and Defence Policies', 979

normative identity. This concept is based on the idea that the EU is an actor capable of shaping what is considered normal in international relations¹⁶⁸ and therefore sets standards for others by disseminating norms and values.¹⁶⁹ This has been the primary understanding of its identity in most constructivist work. The second understanding of identity in this study is geopolitical identity. This concept is based on the idea that the European Union makes a more conscious, intentional and coordinated use of its policy tools to pursue its interests and priorities in the international system.¹⁷⁰ This second concept is intended as an alternative to the already established EU normative identity, which is emerging in EU discourse on strategic autonomy.

As both these concepts are examined through qualitative discourse analysis, a coding framework has been developed to conduct the analysis. Its application is explained in the analytical strategy section.

4.4 Analytical strategy

In order to map representations within the analysed texts, a systematic coding framework has been developed for this analysis. This framework is based on a set of categories, involving discursive codes, that address the most important aspects of the research question. Since the aim of the analysis is to understand how the European Union uses strategic autonomy to construct its identity as an international actor, the analysis is based on four main categories: EU self-representation, representation of strategic autonomy, representation of the international context and discursive relations between the EU and other actors, specifically Russia and the US. Each category connects with a specific aspect of the constructivist framework. The category about EU self-representation reflects the relevance of identity construction within discourse, and it includes codes such as ‘normative actor’, ‘geopolitical actor’, ‘autonomous actor’, ‘cooperative actor’ and ‘security actor’. The category related to the representation of strategic autonomy is intended to illustrate how this key concept is discursively framed and shapes the EU’s identity. It includes the codes ‘sovereignty’, ‘resilience’, ‘defence capacity’, ‘economic autonomy’, ‘complementarity’ and ‘necessity’.

¹⁶⁸ Manners, ‘Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?’, 239

¹⁶⁹ Whitman, ‘Norms, Power and Europe’, 4

¹⁷⁰ Rekowski, ‘From Narrative to Policy’, 14

Since identities are discursively constructed within a specific social and political context,¹⁷¹ the third category connects to the context within which the EU's identity representation occurs. For this reason, it includes codes such as 'multipolarity', 'crisis', 'Russian threat', 'strategic competition', 'decline of liberal order' and 'European vulnerability'. Finally, the fourth category is intended to represent how EU identity is constructed in relation to other international actors, namely the United States and Russia. Therefore, it includes the codes 'EU-Russia relationship' and 'EU-US relationship'. This is because, in constructivism, identities are self-understandings that constitute interests and consequently condition the identification of other actors and events.¹⁷² This helps understand how the EU's identity is socially constructed. By applying these categories to two separate periods, this analysis aims to determine how the EU's understanding of SA has developed before and after 2022 and how this has contributed to the EU's construction of identity as an international actor, especially in light of previous representations as a normative power. The hypothesis for this study is that, although the discourse on strategic autonomy serves to construct the EU identity as a more assertive geopolitical actor, this discourse does not appear to replace its normative identity.

4.5 Limitations

While discourse analysis has been selected for this study because of its established compatibility with social constructivism, it is necessary to highlight the limitations that inevitably arise with this methodology. As an interpretative methodology, discourse analysis is always shaped to some extent by the personal interpretation of the researcher. While it is important for the researcher to limit their bias and ensure that their analysis is as meticulous and structured as possible, the analysis unavoidably remains selective and non-exhaustive.¹⁷³ Evidently, this is also reflected in the selection of documents for the analysis. In this context, the main focus is on official documents and speeches issued or published by European Union institutions and representatives, which effectively limits the range of discourses and representations considered in this analysis. Consequently, the potential representations provided by other important agents, such as EU Member States and European public opinion, are excluded from the analysis. Because this is a qualitative methodology, the analysis is

¹⁷¹ Risse, 'Social Constructivism and European Integration', 156

¹⁷² Wendt, "Ideas All the Way down?", 122

¹⁷³ Taylor, *What Is Discourse Analysis?* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 82

only based on a limited number of texts, effectively restricting the scope of the findings. Furthermore, as the analysis covers a specific time frame, it cannot reflect any subsequent developments in EU discourse on strategic autonomy. Since this analysis is intended to understand how discourse on strategic autonomy contributes to the EU's identity construction as an international actor, it does not measure the level of strategic autonomy actually realised by the Union. Accordingly, it is not possible to determine whether the EU can objectively be considered an autonomous and geopolitical actor.

The following section is dedicated to the empirical analysis of the selected corpus of EU official documents. The aim is to present the evolution of the EU discourse on strategic autonomy and illustrate how this discourse has impacted on the construction of the EU identity as an international actor.

5. Analysis

The following chapter presents the analysis conducted on the selected corpus of sixteen official EU documents and speeches. The study intends to address the research question “How does the EU use strategic autonomy to construct its identity as an international actor?”, as well as the secondary question “Has this identity shifted in the aftermath of the Ukrainian war?”. Consequently, the following analysis focuses on examining how the EU uses discourse on strategic autonomy to construct its identity in the international system and whether this identity has shifted in the period following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. For this reason, it will be organised into two chronological parts, the first focused on the period predating 2022 and the second focused on the period post-2022, following the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The discussion at the end connects the findings presented in the previous two sections and outlines how these findings relate to the research questions and whether they confirm the initial hypothesis of this study.

5.1 Pre-2022 Analysis

To examine the EU discursive construction of identity and conceptualisation of strategic autonomy, this analysis initially focuses on the period preceding the 2022 Russian invasion

of Ukraine. In this sense, the analysis of the pre-2022 EU discourse reveals an interesting and progressive evolution of both EU identity and strategic autonomy. This section is divided into three subsections to facilitate the chronological representation of this evolution across the different documents.

5.1.1 2013-2016

To begin this analysis, it is important to highlight that the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ appears for the first time in an official EU document in 2013. As previously discussed, the original conceptualisation of strategic autonomy primarily involved the field of defence and security. This is precisely the understanding associated with the term ‘strategic autonomy’ in the European Council conclusion of December 2013, which marked an important thematic debate on defence to identify priority actions for stronger cooperation with NATO.¹⁷⁴ In this sense, the concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ is primarily understood as related to the field of security and defence capabilities. These capabilities are to be expressed within the framework of NATO, which the EU remains committed to in terms of security cooperation. The framing of ‘strategic autonomy’ in the field of military defence and security continues to be relevant across some of the documents in this section. For example, in the 2016 Global Strategy ‘strategic autonomy’ is described as crucial for “Europe’s ability to promote peace and security within and beyond its borders”,¹⁷⁵ which indicates that the EU aspires to become a more assertive actor in the defence field. These aspirations are justified by the representation of the world as increasingly multipolar and unstable, which gives rise to crises that are perceived as a threat to the Union.¹⁷⁶ For this reason, while the EU has always considered its “soft power” as crucial in its international action, the changing global environment makes it necessary for the Union to rethink what type of international actor it needs to become.¹⁷⁷ Consequently, becoming a more assertive security actor is represented as a necessary evolution.

¹⁷⁴ Council of the European Union, *European Council Conclusions (19 and 20 December 2013)*. Doc. EUCO 217/13 (Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, 2013), https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/140245.pdf.

¹⁷⁵ European External Action Service, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels: European External Action Service, 2016), 9 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/shared-vision-common-action-stronger-europe_en.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 13

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 4

However, at this point in time these aspirations in the field of security and defence do not appear to involve a greater level of autonomy. In fact, the European security aspirations are represented as a form of complementarity to the Union's cooperation with NATO, which is considered fundamental for the defence of those European states that are part of it, rather than constituting a complete turn to EU autonomy and assertiveness.¹⁷⁸ The EU is framed as an actor that aims for more autonomy but remains committed to cooperation with its traditional allies. Overall, while this period's documents emphasise the importance of international cooperation and multilateralism, attention is also strongly directed to the role played by the EU values in its representation as an international actor. Indeed, developing strategic autonomy in the field of defence and security is explained as a mechanism that can help promote EU interests, as well as EU principles and values. It involves fostering respect for a rules-based global system and multilateralism, as well as respect for international law, human rights and the principles of democracy and good governance.¹⁷⁹ The protection and promotion of values and principles to maintain the world multilateral and rules-based are depicted as being integrated with European interests, in order to increase its security capabilities.¹⁸⁰ The importance of the EU values is also discursively reflected in the relations the EU has with other actors, such as Russia. The relationship between the Union and Russia is portrayed as partially compromised, despite the existence of some common interests, because of Russia's violation of international law and principles of European security committed by invading Crimea.¹⁸¹ The discursive representation of this event seems to emphasise the importance attributed by the EU to its values and its self-representation as a normative actor in the global system.

5.1.2 2019-2020

In the pre-2022 segment of documents, an important sign of discursive evolution is represented by the changing understanding of 'strategic autonomy'. While SA has been primarily associated with the field of defence and security until this point, its meaning is progressively expanded to include other policy areas. In fact, by 2019 the understanding of

¹⁷⁸ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy in the Area of Security and Defence. Doc. 14149/16* (Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, 2016), 5, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14149-2016-INIT/en/pdf>.

¹⁷⁹ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 4; Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy*, 5

¹⁸⁰ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 13

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 33

‘strategic autonomy’ has moved beyond the simple military dimension and is now associated with the EU’s ability to act more decisively in the economic system, as well as being able to shape and raise the “standards in all fields”, including labour and data protection.¹⁸² This indicates that ‘strategic autonomy’ has become a more comprehensive concept, which has begun to encompass multiple policy areas. At the same time, the international context is described as consistently unstable and strategically competitive. An example of this situation is the closer relationship between the EU and Ukraine, which is not perceived favourably by Russia and is followed by the invasion of Crimea.¹⁸³ This new and evolving reality poses a threat to the existence of the EU project and uncovers the existence of European vulnerabilities in different areas, including defence and economic capabilities. Effectively, Europe is described as progressively losing leverage on the global stage, while other actors are exercising more influence internationally.¹⁸⁴

Interestingly, the US are represented mostly as a defence and security ally, but also as a partial strategic competitor, because of “geopolitical choices that run contrary to Europe’s interests”.¹⁸⁵ However, the importance of cooperation between the EU and the US through NATO, considered an important framework to ensure EU defence, is described as complementary to the development of a greater level of European SA, as it is “fully compatible with a stronger transatlantic bond and even a precondition of it”.¹⁸⁶ The development of a greater level of strategic autonomy in different areas, including defence, continues to be represented as a necessary step forward to improve the EU assertiveness in defending its interests in the global system, while not renouncing cooperation with other actors.

At this point in time, the EU is described as an actor that aims to be recognised as a more assertive geopolitical actor in the international system. For example, the Union is

¹⁸² Federica Mogherini, *Speech by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the Conference “Walking the Strategic Talk: A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda for the Future”*. October 9, 2019 (Brussels: European External Action Service, 2019), 6, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-conference-%E2%80%9Cwalking-strategic-talk_en.

¹⁸³ Charles Michel, “*Strategic Autonomy for Europe: The Aim of Our Generation*.” *Speech to the Bruegel Think Tank*, September 28, 2020 (Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, 2020), 1, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/09/28/l-autonomie-strategique-europeenne-est-l-objectif-de-notre-generation-discours-du-president-charles-michel-au-groupe-de-reflexion-bruegel/>.

¹⁸⁴ Josep Borrell, *Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters*. December 3, 2020 (Brussels: European External Action Service, 2020), 3, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/why-european-strategic-autonomy-matters_en.

¹⁸⁵ Michel, “*Strategic Autonomy for Europe: The Aim of Our Generation*.”, 2

¹⁸⁶ Borrell, *Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters*, 6

characterised as “a major player who doesn’t yet know that it is”.¹⁸⁷ This geopolitical objective is to be achieved by increasing European strategic autonomy. In fact, the development of SA is framed as a long-term process intended to enhance Europe’s global influence and decrease its dependencies, as well as to ensure that it becomes self-reliant to protect its interests and values.¹⁸⁸ This suggests that the EU is represented as being in the process of becoming more assertive. At the same time, European values play an important role in the Union’s international approach. In fact, in his 2020 speech, Charles Michel specifically refers to the “Brussels effect”, which he defines as the EU’s ability “to spread rules and standards across the globe”¹⁸⁹ within the economic context. As the EU’s economic model is based on the foundation of its values,¹⁹⁰ this suggests that the EU maintains a form of normative self-representation. Importantly, the Union’s intention to uphold and promote its values is not perceived as contradictory to the necessity to protect its interests; indeed, European values and interests are seen as interrelated.¹⁹¹ This may suggest that the progression of strategic autonomy and the aim to become a more assertive actor in the global system do not diminish the European commitment to pursue its normative objective.

5.1.3 2021

An additional discursive evolution within this section is represented by the further expansion of the understanding of ‘strategic autonomy’. By 2021, SA starts to be labelled as ‘open strategic autonomy’, which emphasises the commitment of the EU to maintain openness toward global cooperation in fair trade, while protecting its own strategic interests and values more autonomously.¹⁹² This understanding of SA is aimed at making the EU more resilient and competitive in the economic sphere, while allowing it to become more assertive and continue to promote its rules-based approach to international cooperation.¹⁹³ This expansion of strategic autonomy’s representation is important, because it essentially reaffirms the evolution of SA from its original defence-based conceptualisation and indicates that the EU

¹⁸⁷ Michel, “*Strategic Autonomy for Europe: The Aim of Our Generation*”, 1

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 3; Borrell, *Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters*, 9

¹⁸⁹ Michel, “*Strategic Autonomy for Europe: The Aim of Our Generation.*”, 1

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 3

¹⁹¹ Mogherini, “*Walking the Strategic Talk: A Progressive EU Foreign Policy Agenda for the Future*”, 4

¹⁹² European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions: Trade Policy Review - An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy. COM(2021) 66 Final, February 18, 2021* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), 4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0066>.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 4-5

is represented as an actor aiming for a more active role in the global system without renouncing cooperation with other actors. This enhancement in the conceptualisation of SA is justified by the representation of the international context as increasingly competitive and unstable. Continuing the discursive trend that began in previous documents, the 2021 texts highlight the Union's difficulty in competing internationally, as the world is becoming increasingly more multipolar. This aspect is emphasised particularly in the field of digital technology, where the EU's values-based approach to digitalisation and protection of data is portrayed as being increasingly challenged by other actors' approaches.¹⁹⁴

Once again, the concept of the EU's "Brussels effect" is referenced in the texts, indicating that the Union is represented as an actor who has been a leader in the field of influencing regulations and settling international values-based standards for some time. However, the emergence of new regulatory powers presented in the texts is seen as consistently challenging the Union's influence.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, developing a stronger strategic approach to different areas, including digitalisation, could help the EU become more influential in the design of regulations and standards and promotion of its own values-based model. The EU values-based approach and commitment to cooperation are also reflected in its relationships with both Russia and the United States. Regarding Russia, for example, the texts emphasise the Union's intention to uphold a values-based partnership, despite persistent tensions.¹⁹⁶ While the transatlantic alliance is represented as being beneficial for the EU because of its economic dimension and shared values, the most fundamental pillar of the EU-US relationship remains the NATO defence partnership. Although this partnership remains necessary and should be enhanced, the development of greater European defence capabilities is presented as a significant step forward to continue protecting and promoting "a rule based international order".¹⁹⁷ This suggests an increasing representation of the geopolitical identity as an EU objective, while maintaining a focus on the importance of international cooperation and multilateralism. The emphasis on the promotion and protection of EU values and standards appears to be consistent across the 2021 documents.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 14

¹⁹⁵ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: 2021 Strategic Foresight Report - The EU's Capacity and Freedom to Act*. COM(2021) 750 Final, September 8, 2021 (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021), 12-13, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52021DC0750>; European Commission, *An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*, 16

¹⁹⁶ European Commission, *2021 Strategic Foresight Report*, 18

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 16

5.2 Post-2022 Analysis

The second part of this analysis focuses on the period following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, the analysis in this section begins with a strategic document published very closely after the beginning of the war. The Ukrainian war represents a turning point between the two periods, as it marks an intensified discursive representation of the EU's identity as a geopolitical actor. The aim of this analysis is to present the shift in the way the EU identity is represented in official discourse across the documents. Once again, to facilitate the chronological representation of this evolution, the documents have been divided into two subsections.

5.2.1 2022-2023

One of the main discursive aspects of this section is the representation of the war in Ukraine. Throughout the texts, the international system is repeatedly represented as unstable, multipolar and competitive. Specifically, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is depicted as the cause of the growing level of instability and insecurity. Although it is not the only reason for the deterioration of the global order, it is depicted as a major cause for insecurity in Europe. For example, in the 2022 Strategic Compass, the war in Ukraine is referenced as “the most serious security crisis in Europe in decades”,¹⁹⁸ which constitutes “a tectonic shift in European history”.¹⁹⁹ Effectively, this event appears as a turning point in terms of European security because of its perceived severe repercussions for Europe. The framing of the war is important for the discursive representation of the EU's identity, as it is used to justify the Union's increasing geopolitical positions in the texts. In fact, there are clear references to the necessary implementation of the EU's “geopolitical awakening”²⁰⁰ and “geopolitical posture”²⁰¹ following the beginning of the Ukrainian war. Furthermore, this geopolitical intensification also appears by depicting the EU as a “geopolitical Union”. This is represented as a consequence of the support manifested toward Ukraine and the strong stance taken against Russia's aggression, as well as for its general international stance in the

¹⁹⁸ European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union That Protects Its Citizens, Values and Interests and Contributes to International Peace and Security* (Brussels: European External Action Service, 2022), 5, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/strategic_compass_en3_web.pdf.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 14

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 4

²⁰¹ Ibid., 15

growing competitive global system.²⁰² The European Commission itself is labelled as “geopolitical”,²⁰³ indicating a more strategic and assertive stance taken by one of the main institutions of the Union. This increasingly assertive turn is emphasised in different areas across the documents, but especially in the field of defence and security. In fact, developing strategic autonomy, intended as security and defence capabilities, is described as a way to help the EU become a more “coherent political actor” and take more responsibility for its own security, while helping to strengthen the transatlantic partnership it shares with the US.²⁰⁴ This suggests that, although cooperation and multilateralism are still at the centre of European discourse, when describing its role in the international system the Union is progressively representing itself as a more assertive and autonomous actor.

Similarly to previous documents, across this period there are mentions of ‘open strategic autonomy’, indicating the EU’s aims to maintain “its openness, global cooperation with like-minded partners and competitiveness”, while at the same time its objective is to “ensure the resilience of its economy and preserve its capacity to protect and develop its economic and financial interests”.²⁰⁵ The use of this term suggests that the EU is represented as an assertive actor who is focused on protecting its own interests globally, while maintaining multilateralism at the centre of its international approach. A further sign of a more assertive EU is exemplified by the use of the term ‘sovereignty’ across the texts. This term is associated with the development of technological capabilities, both in the military and the economic fields, which would help the Union become more resilient and tackle the challenges that are rising in the global system.²⁰⁶ Building “European sovereignty” is also considered a general objective of the EU, together with reducing its dependencies and taking more responsibility for its own security.²⁰⁷ Importantly, while there is a consistent representation of the EU as a more geopolitical actor, the promotion of European values and

²⁰² Ursula von der Leyen, *European Commission - Speech: 2023 State of the Union Address by President von Der Leyen. Strasbourg, 13 September 2023* (Brussels: European Commission, 2023), 2, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/ov/speech_23_4426/SPEECH_23_4426_OV.pdf.

²⁰³ Ibid., 10

²⁰⁴ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 10

²⁰⁵ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Achieving the EU’s Economic and Financial Strategic Autonomy in an Open Economy: One Year After the Commission’s Communication. Doc. 6301/22, March 29, 2022* (Brussels: General Secretariat of the Council, 2022), 2-3, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6301-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

²⁰⁶ European External Action Service, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 7; von der Leyen, 2023 *State of the Union Address*, 7

²⁰⁷ Council of the European Union, *Achieving the EU’s Economic and Financial Strategic Autonomy in an Open Economy*, 2

principles remains an important focus across the documents. Values, such as respect for the rule of law and for fundamental rights, are described as being the foundation of the European Union.²⁰⁸ However, these values are perceived to be under threat by the growing delegitimisation of the current liberal order, as the European governance system faces competition due to the promotion of other governance models.²⁰⁹

Becoming a stronger actor is seen as a way for the Union to protect itself but also to continue upholding and promoting its values and principles.²¹⁰ Instead of signalling a complete shift in how the EU represents itself, this seems to suggest that a progressive interconnection between normative power and geopolitical power is necessary for the construction of the EU's identity as a more assertive international actor. Furthermore, as international cooperation and multilateralism remain strong EU objectives, the Union is progressively more determined to concentrate on developing international partnerships with actors who share similar values.²¹¹ In this sense, the aim of the EU is to cooperate with other actors to "reform and improve the international system", as well as preserve a fair rules-based order.²¹² While this model of partnership includes the US, because of the fundamental role played by NATO in maintaining European security, the relationship between the EU and Russia is represented as increasingly deteriorated. For example, as a consequence of its invasion of Ukraine and as part of the European plan to become more resilient, the EU is committed to mitigating its dependence on Russian energy imports.²¹³ This signals the intention to maintain EU values at the centre of the EU's pursuit of a greater level of autonomy and assertiveness. It also emphasises the normative representation of the EU in comparison to Russia. In fact, Russia is considered a threat to the global order and a reason for instability, while the EU is represented as an actor that upholds values, principles and laws in its approach to international partnerships.²¹⁴

²⁰⁸ von der Leyen, *2023 State of the Union Address*, 14

²⁰⁹ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 14

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43; Council of the European Union, *Achieving the EU's Economic and Financial Strategic Autonomy in an Open Economy*, 2

²¹² von der Leyen, *2023 State of the Union Address*, 10

²¹³ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 5

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14

5.2.2 2025-2026

The intensification of the discursive representation of the EU as a geopolitical actor continues in the years following 2022. Similarly to previous documents in this section, the reason behind the EU's increasing geopolitical stances is based on the instability and multipolarity of the international system, as well as the erosion of the rules-based international order. In particular, European discourse portrays the Union as a stronger security actor. The war in Ukraine especially represents a pivotal moment for Europe's changed perspective on security and its need for increased autonomy.²¹⁵ For example, in regard to the war, the Union is depicted as an active supporter of Ukraine. Whether financially, diplomatically or militarily, the EU has taken the initiative to aid Ukraine and remains committed to supporting the country in its fight against the Russian invasion.²¹⁶ As a consequence, the relationship between the Union and Russia has officially deteriorated. The same level of decisiveness is portrayed in relation to the military development of Europe. The Union is arguably displaying more commitment to its own security by embarking on "the biggest military undertaking in recent history".²¹⁷ The necessity to build security in cooperation with other actors, such as NATO, which is considered relevant to address the security challenges, is still emphasised across the texts.²¹⁸

However, the intention to become more autonomous in this sector is openly stressed. For example, security is described as an imperative that the European Union must be responsible

²¹⁵ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council: 2025 Strategic Foresight Report - Resilience 2.0: Empowering the EU to Thrive Amid Turbulence and Uncertainty*. COM(2025) 484 Final, September 9, 2025 (Brussels: European Commission, 2025), 4, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0484>.

²¹⁶ Ursula von der Leyen, "Special Address by President von Der Leyen at the World Economic Forum." *SPEECH/26/150*, January 20, 2026 (Brussels: European Commission, 2026), 3, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_150; António Costa, "Speech by President António Costa at SciencesPo - Paris School of International Affairs." *Paris*, March 24, 2026 (Brussels: Council of the European Union, 2026), 1, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/03/24/speech-by-president-antonio-costa-at-sciencespo-paris-school-of-international-affairs/>.

²¹⁷ Kaja Kallas, "Europe in Danger, but Not Alone: Getting Serious About Our Security Responsibilities." *Keynote Speech at the EUISS Annual Conference, September 3, 2025* (Brussels: European External Action Service, 2025), 3, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/europe-danger-not-alone-getting-serious-about-our-security-responsibilities_en.

²¹⁸ European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*; Kallas, "Europe in Danger, but Not Alone"

for.²¹⁹ More directly, security is described as “a key vector for all EU policies”.²²⁰ This discursive representation of the European role in the field of security and defence suggests that the EU is progressively redefining its self-representation as an international actor. Cooperation with other partners remains complementary to an enhanced autonomy of the EU. Importantly, while the United States are considered a fundamental ally, some strategic issues are represented in the European discourse, especially regarding Greenland. Although the text reaffirms the importance of the EU partnerships with the US, it also emphasises a strong European stance to protect the Danish sovereignty of Greenland.²²¹ This is a small but meaningful variation compared to the previous section, because it highlights a change in the way the Union approaches its historical partnership with the US. In this way, the EU seems to represent its assertiveness when it involves disputes with its closest allies.

While defence is considered a relevant pillar for European strategic autonomy, the importance of economic competitiveness cannot be overlooked. In fact, competitiveness “to boost and strengthen” the European economy, combined with defence, is what makes the EU an “autonomous player”.²²² Effectively, this combination of features is considered necessary to make the Union resilient. Mentions of ‘open strategic autonomy’ stress the importance of keeping the EU open to cooperation with other actors while it pursues its interests and reduces its dependencies.²²³ An important discursive progression within this section is the use of the term ‘independence’, which seems to indicate an increasingly assertive representation of the Union. This term appears mainly in President von der Leyen’s speeches, and it seems to be connected with the development of strategic autonomy.

Building independence involves focusing on EU strategy, interests and priorities to enhance the Union’s autonomy in different areas, such as security, economy and energy, and to allow it to become a stronger actor.²²⁴ To depict the Union as independent essentially appears as a way to enhance its geopolitical discursive representation. The necessity for more autonomy

²¹⁹ Ursula von der Leyen, *Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary Debate in Preparation of the European Council Meeting of 18-19 December 2025, in Particular the Need to Support Ukraine, Transatlantic Relations and the EU’s Strategic Autonomy. SPEECH/25/3102, December 17, 2025* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025), 2, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/speech_25_3102/SPEECH_25_3102_EN.pdf.

²²⁰ European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*, 4

²²¹ von der Leyen, “*Special Address by President von Der Leyen at the World Economic Forum.*”, 3

²²² Costa, “*Speech by President António Costa at SciencesPo*”, 2

²²³ European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*

²²⁴ von der Leyen, *Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary Debate*, 1

is also accentuated by the growing strategic competition in the global system. In this sense, the texts clearly emphasise an increasing disparity in economic growth in the global system, which is disproportionately affecting the EU and other actors, such as the United States. For this reason, a change of strategy is needed.²²⁵ Reducing dependencies and enhancing competitiveness across key factors, including digital technologies, will enable the EU to compete with other actors.²²⁶ Effectively, discourse persistently focuses on policy areas that can help foster European interests and priorities and increase its assertiveness.

However, the portrayal of international competition also involves the ability to promote values and to set global standards. Similarly to previous documents, the EU is represented as being a supporter of the rules-based international order. Consequently, it is in its interest that the global system remains “rules-based and cooperative”.²²⁷ Although the democratic model and fundamental values of the EU are perceived as being under threat, due to internal and external factors that seek to weaken the European model, the combination of fostering its own values-based model and developing its own strategy can help the Union present itself as a more reliable player and partner in the geopolitical system.²²⁸ In fact, European values, such as democracy, human dignity, freedom, equality, rule of law and respect for human rights, are considered among the fundamental elements to increase EU resilience.

Fostering, defending and enforcing these values, as well as the European democratic model, both internally and on the global stage, remains a main objective of the European Union.²²⁹ Furthermore, European values are represented as an important part of strategic autonomy. For instance, it is openly mentioned that, in the technological field, the EU will promote “a values-based innovation model” in competition with “the US market-driven or the Chinese state-driven ones”.²³⁰ European values are also connected to the EU’s independence, as becoming more independent is helpful to protect and promote the European model of governance. In fact, independence is not only about fostering the Union’s interests, but it is fundamentally about allowing Europeans to live how they want, which is “the European way of life”.²³¹ This discursive representation suggests that the promotion of European values

²²⁵ Ibidem

²²⁶ European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*, 6

²²⁷ Costa, “*Speech by President António Costa at SciencesPo*”, 1

²²⁸ European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*, 10-12

²²⁹ Ibid., 3

²³⁰ Ibid., 8

²³¹ von der Leyen, *Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary Debate*, 2

and the Union's geopolitical aspirations do not exist as separate objectives, but are rather interconnected.

5.3 Discussion

Considering the analysis of the selected corpus of documents above, it can be noted that EU discourse on strategic autonomy reveals a partial evolution in the discursive construction of the European Union's identity. This is particularly evident in the post-2022 period, where, following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the references identifying the EU as a geopolitical actor intensify. Indeed, while the analysis regarding the period preceding the war hints at the aim of the European Union to become a progressively more assertive geopolitical actor, this objective is still represented as a developing process. However, in the EU discourse following the beginning of the conflict, the discursive representation of the EU gradually shifts to an overall more assertive and autonomous portrayal. In fact, there are more explicit references to the representation of the EU as a geopolitical actor, as well as to an increasing level of strategic autonomy in different policy areas, which emphasise the increasing level of EU assertiveness. However, the normative nature of the EU's identity remains consistently represented across both periods and gets progressively interconnected with the Union's geopolitical representation. This suggests that European values, as well as their promotion on the global stage, remain a fundamental element of EU identity even while the Union is progressively repositioning itself as a geopolitical actor. At the same time, discourse analysis highlights the relational dimension between the European Union and other actors of the international system, namely Russia and the United States, that appears to serve as a functional element for the construction of the EU's identity. Accordingly, it is necessary to establish how these discursive findings can be interpreted in light of the constructivist theoretical framework and what they reveal about the construction of the EU's identity.

The main finding revealed in the analysis is the strengthening of the EU representation as a geopolitical actor, following the beginning of the war in Ukraine. This is particularly true in the field of security and defence, but it is also highlighted in other policy areas, and most importantly, it is emphasised by direct references to a more geopolitical and autonomous identity of the EU. In the period preceding the war, although the development of strategic autonomy is represented as a necessary step forward because of an increasingly polarised world, there are still references to the Union focusing more on cooperation and alliances

over a greater level of autonomy. For this reason, the development of strategic autonomy, particularly in the field of security and defence, is often represented as a form of complementarity to help the EU enhance its partnerships, such as NATO,²³² rather than a discursive intensification of European assertiveness. Instead, in the period after 2022 there is a progressive repositioning of the EU toward a more assertive, autonomous self-representation.

In this sense, across this period's documents, there are clear references to the EU becoming "geopolitical"²³³ or moving toward a more "geopolitical posture"²³⁴ as a consequence of the security issues created by the war, as well as because of the EU's active commitment to support Ukraine in its fight against the invasion. A more assertive discursive position is also reflected in the representation of strategic autonomy. An example of such representation is the identification of both economic competitiveness and defence as necessary pillars of strategic autonomy that make the EU an "autonomous player".²³⁵ Particularly, the development of the security and defence dimension is emphasised as something the EU must become progressively more responsible for, considering the increasingly unstable international environment.²³⁶ While this does not entail interrupting the transatlantic partnership with NATO, it does seem to indicate the redefinition of the EU role in the world.

A further significant discursive progression in the post-2022 period is the connection between strategic autonomy and the rise of European "independence".²³⁷ In fact, building independence requires the EU to concentrate on its own strategy, interests and priorities, to enhance its autonomy in different policy areas and become a stronger actor.²³⁸ Effectively, representing the EU as independent entails representing it as a geopolitical actor. The discursive evolution of the EU's identity representation connects with the constructivist argument that actors' understanding of the social world can change depending on the historical, social or cultural context they experience and can therefore lead to a redefinition

²³² Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy*; Borrell, *Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters*.

²³³ von der Leyen, *2023 State of the Union Address*, 2

²³⁴ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 15

²³⁵ Costa, "Speech by President António Costa at SciencesPo", 2

²³⁶ von der Leyen, *Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary Debate in Preparation of the European Council Meeting*, 2

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2

of identities, since identities are not fixed.²³⁹ The increasing instability of the international context caused by the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict represents the type of social context that may lead to a redefinition of identity. In fact, the instability and insecurity caused by the war appear to be perceived by the European Union as the main reason behind the pursuit of a greater degree of strategic autonomy, through which the Union can take care of its interests and priorities. Therefore, the war inherently influences the EU's perception of the international context and consequently creates the conditions that prompt the Union to reconsider what type of actor it needs to become. Since actors' identities and views are constructed in discourse, which is shaped and changed in social interaction,²⁴⁰ the EU discourse on strategic autonomy within the context of the Ukrainian war influences the discursive construction of its identity as a geopolitical actor.

While the shift toward a more geopolitical representation of the EU has been assessed, the Union's representation of its normative identity remains relevant in official discourse on strategic autonomy. Indeed, EU values are emphasised across both periods and constitute an important element of its self-representation. Within European official discourse, EU values are referenced as the foundation of the Union and their promotion as one of its main objectives.²⁴¹ The protection of values such as democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights²⁴² is considered a relevant part of the European identity in the international environment. Furthermore, the EU is repeatedly depicted as a supporter and promoter of principles such as a rules-based global system and multilateralism.²⁴³ The protection of values also occupies an important position in the Union's cooperation with other actors, as the EU is committed to working with others to ensure the respect of values on the global stage.²⁴⁴ This suggests that, despite the increasing representation as a geopolitical actor, the normative nature of the EU's identity does not lose its relevance in strategic autonomy discourse.

However, an important development within European discourse is the gradual interconnection between the European normative identity and its growing geopolitical

²³⁹ Larsen, 'Discourse Analysis in the Study of European Foreign Policy', 63-64; Hopf, 'The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory', 176

²⁴⁰ Larsen, 'Discourse Analysis in the Study of European Foreign Policy', 65

²⁴¹ von der Leyen, *Speech: 2023 State of the Union Address*, 14; European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*, 1

²⁴² European Commission, *2025 Strategic Foresight Report*, 3

²⁴³ EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 4; Costa, "Speech by President António Costa at SciencesPo", 1

²⁴⁴ European Commission, *An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*, 6

identity. This interconnection between EU values and strategic interests already appears in some of the earlier documents, but it progressively strengthens following the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict. For example, in discourse preceding 2022, the promotion of EU values is referenced as not being in contradiction with the pursuit of the Union's strategic interests. Rather, the two concepts are presented as interrelated.²⁴⁵ Another instance of this interconnection is also reflected in the European approach to the technological field, which is based on the Union's commitment to a values-based model for the protection of data.²⁴⁶ Importantly, in discourse following 2022, normative identity is emphasised by presenting the EU governance model, which is based on human rights and democratic values, as being challenged by the increasing promotion of alternative models.²⁴⁷ In this sense, the EU's growing geopolitical power can be functional to the protection and the promotion of its values.

In fact, as emphasised in this period's discourse, by focusing on its strategy, interests and priorities to enhance its autonomy across policy areas and to become a stronger actor, the European Union is building its independence.²⁴⁸ However, becoming independent is not only important to advance European interests, but also to allow Europeans to continue living according to "the European way of life".²⁴⁹ Since it has been assessed that EU values are considered the foundation of the Union in official discourse, it is reasonable to believe that the 'European way of life' includes living according to European values. Consequently, fostering European independence, which makes the Union a more assertive actor in the international system, can help the Union to continue protecting and promoting its values. In this way, the normative and geopolitical identities of the European Union appear to become progressively integrated, rather than existing separately in strategic autonomy discourse.

The discursive representations of EU normative identity in SA discourse and its interconnection with geopolitical identity are consistent with the constructivist argument that the European identity is not fixed but rather specifically constructed depending on the social

²⁴⁵ Mogherini, "Walking the Strategic Talk", 4

²⁴⁶ European Commission, *An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*, 15

²⁴⁷ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 14

²⁴⁸ von der Leyen, *Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary Debate in Preparation of the European Council Meeting*, 1; von der Leyen, *Special Address by President von Der Leyen at the World Economic Forum*, 4

²⁴⁹ von der Leyen, *Speech by President von Der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary Debate in Preparation of the European Council Meeting*, 2

and political context in which it is performed.²⁵⁰ In this sense, it has been assessed earlier that the context of the Ukrainian war influences the construction of the EU geopolitical identity. However, as argued by Manners, the repeated mentions of EU values in different forms of official discourse have gradually embedded those values in the EU's self-understanding and shaped its identity in the international system.²⁵¹ From this perspective, the persistent presence of EU values in discourse on strategic autonomy suggests that their embedding has pervaded EU discourse deeply enough that these values remain as a core element of EU representation even as the EU identity is being progressively rearticulated toward a greater level of geopolitical assertiveness. Consequently, the EU geopolitical identity does not simply substitute the Union's normative identity. Rather, the two become progressively integrated within European discourse on strategic autonomy as EU values and principles remain the foundation of the Union.

Furthermore, the analysis of European discourse on strategic autonomy reveals the evolving relationship between the EU and other actors, namely Russia and the United States. Indeed, some changes occur between the pre- and post-2022 periods, which can be seen as relevant for the construction of the EU's identity. Regarding Russia, its relationship with the EU in the pre-2022 discourse is represented as complicated, due to its violation of international law and destabilisation of the European security order after its invasion of Crimea.²⁵² However, at this point, the EU-Russia relationship remains cooperative and values-based due to shared interests between the two actors.²⁵³ The transatlantic partnership between the European Union and the United States is instead fundamentally based on shared values and principles,²⁵⁴ but most importantly on the guiding defence framework offered by NATO.²⁵⁵ Following the beginning of the war, the relationship between the EU and Russia changes significantly and becomes more hostile. In fact, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is considered "the most serious security crisis in Europe in decades"²⁵⁶ and one of the reasons behind the development of a greater level of strategic autonomy, particularly in the field of

²⁵⁰ Risse, 'Social Constructivism and European Integration', 156

²⁵¹ Manners, 'The EU's Normative Power in Changing World Politics', 20

²⁵² EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 33; Michel, "Strategic Autonomy for Europe: The Aim of Our Generation.", 1

²⁵³ EEAS, *Shared Vision*, 33; European Commission, *2021 Strategic Foresight Report*, 18

²⁵⁴ European Commission, *An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy*, 8

²⁵⁵ Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Implementing the EU Global Strategy*, 5; Borrell, *Why European Strategic Autonomy Matters*, 6

²⁵⁶ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 5

security and defence.²⁵⁷ European commitment to support Ukraine against the Russian aggression is also strongly emphasised during this period.²⁵⁸

At the same time, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is represented in European discourse not only as a reason for global insecurity and instability, but also as a violation of both international law and principles of the UN Charter.²⁵⁹ This is in contrast with the Union, which is represented as being committed to upholding these principles and cooperating with partners to promote and protect a rules-based global order.²⁶⁰ In fact, as previously assessed, the normative nature of the European Union remains at the centre of its discourse on strategic autonomy due to the foundational nature of EU values. In this sense, this relational dimension is important for the construction of the European Union as an international actor because, as Diez argues, while actors' identities are discursively constructed rather than being naturally formed, they are usually formed in contrast with the identity construction of other actors.²⁶¹ In this sense, the European Union constructs its identity in contrast with Russia by defining it through its violation of international norms and values due to its invasion of Ukraine and, therefore, reaffirming its own normative identity. At the same time, this violation of international law and the threat to European security influence the increasing level of strategic autonomy in terms of security and defence.

The discursive representation of the relationship between the European Union and the United States is fundamentally different compared to the one with Russia. In fact, in the post-2022 period, while the partnership between the Union and the US remains cooperative due to the role of NATO in European defence, it progressively shifts to become more competitive, due to certain diverging interests. For instance, the EU states its commitment to protect Denmark's sovereignty over Greenland, despite the tensions that have arisen with the US surrounding the Arctic area.²⁶² In this sense, the Union appears to construct its growing geopolitical assertiveness in relation to a close ally, but it does not construct itself in contrast to the US. The different relational representation of the US compared to Russia's in European discourse can be explained by the fact that, according to Wendt, as identities are

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 10

²⁵⁸ Ibidem; von der Leyen, "Special Address by President von Der Leyen at the World Economic Forum.", 1

²⁵⁹ EEAS, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence*, 14

²⁶⁰ Ibidem; von der Leyen, *2023 State of the Union Address*, 10; Costa, *Speech by President António Costa at SciencesPo*, 1

²⁶¹ Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', 321

²⁶² von der Leyen, *Special Address by President von Der Leyen at the World Economic Forum.*, 3

formed through socialisation, actors understand other actors according to the identity they associate with them, therefore acting differently toward enemies than they do toward friends, due to their different perceptions of each.²⁶³ In this way, since the EU still considers the US a partner rather than an enemy, it does not discursively construct itself in contrast to the US, as it does with Russia. The evolving discursive representation of the EU's relationship with these two actors within EU discourse on strategic autonomy therefore reflects its ongoing identity redefinition. In fact, while the EU reaffirms its normative foundation through the othering of Russia, it also constructs its growing geopolitical identity both in relation to the US and Russia.

Collectively, the findings obtained through the analysis point to a discursive evolution in the construction of the EU identity toward a more geopolitical stance. Nonetheless, normative power continues to be at the centre of the EU representation. In light of this study's objective, the implications of these findings will be further assessed in the following conclusions.

6. Conclusions

The present thesis sought to examine how the EU uses discourse on strategic autonomy to construct its identity as an international actor and whether this identity shifted following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this context, identity has been considered as a concept that is not given or naturally formed but rather constructed through discourse.²⁶⁴ For this reason, a constructivist discourse analysis was applied to sixteen official EU documents and speeches. These were divided into chronological periods structured around the beginning of the war, due to the significance of this event for the EU. As a result, the analysis identified a number of findings which indicate a partial redefinition of the EU's international identity.

Primarily, the analysis reveals a progressive strengthening of the EU's representation as a geopolitical actor. EU discourse from the period preceding 2022 indicates the pursuit of strategic autonomy as a necessary step in order to respond to an increasingly multipolar world. However, in line with the constructivist argument that identities can be redefined by

²⁶³ Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It', 397

²⁶⁴ Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', 321

an actor's changing understanding of the social world,²⁶⁵ a clear representation of the EU as a more assertive and autonomous actor appears in discourse following the beginning of the Ukrainian war. This indicates an increasing repositioning of the EU toward a more geopolitical stance.

Concurrently, the analysis demonstrates the persistent relevance of normative power in EU discourse on strategic autonomy, since the EU's objective of protecting and promoting values is emphasised across discourse in both chronological periods. Importantly, the stronger and more assertive position of the EU is depicted as a means through which the Union can pursue its purpose of defending and fostering its core values and model of governance. Rather than signalling a complete switch in identity, it appears to indicate a progressive integration of the EU's normative power with a growing geopolitical identity. This remains consistent with the constructivist argument that the social and political context can cause the reconstruction of EU identity,²⁶⁶ but also confirms the embedded nature of values in the Union's identity.²⁶⁷

Additionally, the analysis reveals an evolution in the EU's relationship with Russia and the United States. Regarding Russia, its relationship with the EU drastically changes in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, which represents a threat to European security and a violation of international law and principles. As a result, while this condition represents a reason behind the Union's growing geopolitical stance, the EU's normative identity is reaffirmed and discursively constructed in opposition to Russia's, indicating a process of discursive othering.²⁶⁸ The EU and the US remain close partners, particularly due to the role of NATO in the field of security and defence, but their relationship is portrayed as partially more competitive due to diverging interests. This influences the EU's discursive construction as a geopolitical actor to some degree, without fully transforming this partnership.

Effectively, the analysis indicates that the European Union uses strategic autonomy as a discursive concept through which it constructs itself as a more geopolitical actor. At the same time, this articulation of assertiveness and autonomy does not entail a replacement of the

²⁶⁵ Larsen, 'Discourse Analysis in the Study of European Foreign Policy', 63-64

²⁶⁶ Risse, 'Social Constructivism and European Integration', 156

²⁶⁷ Manners, 'The EU's Normative Power in Changing World Politics', 20

²⁶⁸ Diez, 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics', 322

EU's normative identity, as the Union's values remain a core foundation of its international identity. Indeed, while the conflict in Ukraine constitutes an important element for the shift toward a progressively more assertive EU identity, this reformulation represents an increasing level of interconnection between the European normative and geopolitical identities. This in turn confirms the hypothesis initially formulated, namely that the EU's discourse on strategic autonomy reflects an ongoing redefinition of its international identity as a more assertive geopolitical actor, without entirely replacing its normative identity.

This thesis aims to contribute to the existing literature on strategic autonomy and EU identity by examining the growing relationship between the two concepts. Indeed, since the concept of strategic autonomy is acquiring increasing relevance in European discourse, it becomes pertinent to assess what this development could indicate for the European Union as an actor. In this respect, this thesis attempts to illustrate how official EU discourse on strategic autonomy reflects a gradual interconnection between the Union's normative objective and its rising geopolitical posture. Thus, it adds to existing analyses in this field that have pointed to a normative identity crisis and to the reconstruction of identity through othering by proposing a different interpretation of the association between the EU's normative foundation and its developing geopolitical assertiveness.

Nonetheless, the thesis presents some inevitable limitations. As the analysis is based on an interpretative methodology, it has produced findings that are unavoidably defined by specific interpretative choices and therefore partial in nature. Additionally, due to the qualitative essence of the methodology, only a limited corpus of documents has been employed for the analysis. Notably, the selected documents primarily reflect the perspective of institutions and representatives of the European Union, therefore excluding other important voices such as EU Member States and European public opinion. This has limited the scope of the insights provided through the analysis. Importantly, the analysed documents are only tied to a specific time frame, which omits any later development regarding EU discourse on strategic autonomy.

To overcome some of the limitations of this work, future research could examine how individual Member States discuss strategic autonomy in their national discourse. This would help determine whether their understanding of the concept, and its implications for EU identity and role in the international system, aligns with that of EU institutional discourse. Although this thesis focuses on a particular time frame centred around the ongoing war in

Ukraine, further research could focus on how future events or crises may influence the development of EU discourse on strategic autonomy and the consequences this may have for the Union's identity. Furthermore, as the analysis in this thesis has partially examined how the European Union's identity is constructed in relation to the United States and Russia, future research could investigate how the Union constructs its identity in relation to other relevant international actors, such as China. Ultimately, it seems reasonable to suggest that the significance of strategic autonomy in EU discourse is unlikely to diminish and that this concept will continue to influence future studies on the Union and its role as an international actor.

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