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*From Narrative to Policy: The Role of the EU Institutions in Building of the European Strategic Autonomy**

Od narracji do polityki: rola instytucji UE w budowaniu europejskiej autonomii strategicznej

ABSTRACT

European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) became a highly influential concept guiding policy-making practice of the European Union, with the view to strengthen its international actorness. This article contributes to recent research on ESA that is rooted in constructivism and discursive institutionalism. It approaches ESA as an idea that is shaped through ideational power, reproduced through narrative practice and implemented through policy-making effort. It focuses on the role of the institutions of the European Union in the process of conceptualizing and implementing ESA in the EU. It claims that EU institutions have been instrumental to the move from narrative on ESA to policy-making of ESA. It argues that initiatives undertaken by the EU to build its strategic autonomy usually fall under four main categories: strengthening EU's own strategic capacity, reducing EU's strategic vulnerabilities, building EU's situational awareness and strategic partnering with other actors. These four types of action constitute an analytical model elaborated in this article, that is meant to help answer a general question: how does a polity define its strategic autonomy?

Keywords: European Union, European Strategic Autonomy, EU actorness

INTRODUCTION

Telling stories about the world and Europe's place in it has always been the underlying element of European integration [Manners, Murray 2016]. Faced with multiple challenges, European Union (EU) seeks a new narrative that would enhance its sense of common fate and help navigate restless international waters [de Wilde 2023]. Although initially contested, the idea of strategically autonomous Europe has shaped political narratives that explain how the EU could (and *should*) become a fully-fledged international actor ready to play its role on the global stage. Picked-up and heavily promoted by the EU institutions, concept of strategic autonomy (SA) has effectively influenced the policy-making practice in the EU accompanying adoption of new initiatives in multiple sectors such as defence, foreign policy, trade, industrial policy, health or technology. Thus, SA became more than just a buzzword: it is something of a principle guiding various efforts to strengthen the EU as a polity. This article aims to provide an analytical insight into how the move from narrative on SA to policy-making of strategic autonomy takes place.

This article contributes to recent research on SA by answering the questions of how the move from the idea towards policymaking of SA is led by the EU institutions. It presents analysis encompassing ideational, narrative and practical contribution of the EU institutions to conceptualisation and implementation of SA. It puts forward two main arguments. First, the pursuit of SA in Europe is primarily driven by the intergovernmental and supranational institutions of the EU, in particular: European Council, Council of the European Union (the Council), European Commission, and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP). Second, the practical pursuit of SA in Europe takes the form of a combination of four types of efforts: measures strengthening EU's own strategic capacity, measures reducing EU's strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies, measures building strategic situational awareness and strategic partnering with other actors.

This article proceeds as follows. The first section places the research in the theoretical paradigm of constructivism and discursive institutionalism and briefly introduces key concepts illuminating the analysis. The second section presents basic assumptions about the meaning and current use of the concept of SA in the EU. The third section provides a thorough analysis of the ideational and narrative practices undertaken by the EU institutions in relation to SA. More specifically, it traces EU-led contributions to the conceptualisation of strategic autonomy by defining *what* SA is, *where* (in which policy sectors) it should be pursued and *how* it should be built. The fourth section elaborates a model that conceptualizes most common strands of activities undertaken by the EU to build its strategic autonomy across various policy sectors, which is based on empirical research. It contains four categories of actions that are recurring in most attempts to pursue SA in the EU as indicated by the analysis.

METHODS AND THEORY: EUROPEAN STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AS AN IDEATIONAL PRACTICE

The article draws its assumptions and concepts from scholarships of social constructivism and discursive institutionalism. This is due to several reasons. When looking for instances of SA one inevitably first encounters words: an ever-growing pile of publications, reports, commentaries, debates, speeches or documents that speak of strategic autonomy. The authors of all these contributions tend to disagree over meaning of SA or desirability of what it entails and frequently engage in lengthy elaborations and discussions. SA is something that exists, first and foremost, in discourse. Next, although its meaning has been contested since the concept surfaced in mainstream EU policy language in the years 2013–2016, it is not unjustified to say that when different actors invoke the words "strategic autonomy" they refer to an idea that they can effectively communicate about to each other, even if they would disagree over its definitions. Furthermore, while analysing these contributions one quickly notices that they often share a common feature: they usually speak about what the EU should or should not do in response to the events of the external world. SA is therefore a prescriptive idea related to the EU's actions. Finally, the analysis of recent EU sources like the speeches of its top leaders or the legal acts adopted by its policymakers, shows that the concept of SA is increasingly used in the EU to explain, justify or direct actions and policies undertaken by its institutions. This movement from idea to narratives to policy is the main topic of this article. It approaches SA as an idea that is shaped through ideational power, reproduced through narrative practice and implemented through policy-making effort.

Constructivism allows for an adoption of rich ontology of actors (including states, institutions and individuals) that produce social reality of European politics through "sustained patterns of social practice" [Phillips 2007: 62] driven by ideational factors, such as ideas, norms or worldviews [Kauppi, Viotti 2020: 144]. Historically, constructivism investigated the impact of ideas on political institutions, events and foreign policy [Goldstein 1988, 1989; Checkel 1993a, 1993b; Risse-Kappen 1994; Blyth 2002; Jabko 2006]. Ideational factors such as ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge, when adopted by decision-makers and operationalised into concrete policies lead to a tangible outcomes [Risse-Kappen 1994; Checkel 1993a, 1993b]. Nicolas Jabko indicated that it is not just the ideas that are the engines of change, but rather the actors that propagate them and act under their influence [Jabko 2006]. He also argued that ideas do not need to be well-defined or unambiguous to be politically relevant. In fact, making certain notions intentionally wide or blurry can ensure their attractiveness as vehicles of change. Ideas can be kept *constructively ambiguous* [Jegen, Mérand 2014; Crespy, Vanheuverzwijn 2019] and used for political purposes as a *strategic repertoire* [Jabko 2006: 26]. Discursive institutionalism [Schmidt 2008, 2015] complements constructivist framework with the notion of *ideational power* defined as ability of actors "to influence other actors' normative

and cognitive beliefs through the use of ideational elements" [Carstensen, Schmidt 2016: 321]. It focuses on how agents convey ideas in discourses that, depending on their institutional context and accompanying material factors, can succeed or fail in enacting policy change or transforming policies [Schmidt 2015: 171–177]. Actors that push the ideas within particular institutional settings are acting as policy/discourse/ idea entrepreneurs [Finnemore, Sikkink 1998; Schmidt 2008], instrumental to their successful adoption and implementation. Through narration, they wield ideational power, which can take different forms: *power through ideas*, when a given actor compels others to follow an idea; *power over ideas*, when a given actor determines how others understand an idea; and *power in ideas*, when a given actor imposes an idea as important and authoritative [Carstensen, Schmidt 2016].

There is a growing number of recent publications in EU studies that applies constructivism, discourse theory and discursive institutionalism to the study of SA [Martins, Mawdsley 2021; Helwig 2022; Miró 2022; Csernatoni 2022a, 2022b; Jacobs et al. 2023; Bora 2023; Broeders et al. 2023; Juncos, Vanhoonacker 2024]. Recently, Ana E. Juncos and Sophie Vanhoonacker [2024] successfully argued that analysis of ideational factors shaping SA is crucial and showcased how the EU institutions exercise ideational power over the concept of SA. The policy entrepreneurship of the Commission in the aspects of strategic autonomy has been also recently documented by Pierre Harroche [2023] and Calle Håkansson [2021, 2022, 2023]. This article reinforces the observation that EU institutions are the most important and most effective ideational and policy entrepreneurs in promoting the notion of SA. It contributes to that scholarship by investigating how the European Commission, the HR/VP, the Council and the European Council shaped the conceptualisation and implementation of SA in the EU. It departs from the assumption of the three variants of ideational power to argue that the EU institutions established SA as a guiding concept for the EU policies (*power through ideas*), shaped its essential meaning (*power over ideas*) and elevated it as a one of the EU's political priorities (*power in ideas*). Specifically, it traces how they contributed to conceptualising *what* SA is meant to be, *where* (in relation to which policy sectors) it is applicable, and *how* it is meant to be implemented. Finally, it analyses how the EU institutions have moved beyond just narrative and towards implementation of SA through practice that combines four main types of effort, thus, providing for a coherent pattern of action which could be viewed as a general way of building SA.

The research is based on a thorough qualitative content analysis of over 260 documents, publications and communications produced by the EU institutions in years 2013–2024. It encompasses EU regulations, strategies, reports, press releases and speeches by EU policymakers that directly referred to the concept of SA, with the aim of tracing when the notion emerged, how it was explained, what importance was ascribed to it, in relation to which policy areas it was used, and what means were indicated as appropriate for building SA.

MEANING OF THE ESSENTIALLY EUROPEAN CONCEPT

This article adopts an assumption that in the ideational and narrative practice of the EU the labels of European Strategic Autonomy, European Sovereignty, Strategic Responsibility, European Responsibility, European Power and other similar notions are used interchangeably and in a broad sense refer to the same idea. As the President of European Council Charles Michel has put it, they may have "different connotations depending on the context" but in principle they share a common "substance behind the words" [Michel 2020a]. This substance is the idea of the EU as capable international actor equipped with tools which it can autonomously use to pursue its interest and protect its values. Following the 2016 Council conclusions, it is often defined in the EU as "the ability to act and cooperate with international and regional partners whenever possible, while being able to operate autonomously when and where necessary" [Council of the European Union 2016]. Noteworthy, the content of the concept of SA is not permanently fixed and can be seen to evolve due to political dynamics and geopolitical context. For this reason, SA is sometimes seen as an empty signifier or a floating concept that is open to be saturated with multiple ideas accommodating interests from various stakeholders [Csernatoni 2022a].

Furthermore, the concept of strategic autonomy has taken firm root in the language and policy-making practice of European politicians. Despite being initially criticized or resented as a French idea [Franke, Varma 2019; Soubrier 2023; Bora 2023], SA has gradually gained support of other EU member states with some of them, like the Netherlands and Spain, actively promoting their interpretation [Spain and Netherlands 2021; Spain 2023]. Even states usually considered to be most sceptical have incidentally endorsed some version of it. For example, during the visit of Commissioner Breton to Warsaw in 2021, the Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland stated rather unambiguously that "Poland sees it as a way of strengthening the EU's international position" and "our country believes that strategic autonomy should allow the EU to achieve its ambitious objectives" [Poland 2021]. This does not mean that the discussions contesting the term are gone for good or that there are not any disagreements among the member states about its meaning or usefulness. Political support for the idea of SA will continue to fluctuate in each country depending on particular political context, party, programme or even specific politician in office. Nevertheless, given the generally wide adoption of the notion by many national leaders and governments that keep calling for it, it is justified to assume that "the substance" of SA has been generally accepted by the member states as one of the key goals of European politics in the global context. In fact, it became so important that in July 2023 five member states representing all geographic regions of the EU have issued a Joint Non-paper on Open Strategic Autonomy in which they have called for the European Commission to create a portfolio of Executive Vice-President of the Commission responsible for spearheading strategic autonomy [Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovakia 2023].

Finally, although it originates from France, SA is a notion that is in its essence European. The way the concept of SA has been evolving puts a key emphasis on the EU as the main vehicle for building SA. This means that, at least in Europe, strategic autonomy is a concept that is practically EU-oriented and the adjective "European" in its name refers mainly to the EU as it is linked to the idea of acting as a community. Furthermore, empirical research has shown that despite controversies surrounding it, the idea of SA has managed to find its place in the mainstream EU policy-making language and became something of a guiding principle for the EU [Rekowski 2023; Juncos, Vanhoonacker 2024]. It functions as one of the EU objectives [European Council 2020: 1]. This also means that SA is a goal that is primarily pursued through the EU and that the EU institutions are important actors in this effort.

ROLE OF THE EU INSTITUTIONS IN THE BUILDING OF THE ESA

EU institutions, particularly the European Council, the Council of the European Union, the European Commission and the HR/VP all play influential role in the process of pursuing SA. This is supported by several findings that are presented in this section. The institutions of the EU have been highly receptive to the notion of SA which became widely adopted in discourse of many of them and is included in publications and legislative acts issued on various policy topics. Effectively, they have enhanced a new European narrative that is meant to strengthen the sense of a shared fate among EU citizens (Europe as polity faced with exogenous challenges) and present a solution to direct and justify EU policies (building strategic autonomy to withstand exogenous challenges).

First, by spreading the narrative on SA, EU institutions contributed to its popularization in the EU, as well as provided some substance as to what strategic autonomy is meant to be. The document rightfully credited with giving SA most spotlight was the 2016 Global Strategy that famously stated "the ambition of strategic autonomy for the European Union" [European External Action Service 2016: 4] and mentioned SA in different configurations 11 times. However, it was the European Council and the Council of the European Union that have played a crucial role in elevating the idea of SA to the EU level throughout the entire period of 2014–2019. European Council has included the concept in the context of European security and defence in its conclusions already in December 2013 and continued to do so in following years [European Council 2013, 2018a, 2018b]. In June 2019, the European Council has adopted the Strategic Agenda for 2019–2024 which stressed the need for the EU "to pursue a strategic course of action and increase its capacity to act autonomously to safeguard its interests and uphold its values" [European Council 2019]. European Council conclusions in the following years continued to address idea of an autonomous or strategically sovereign EU [European Council 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 and 2024] giving it growing importance, for example, by calling SA "a key objective of

the Union" [European Council 2020]. The Council, on the other hand, also started to include the concept in the conclusions of its meetings as early as November 2013 and continued to do so in the following years [Council of the European Union 2013, 2014a, 2015a, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2019a, 2020a, 2021a, 2022a, 2023a, 2024a] but also in other strategic documents, for example a report on foreign policy priorities from 2019 [Council of the European Union 2019b]. In both cases of the Council and the European Council, most of the mentions in the period 2013–2019 related to SA in the context of the EU's ability to being a security provider and international actor and related to the themes of the EU defence industry, defence capabilities, capacity to act and its ability to cooperate with partners. Nevertheless, in the following years, SA has been used in an increasingly broader context.

Top EU politicians took effort to explain what they mean by SA. For example, Michel has emphasized the fact that EU's geopolitical environment is becoming increasingly challenging and, in this context, referred to strategic autonomy as "our new common project for this century" [Michel 2020b]. In his optic, SA is about being able to make independent choices [Michel 2021]. He described SA as an endeavour to reinforce European security and well-being, Europe's influence in the international system and the EU's values, famously calling it "the aim of our generation" [Michel 2020a]. Both HR/VPs Federica Mogherini and Josep Borrell were very actively promoting the concept throughout their respective terms making effort to explain its meaning and importance to a broader public. For example, Mogherini presented SA as the coming of the EU to a realisation that it is a capable international power. She indicated that the EU already has at its disposal many tools to exert influence in world politics and stressed that "everything has an external and global projection that can be used by the European Union to build a more recognisable and even more assertive role in the world" [Mogherini 2019]. The EU should recognize this, develop missing capabilities and learn to use these instruments to protect European interests and values in the world. Similar tropes were used by Borrell who, against the background of increasingly competitive external environment, underlined that the EU should adopt a new mode of thinking and acting in international politics which he famously described as "the need to learn to speak the language of power" [Borrell 2020a]. Following this thought, he referred to SA as a new "state of mind," "prism" and "way framing our choices" that should navigate the EU in the emerging global order [Borrell 2020a]. On another occasion Borrell defined strategic autonomy as a long-term process aimed "to defend our interests and values in an increasingly harsh world, a world that obliges us to rely on ourselves to guarantee our future" [Borrell 2020b]. And in more recent contribution, he equated SA with another concept of strategic responsibility "that means basically the same: the capacity to act, the capacity to defend ourselves, the capacity to face the challenges which for us are the most important" [Borrell 2024].

The European Commission has been another particularly active ideational entrepreneur of the notion of SA, embedding it through both discursive and policy-making practice in various configurations. The idea of a more geopolitical, strategically au-

tonomous or sovereign Europe has been echoing throughout the State of the Union (SOTU) speeches of both Jean-Claude Juncker and Ursula von der Leyen. For example, in the 2018 SOTU address Juncker famously stated that "the time for European sovereignty has come" and indicated that Europe needs autonomy so it can become a "more sovereign actor in international affairs" and live up to its global responsibilities [Juncker 2018]. He also explained that European Sovereignty does not replace sovereignty of the member states but stems from their efforts to share it. Juncker directly used the terms on several occasions as early as 2016, for example in the context of cybersecurity [Juncker 2016]. Von der Leyen did not use the concept of SA directly in her SOTU speeches (although she mentioned it elsewhere: von der Leyen, 2020), but spoke of digital sovereignty in the 2020 and technological sovereignty in the 2021 when she indicated that it is meant to "shape our digital transformation according to our own rules and values" [von der Leyen 2021]. Even more importantly, von der Leyen introduced to the EU the idea of "geopolitical Commission" [Harroche 2022] that also entailed the concept of "geopolitical Union." In her electoral speech she explained it as the EU that actively pursues its interests and values on world's stage [von der Leyen 2019] and on a different occasion as the EU that has "geopolitical weight and the capacity to act" [von der Leyen 2023a]. Fundamentally, the idea of geopolitical EU denotes making of a more conscious, intentional and coordinated use of EU's policy tools to achieve the desired outcomes in international politics and, as such, is closely tied to the concept of strategically autonomous EU. She also used the concept of strategic responsibility in the context of security, defence and geopolitics. For example, while speaking at the European Defence Agency in 2023, von der Leyen stated that geopolitical changes require the EU to "take strategic responsibility for its own future" and explained it as essentially, the ability to perform as a geopolitical actor: one that is capable of supporting others (Ukraine), balancing foreign influence in strategic regions (Western Balkans, Middle East, Caucasus), building up its defence posture (capabilities, industry, contribution to NATO), exercising strategic planning in critical areas, and responding with its industrial base to geopolitical challenges [von der Leyen 2023b]. In general, European Commissioners adopted the narrative of SA into their political language. Both Commissioners Elżbieta Bieńkowska [2019a, 2019b] and Thierry Breton publicly promoted the concept of SA on multiple occasions, which is understandable given the role of defence industry in their portfolios. In 2020, Breton and Borrell have authored together an article in several European media outlets, in which they interchangeably used the concepts of SA, sovereignty and EU as a geopolitical "player." They have called for the EU to move beyond being simply "virtuous" and complement its soft power with hard power instruments, so it can "use its levers of influence to enforce its vision of the world and defend its own interests" [Borrell, Breton 2020]. On another occasion, while pointing to increasingly dire exogenous threats to Europe, Breton highlighted the need to build "leverage and a balance of powers to never get caught off-guard" [Breton 2022a]. While addressing notions of SA and technological sovereignty, he advocated for self-assurance in rela-

tion to EU strengths, its ability to "set the rules of the game" and ability to deal with other powers. Other Commissioners also referred to the SA in their speeches: Valdis Dombrovskis [2023], Stella Kyriakides [2023], Maroš Šefčovič [2020], Margaritis Schinas [2024], Paolo Gentiloni [2024], Kadri Simson [2023], Mairead McGuinness [2022] to give just a few examples. In general, Šefčovič, Dombrovskis and Breton were the most active promoters during the 2019–2024 period. Even Competition Commissioner Margarethe Vestager, commonly considered to be the advocate of free-market economy promoted SA in her speeches (in the *open* version) [Vestager 2021]. In addition, the term of SA or OSA (open strategic autonomy) figures in many legislative proposals and communications and in many reports and working documents published by the Commission and dedicated to a wide spectrum of policy areas. Through injection of the term in the policy-making practice the Commission has effectively ascribed many policy initiatives to the logic of SA, at the same time promoting the concept in sometimes distant, yet interlinked policy domains (from fertilisers to space launchers).

Second, European institutions have defined where – in which policy areas – SA should be pursued. By doing so, they have effectively contributed to the broadening of the concept. This process has been growing in time since the broadened vision of SA was pitched by Emmanuel Macron in his 2017 Sorbonne Speech which mentioned *six keys to European sovereignty* that included not only security but also border control, foreign policy, ecological transition, digital transformation, industry and economic power. On the side of the Commission, Juncker presented a similar comprehensive vision in his 2018 SOTU speech, when he talked also of monetary policy, trade and EU's foreign policy [Juncker 2018]. Similar broadened understanding of SA comprising economy, trade, monetary and standardization policy was also promoted by HR/VP Mogherini in June 2019 [Mogherini 2019]. Council of the European Union progressively mentioned SA in a growing number of contexts, including space [Council of the European Union 2014b, 2017c, 2021b, 2022b], maritime security [2018b, 2021c], cybersecurity [Council of the European Union 2018b, 2020b, 2021d, 2022c, 2023a], hybrid threats [Council of the European Union 2022d], economy and finance [Council of the European Union 2022e], science and innovation [Council of the European Union 2022f, 2023b, 2024b], research cooperation [Council of the European Union 2020c, 2022g], climate diplomacy [Council of the European Union 2021e], supply chain dependencies [Council of the European Union 2020d] and health [Council of the European Union 2021f, 2021g]. European Council's Strategic Agenda 2019–2024 defined priorities for the EU in several key areas (protecting citizens and freedoms; developing economic base; building a climate-neutral, green, fair and social Europe; promoting Europe's interests and values in the world) all of which were pursued in the subsequent years through initiatives with SA label. The broadening of SA was accelerated by the 2020 COVID-19 crisis, which starkly underlined the critical importance of domains such as health, food or digital for Europe's SA. The push towards such broadening continued to come also from the member states, as

showcased by the 2022 Versailles Declaration that marked a commitment on their behalf towards "building our European sovereignty" [Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government 2022: 3] through bolstering defence capabilities, reducing energy dependencies, building a more robust economic base, and fostering investment. It pointed to strategic dependencies in critical raw materials, semiconductors, critical health products, digital technologies and key food agricultural products. The tendency to treat it as a multi-sectoral concept is a proof to the emergence of comprehensive approach that applies it to virtually all challenges to indicate how the UE wants to deal with them. In particular, the links between SA and digital policy and digital sovereignty became prevalent in European policy discourse [Christakis 2020, 2023; Gajewski 2022; Broeders et al. 2023; Timmers 2024]. The research services of the EU institutions have further contributed to this conceptual broadening. For example, Joint Research Centre has published in 2021 a Strategic Foresight Report in which it carefully analysed the main advantages, challenges and future scenarios for SA in relation to five domains: geopolitics, technology, economy, environment and society [Cagnin et al. 2021]. Another example is a research paper published by Mario Damen from the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) that considers SA through the lens of Maslow's hierarchy of needs [Damen 2022]. Most sectors relevant for SA such as security and safety (also in context of resources and economics) are associated with the basis, or lowest levels of Maslow's hierarchy, whereas others (like EU status in the world) are placed on higher levels. The same paper also includes a multisectoral wheel illustrating thematic clusters of SA. In there, SA is broken down into 18 domains grouped into 6 key thematic clusters.

Third, EU institutions have attempted to answer the question of *how* SA should be pursued. The need to focus on practicalities of implementation of strategic autonomy was often stressed by Roberta Metsola [Politico 2024]. Recent empirical research points to the fact that EU institutions are no longer preoccupied with the political value-driven debates about what SA should mean and instead have moved to a next stage focused on operationalisation of the concept in relation to various policy domains [Rekowski 2023; Juncos, Vanhoonacker 2024]. The emphasis on practical aspects of SA has been the main focus of studies aimed to give SA a more pragmatic and applicable dimension. As a result, the EU has advanced in operationalisation of strategic autonomy into concrete aims and actions. For example, crucial element of the European efforts to pursue SA is the emphasis on *strategic capacity* and *strategic dependencies* that affect sectors critical for the EU. Both terms were defined in a Commission study from 2021 [European Commission 2021b: 8]. Commission services continued to work on a more qualitative approach for measuring/defining SA which led to the publication of a paper on "enhanced methodology to monitor the EU's strategic dependencies and vulnerabilities" in 2023. It allowed to analyse 564 products where the EU was dependent on foreign provides which amounted to ap. 13% of its total imports [Arjona et al. 2023]. According to the study, 204 of these products belong to sensitive ecosystems considered to be of strategic importance

like security, health or green technologies. Furthermore, the study introduced the concept of global single points of failures (SPOFs) which allows identify products highly vulnerable in an event of supply chain disruption.

Fourth, EU institutions have effectively moved beyond the questions of *what*, *where* and *how* that surround SA, and started to implement the notion of SA in concrete policy sectors. This development marks SA's the movement from narrative to policy that has taken place in the EU. As expressed by Commissioner Breton in context of SA, "rather than focus on semantics and theoretical debates, I find it helpful to seek convergence on the actual results" [Breton 2022a]. In fact, this is the aspect of SA that has been most advancing in the EU after 2020. The EU has since produced a considerable pile of files addressing many European strategic interests with the intention to strengthen European sovereignty in specific domains as well as the overall EU's SA across sectors. These efforts are categorized in the next section.

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN MODEL OF BUILDING OF SA

In the broadest sense, ESA denotes the ability of the EU to act and protect its interests in face of external challenges as a fully-fledged international actor. In more concrete terms, it is mainly pursued through four key types of action: (1) measures strengthening EU's own strategic capacity; (2) measures reducing EU's strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies; (3) measures building strategic situational awareness; (4) strategic partnering with other actors. Combination of these elements appear in most initiatives linked to SA as they are being devised and put into practice by the EU across many policy sectors: industrial policy, security policy, technological policy, health policy, environmental policy and others. They constitute a model adopted in this article, that is meant to provide for a general answer to the question: what does a polity that seeks to build its strategic autonomy do?

A) MEASURES STRENGTHENING EU'S OWN STRATEGIC CAPACITY

Measures strengthening EU's own strategic capacity (1) refer to the primary meaning of SA as a capacity to act which dates to the Franco-British Sant-Malo Declaration from 1998. It comes from a belief that EU's legitimacy to be regarded an influential actor on international stage depends on its capacity to do play that role and the means to play it. This is precisely the logic that permeated the traditional notion of SA in the security and defence. If the EU is to be a security provider, it must actually provide security, which, in turn, requires the capacity to do so: relevant capabilities and institutions to use them. This perspective has been conceptualised as the capabilities-expectations gap [Hill 1993] and has been highly influential in framing the thinking about EU actorness [Larsen 2020]. The focus on capabilities was the strongest element of how SA was understood before 2020 [Council of the

European Union 2015b]. The 2016 EU Global Strategy reinforced but also expanded this understanding when it spoke of EU's "autonomy of decision and action" and "ability to foster peace and safeguard security" [European External Action Service 2016: 11, 19]. Furthermore, this vision has only gained more urgency with the general deterioration of the global rules-based order and the recent polycrisis [Zeitlin et al. 2019]. As stressed by the 2023 Joint Non-Paper by the member states, "the EU must be able to act swiftly and decisively to respond to external challenge and opportunities" [Belgium, Finland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovakia 2023]. Hence, SA is about acting and reacting, being able to shape events but also to protect against unwanted influence. This logic is applicable to all policy areas, from economy and green transition to digital technologies. This is why the essential element of pursuing strategic autonomy concerns the development tools and means allowing the EU to do things (*strategic capacity* mentioned in previous paragraph), be it through humanitarian intervention force, defence capabilities, technology infrastructures, funds for technology research and development, or instruments that enable response to hostile trade practices or public health emergencies.

B) MEASURES REDUCING EU'S STRATEGIC VULNERABILITIES

Measures reducing EU's strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies (2) constitute the aspect of SA that gained most prominence since the COVID-19 pandemic and is often used to explain the general meaning of the notion of SA, as in the case of the 2020 Industrial strategy which stated that "Europe's strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most" [European Commission 2020]. However, contrary to the popular belief that it started with COVID-19, this idea in the context of SA is not new as it originates from the domain of security and defence where it has been debated for years. European discussions about European defence capabilities comprised considerations about the availability of specific components and materials necessary for the development or maintenance of such capabilities that EU member states need get from elsewhere. Concerns about reliance on third parties for technologies, goods and materials critical for European security and defence were partially responsible for the development of European industrial and technological policy programmes such as the Preparatory Action on Defence Research in 2017 and its successor, the European Defence Fund. Another example of how these concerns predated 2020 was the discussion on the security of 5G networks that was prominent in Europe throughout 2019, as evidenced by the European Council conclusions on 5G [Council of the European Union 2019c]. The debate about what extent of reliance on foreign technology providers in the rollout of the communication networks in the EU member states constitutes a security risk led to the adoption of the set of mitigation measures known as the 5G Toolbox in January 2020 [NIS Cooperation Group 2020]. It also popularised the debate about the importance of technology provenance (including of market-available technologies

such as consumer electronics) for national and public security and contributed to the emergence of the concept of "technological sovereignty" which made its way to the top of the new Commission's agenda in 2019. The COVID-19 crisis coincided with the disruption of global supply chains in areas such as semiconductors and consumer electronics, medical supplies and pharmaceutical products, raw earth materials or even simply in the availability of workforce, further disrupting production in heavy industry sectors such as steel and metal, automotive or maritime. These events have bluntly showcased EU's susceptibility to exogenous shocks and directed attention of European policymakers to the areas where EU is heavily reliant on third countries as providers and where negative developments, such as supply-chain disruptions or weaponisation of dependencies could have potentially grave consequences for Europe. As stated by Commissioner Breton, dependencies "weaken us economically and politically" [Breton 2022a]. Such considerations are at the centre of the aspect of strategic autonomy which is preoccupied with the reduction of vulnerabilities that may take various forms. The most obvious case is overdependence on a single foreign country for the import of a product or material that may be critical for EU's security or prosperity. Another case may refer to reliance on infrastructure (be it in energy or digital) provided by non-EU entities in areas where the EU does not have its own alternatives which it could use. Yet another one may be the susceptibility to malicious practices of other actors in areas such as foreign direct investments or technology or data transfers, where the EU may be lacking in means to protect its companies and citizens against such wrongdoings.

C) MEASURES BUILDING STRATEGIC SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

Measures building strategic situational awareness (3) are a relatively overlooked yet crucial component of building of SA. With the aim to strengthen EU's understanding of how it is positioned in relation to various challenges, as well as what means does it have at its disposal to tackle them, it comprises several types of activities. First, conceptualisation and operationalisation of the notion of SA in relation to various policy domains to translate what strategic autonomy means within a defined context, for example, particular technology domain. Second, foresight capacity to develop understanding on how those domains may evolve and what challenges may lay ahead. This involves development of methodologies for activities like horizon scanning, running regular exercises in future scenarios, identifying current and upcoming trends and constantly updating the analysis with new layers and factors. This is the work carried by many institutional actors in the EU, in particular research services of the EU institutions that operate within the framework of European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS). ESPAS is a process that links research activities conducted by nine big EU institutions: the Parliament, the Commission, the Council, External Action Service, Committee of the Regions, Economic and Social Committee European Investment Bank, European Court of Auditors and the

Institute for Strategic Studies. Maroš Šefčovič has been the first EU Commissioner for Foresight and during his term the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission has published several Strategic Foresight Reports dedicated to SA that analysed future scenarios in the context of building strategic autonomy. Third, a framework to monitor the developments affecting the state of play within a given domain (including early warning system for emergencies or crises), the current state of EU's strategic autonomy within it and the progress towards SA. This is mostly done through adoption of regulatory measures that put in place dedicated monitoring frameworks within specific sectors like pharmaceutical products or raw materials. They usually entail reporting obligations for some market entities as well as monitoring ones for the member states which have to regularly provide the EU (usually the Commission) with an updated overview of the situation and flag any potential disruptive contingencies. These measures can be generally characterized as Europe "updating its software" to borrow the words from Commissioner Breton [2022b].

D) STRATEGIC COOPERATION WITH PARTNERS

Strategic partnering with other actors (4) is an element of SA that derives from the effort of more free-market-oriented DGs and member states to ensure that the interpretation of the concept of SA in the EU does not tilt towards inward-oriented protectionism or isolationism but generally maintains a balance between economic self-reliance and interdependence. This aspect was crucial for member states and the emphasis on partnerships was subsequently added to the mentions of strategic autonomy in Council conclusions, as exemplified by the document from 2016 [Council of the European Union 2016]. It was then advanced by the addition of the adjective "open" to the notion of SA which was championed by DG TRADE as a "strategic choice" of the EU [European Commission 2021a]. Open Strategic Autonomy (OSA) was then pushed as the correct term of use in many EU documents (though not all). The chief idea here is that Europe cannot think of its future or pursue its interests as if it was a solitary island. The EU remains essentially committed to cultivating an open international system based on multilateralism and free flows of goods and services. Although much of the old naiveté around the belief that sole existence of such system will render the world a peaceful and friendly place is gone in Europe as exemplified by the geopoliticisation of the EU, the EU still wants to preserve it. In this system, the EU wants to be a reliable, responsible and cooperative partner *vis-à-vis* other actors. This intent plays also to another ambition of strategic autonomy – that, of being a global player that is regarded by the rest of the world as being on pair with other powers and at times, as an attractive alternative to them. This is obviously meaningful in the context of the escalating global competition between United States and China, where the EU could be seen as a third pole, one that does not require its partners to pick a side and follow a dualistic logic of great power competition. The aim to maintain the rules-based order and play part in it is one motivation, the other

is the understandable need of every international actor to build alliances and part-
nerships that allow it to be more successful player in a system that is anarchic and
essentially relational. Moreover, it is also driven by realisation that there are areas in
which the EU can simply be more effective when cooperating with partners, or where
cooperation with others is necessary to achieve its goals in the first place. It should
be also seen in the context of the fact, that economic growth in Europe is heavily
reliant on international flows as the EU is the biggest exporter and importer in world
economy. These ideas were explicitly stated in the 2021 Commission communication
on Trade Policy Review that packed together under the umbrella of SA notions like
resilience, competitiveness, assertiveness on one hand, and sustainability, fairness
and responsibility on the other, at the same time underlining "EU's commitment to
open and fair trade" [European Commission 2021a].

The four types of effort combined in this model can be closely intertwined in
policy practice and sometimes blend into each other – for example, measures that
establish situational awareness (3) are also essential to the effort of reducing vul-
nerabilities (2), which can be also strengthened by diversification of supplies that
can be a result of trade agreements with new partners (4). The list of categories of
action covers those practices that are visibly recurring in EU SA-linked efforts. It is
not meant to be exclusive but rather to complement other approaches to the analy-
sis of strategic autonomy, for example, those focused on trade-centred instruments
[Danzman, Meunier 2024].

CONCLUSION

Summing up, the idea of European Strategic Autonomy has marked the policy-
-making practice in the European Union. The institutions of the EU – in particular,
European Commission, European Council, the Council of the European Union and
the HR/VP have been important contributors to the process of conceptualizing SA as
an important perspective guiding EU initiatives. First, they adopted the interpretation
of SA as an effort to develop measures that strengthen EU's actorness in the global
context. Second, they have elevated SA to the top of the policy-making agenda as
an important political goal for the EU. Third, they have applied it in multiple policy
sectors as a guiding principle, thus, reinforcing its comprehensive meaning. Fourth,
they have moved beyond conceptual debates and started to implement SA in policy-
-making practice. As argued in this article, that practice can be framed as composed
of four types of action that are recurrent in the efforts to build strategic autono-
my in Europe, including: (1) measures strengthening EU's own strategic capacity;
(2) measures reducing EU's strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies; (3) measures
building strategic situational awareness; (4) strategic partnering with other actors.
They help to make sense of the complexity of policies linked to SA that are often
cross-sectoral, follow multiple vectors and state multiple objectives. It has proven

to be useful in the analysis of the chips domain and further policy domains could be subjected to analysis. The added value of this model lies also in fact that it allows to analyse policies that have not been officially labelled with SA and yet they follow the same pattern thus effectively strengthening EU's SA.[1]

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[1]   All views expressed in the article are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Institutions of the European Union.

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OD NARRACJI DO POLITYKI: ROLA INSTYTUCJI UE W BUDOWANIU EUROPEJSKIEJ AUTONOMII STRATEGICZNEJ

Streszczenie: Europejska Autonomia Strategiczna (EAS) stała się wpływową koncepcją kierującą politykami publicznymi Unii Europejskiej (UE) i ma na celu wzmocnienie UE jako aktora międzynarodowego. Artykuł wnosi wkład w najnowsze badania nad autonomią strategiczną zakorzenione w konstruktywizmie i dyskursywnym instytucjonalizmie. Traktuje autonomię strategiczną jako koncepcję kształtowaną przez czynniki ideacyjne, powielaną poprzez praktykę narracyjną i wdrażaną poprzez celowe działania polityczne. Artykuł koncentruje się na roli instytucji Unii Europejskiej w procesie konceptualizacji i wdrażania EAS w Europie. Autor twierdzi, że instytucje UE odegrały kluczową rolę w przejściu od narracji o EAS do kształtowania polityki EAS. Autor argumentuje, że inicjatywy podejmowane przez UE w celu budowania swojej autonomii strategicznej zazwyczaj podpadają pod cztery główne kategorie: wzmacnianie własnych zdolności strategicznych Unii, ograniczanie strategicznych podatności Unii, budowanie świadomości sytuacyjnej oraz strategiczne partnerstwo z innymi podmiotami. Te cztery rodzaje działań stanowią model analityczny opracowany w niniejszym artykule, który ma pomóc odpowiedzieć na ogólne pytanie: jakimi środkami organizacja polityczna buduje swoją autonomię strategiczną?

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, Europejska Autonomia Strategiczna, zdolność UE do działania

BIOGRAPHY

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