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The protean power of Europe: innovation and transformation in the face of radical uncertainty

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Abstract
From the COVID pandemic to Russia's invasion of Ukraine to Donald Trump's questioning of NATO's Article 5 and threat to take Greenland by force, the EU has been repeatedly confronted in recent years with unexpected developments abroad for which it was structurally unprepared. This is inevitable—given the world's growing complexity, no imaginable investment in information gathering, common institutions and material resources would enable the EU to foresee and shield itself from all external developments. In recognition of this reality, this paper develops a theoretical framework based upon Peter Katzenstein and Lucia Seybert's concept of 'protean power' for analyzing whether, how and under what conditions the EU is able to innovate and transform itself in the face of unforeseen developments in its external relations. It defines 'protean power' and compares it to more familiar forms of power focused on control. It situates this approach in relation to the assumptions and expectations of literatures on EU actorness, EU resilience, and EU crisis management. It then identifies a variety of factors that are likely to enable and limit the EU's exercise of 'protean power.' Finally, it summarizes the themes and findings of the various empirical papers in this special issue.

Keywords EU · External relations · Foreign policy · Power · Actorness

Introduction

A series of unexpected developments has challenged the European Union since the turn of the century, including the global financial crisis, the Arab Spring and Syrian civil war, waves of refugees, asylum seekers and economic migrants, Brexit, the COVID pandemic, Russia's invasions of Ukraine, and the Trump administration's

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divestment from European security and threat to seize Greenland by force. Given the limited authority and the delicate balance of powers and identities embodied in the EU, one might have expected it to be powerless in the face of such unexpected and challenging developments. Yet despite its myriad vulnerabilities, the EU has proven to be remarkably agile, robust and even powerful in recent decades. In fact, Jean Monnet's (1978) expectation that "Europe will be forged in crises and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises" has proven remarkably prescient.

"Putin's war has given birth to geopolitical Europe," declared Josep Borrell, then the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, less than two weeks after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. "For years, Europeans have been debating how the EU can be made more robust and security-conscious, with unity of purpose and capabilities to pursue our political goals on the world stage. We have now arguably gone further down that path in the past week than we did in the previous decade."[1] Some parts of this EU's response involve traditional exercises of power, such as the provision of arms or imposition of sanctions. But as suggested by Borrell's metaphor of birth, the response also involves innovation and transformation of the EU itself, including an unprecedented willingness to act collectively, the breaking of policy taboos (such as freezing the assets of Russia's central bank, financing national defense industries, or opening the door to future enlargement), and the use of institutional mechanisms (such as the European Peace Facility) for purposes that were not intended when they were created.

On the other hand, the EU has proven remarkably resistant to change in some areas, unable or unwilling to innovate and transform itself in the face of seemingly existential challenges. For example, EU leaders have adopted increasingly robust rhetoric about the threat posed by Russian revanchism in Ukraine and the Trump Administration's seeming disinterest in European security, but their governments have been slow to compromise their sovereign autonomy in order to develop a credible European capacity for territorial defense and deterrence. Similarly, EU leaders have signaled a new openness to enlargement as a necessary response to Russia's geopolitical interference in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, but then blocked proposals to transform the process by moving to qualified majority voting or giving applicant states greater access to EU institutions and resources before they have become full members.

How can we make sense of all this? Is the EU capable of overcoming unexpected challenges through fundamental policy innovation and structural transformation, and if so under what conditions, or is it forever constrained by existing policy paradigms and institutional forms?

The EU's ability to innovate in the face of the unexpected relates directly to the long-standing debate among scholars regarding the 'actorness' of the Union (Jupille and Caporaso 1998; Bretherton and Vogler 1999; Drieskens 2021) and the forms of power that it exercises in the world. While the EU has never aspired to replace the legitimacy and coercive might of the territorial nation-state, its institutional form

[1] *Project-syndicate.org*, 3 March 2022. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/geopolitical-europe-responds-to-russias-war-by-josep-borrell-2022-03

and collective authority have evolved considerably in the seven decades since its creation. Meanwhile, the question of how the EU wields power has become increasingly salient amidst the global contestation of the Liberal International Order, the unmistakable decline of the United States' military and economic power relative to that of other great powers, and the growing range of policy competences that EU member states have delegated to or pooled in the Union's institutions.

The aim of this paper is to address the puzzle introduced above by looking beyond familiar categorizations of the EU, such as a civilian power (Duchêne 1972), a normative power (Manners 2002), or even a superpower (Moravcsik 2017; de Vos 2024). Instead, we aim to better understand how the EU responds to unexpected developments in a complex international environment—in other words, how the EU deals with the radical uncertainties of world politics. To this end, we explore the heuristic potential of Peter Katzenstein and Lucia Seybert's concept of 'protean power' (2018a, 2018b; see also Katzenstein 2020) —meaning an actor's ability to confront external challenges by innovating and transforming itself—which has heretofore been applied largely to private actors (social movements, advocacy networks, firms, and industries) but not to states or international organizations.

The EU has long been aware of the challenge posed by unforeseen developments, but its response thus far has focused largely on improving its capacity for anticipating the future. Self-described 'futurist' Florence Gaub served from 2018 to 2022 as foresight advisor to the General Secretariat of the European Council, where she authored a 2019 report on *Global Trends to 2030: Challenges and Choices for Europe*.[2] As the Foreword to that report explains, "[t]he interconnected and interdependent nature of national, European and global affairs has put a new premium on agile policy- and decision-making, resilience, strategic foresight, and anticipatory governance…" That same year, Maroš Šefčovič was appointed as Vice President of the European Commission with a new and explicit mandate to improve the Commission's capacity for strategic foresight, including preparation of an annual Foresight Report in consultation with 'Ministers for the Future' and senior officials designated by the member states.[3] According to the Commission, the challenge is to "anticipate trends, risks, emerging issues, and their potential implications and opportunities in order to draw useful insights for strategic planning, policy-making and preparedness."[4] However valuable this activity may be, it is clearly informed by a logic of calculable risk rather than by acceptance of radical uncertainty.

A notable exception to this tendency was Josep Borrell's address to the 2022 annual conference of EU ambassadors, in which he challenged his audience to recognize "a world of radical uncertainty." As he described it, "The speed and scope of change is exceptional. We should not try to deny it. We should not try to resist it. It would be a futile effort. We have to accept it and to adapt [to] it, prioritizing

[2] https://www.politico.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/ESPAS_Report2019_V15.pdf, accessed 5 February 2025.

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/sefcovic_en, accessed 5 February 2025.

[4] https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight_en#what-is-strategic-foresight, accessed 5 February 2025.

flexibility and resilience. But uncertainty is the rule. Events that one could imagine that they will never happen, they are happening one after the other."[5] In such a world, the EU cannot rely on strategic foresight alone—it must be prepared to innovate and transform itself in the face of developments that were not, and could not have been, foreseen. This is the challenge of protean power.

Following this introduction, the paper is organized into four parts. The first part outlines the concept of protean power, from its ontological assumptions regarding risk and uncertainty to its expectations regarding the influence of actors in world politics. The second part demonstrates how prevailing understandings of the EU's role in world politics, including the debate over EU actorness and power, as well as the literatures on EU crisis management and resilience, tend to overlook (or deliberately assume away) the conditions and dynamics of protean power. The third part offers empirically verifiable propositions on the factors that enable and constrain the EU's exercise of protean power. Finally, the fourth part previews the findings and conclusions of other papers in this project.

Part I: The concept of protean power

This part of the paper reviews familiar concepts of power in political science and international relations and compares them to Peter Katzenstein and Lucia Seybert's (2018a, 2018b) concept of 'protean power.' Building upon and sometimes modifying Katzenstein and Seybert's logic, it develops propositions on the forms that the exercise of protean power might take and on the conditions that might motivate an actor to exercise protean power.

Debates on the nature and effects of power are pervasive in modern political science. Robert Dahl (1957) defined power as the ability to get others to do what they would otherwise not do. Michel Foucault (1977) and later Stephen Lukes (2006) de-emphasized choice, focusing instead on the power of impersonal social structures to shape the needs and desires of individuals. Within the sub-field of international relations, the debate has raged between neo-realists who define power as the material resources needed for defense, deterrence and coercion (Waltz 1979; Mearsheimer 2001), liberals who focus on the influence a state gains by having an attractive culture and social values (Nye 1990), and constructivists who emphasize the ways in which norms and institutions transform the identities and behaviors of actors (Finnemore 1996; Wendt 1999). Most recently, scholars of various stripes have highlighted how states exercise power by rendering the options most beneficial to others unaffordable and thus undesirable (Gruber 2001, Medina de Souza and Igor Abdalla 2015). Yet despite the diversity of these arguments, they all assume, like Dahl, that power involves an actor or institution's ability to control others.

In contrast, Katzenstein and Seybert propose a radically different understanding of power as agility, innovation and transformation, which we interpret as an actor's

[5] https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-ambassadors-annual-conference-2022-opening-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell_en, accessed 5 February 2025.

capacity to respond to and shape external challenges by innovating and transforming itself. Given how fundamentally this concept of 'protean power' differs from others in the scholarly literature, its logic cannot be explained without delving first into its ontological foundations. In particular, the distinctiveness and heuristic value of the concept of 'protean power' rests on a distinction between systems that are closed and complicated and systems that are open and complex, and thus on the ontological and explanatory primacy of risk versus uncertainty.

If one assumes that the world is a complicated but closed system, then developments are ultimately predictable, as long as one can identify the various components of the system and obtain sufficient information about them. The resulting logic of risk highlights the challenge of assessing the probability of potential developments and ensuring one's readiness to forestall developments deemed harmful and to exploit those deemed beneficial. According to this logic, power involves the ability to control others and success in the exercise of power depends upon access to information needed to assess the probabilities and consequences of potential developments and the command of resources needed to forestall or exploit them. Katzenstein and Seybert call this control power.

To use the terminology of Donald Rumsfeld, control power involves risk assessment and preparation in the face of 'known unknowns.' The only uncertainty here is operational, which can be addressed by improving access to information relevant to future scenarios. In contrast, the concept of protean power assumes that we live in a world of radical uncertainty involving innumerable and unsolvable 'unknown unknowns,' as Rumsfeld called them (Department of Defense 2002). In this world, uncertainty is an inescapable reality and efforts to exert control are bound to be inadequate, inefficient, and maybe even counterproductive.

The protean power concept assumes that the world is an open and complex system whose components interact and evolve in ways that defy prediction and thus produce effects for which one cannot prepare. Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner explain, "The past did not have to unfold as it did, the present did not have to be what it is, and the future is wide open" (cited in Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 18). In such circumstances of radical uncertainty, the challenge of assessing the probability of a particular danger or opportunity with a particular consequence is not relevant because "there is no basis for agents to settle on what the probability distribution looks like" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 48). In fact, the uncertainty extends to the very nature of the dangers and opportunities that may be forthcoming. This has implications for the paradigm of crisis management, whose focus on gathering information to update one's assessment of how best to control risks and threats is blind to the challenge of radical uncertainty. If we understand crises as "generators of uncertainty rather than risks with associated probabilities that are known or knowable," a new set of challenges comes into focus (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 44).

This condition of radical uncertainty does not deny the exercise of power—"the unexpected is an integral part of power dynamics" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 11). But radical uncertainty has strong implications for how power is understood and how it is exercised. In a complicated system beset by risk, the exercise of power involves gaining information about the resources, preferences and intentions of other actors, as well as the dynamics of the natural world, and amassing the resources

need to control their likely effects. In a complex system characterized by radical uncertainty, there is power in how an actor responds to the unexpected by innovating and transforming itself. Hence the label 'protean power,' based on the shape-changing abilities of the ancient Greek sea-god Proteus.

There are, however, two distinct conceptualizations of how protean power relates to actors and action—both of them plausible and heuristically useful but with distinct implications for social science. According to Katzenstein and Seybert, protean power involves the process by which actors, institutions and networks innovate and transform themselves in response to radical uncertainty in their external environment. It is a phenomenon that emerges or is generated organically and contingently through the experience of uncertainty, not a capacity or characteristic inherent to any actor, institution or network. As an emergent property, it is evident in retrospect but not subject to being exercised by purposive actors.[6] Therefore, one cannot make ex ante assessments of an actor's protean power, much less develop testable hypotheses regarding the factors that may enable or limit the phenomenon.

In contrast, a more common-sense interpretation understands protean power as the capacity of an actor or network or institution to innovate and transform itself in the face of unforeseen developments in the external environment. The source or determinants of this capacity may be self-consciously learned or deliberately designed based on prior experience, or it may be an unintended consequence of characteristics that developed for other reasons. By this understanding, it is indeed possible to identify factors likely to enable or limit innovation and the transformation of the self in situations of emergent uncertainty, and thus to make *ex ante* assessments of an actor's, network's, or institution's protean power capacity that can be evaluated empirically.

What then does it mean for an actor to generate or exercise protean power? We agree with Katzenstein and Seybert that protean power is not an instrument, a tool that an actor uses or deploys without affecting its own identity or character. But this does not exclude the possibility of generating or even exercising protean power. After all, protean power derives from an actor's ability to act in certain ways (in relation to other actors and to intersubjective or material developments), and this ability can increase or decrease and be learned or developed over time. By this understanding, the exercise of protean power involves an actor or institution exploiting this ability, taking advantage of its potential to innovate or self-transform in response to new circumstances. As such, the exercise of protean power is distinct from the exercise of control power but potentially no less important.

The ability to exercise protean power is closely linked to an actor's influence on its environment. Actors and institutions with the capacity (or agility) to innovate and transform themselves, and thus to engage creatively with the world, are better able to manage and exploit unexpected developments. Consider the Transformers action films, where fantasy characters use their shape-shifting ability to overcome their foes. In world politics, actors that lack this capacity may be successful at managing familiar challenges, but they are likely to be overtaken by the unexpected as they

[6] Peter Katzenstein's comment to authors.

deploy resources and tactics ill-suited to the new situation that confronts them. So while protean power is not necessarily a weapon of the weak (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a: 53), its exercise can compensate for disadvantages in control power that afflict weak actors.

Despite its superficial similarities to crisis management, protean power is not about the deployment of resources to control unexpected but threatening events. Instead, protean power involves an actor's or institution's capacity to innovate and transform *itself* in response to unforeseen developments, whether to adapt to the unforeseen or to shape its further unfolding or both. Protean power is thus evident in contexts of radical uncertainty—that is, in situations where the complex nature of the external world leaves actors or institutions unable to calculate the probability or extent of threatening developments and thus confronts them with unforeseen events that require attention and innovation.

Of course, theorists of protean power are not the only who link innovation to power. Lawrence Freedman (2013: xii) defined strategy as "the art of creating power" through intelligence or creativity in order to get "more out of a situation than the starting balance of power would suggest." Eric Schmidt (2023), former CEO of Google and consultant to the U.S. Department of Defense, argues that a state's relative capacity for technological innovation is more important to its geopolitical competitiveness than any current endowment of resources. Yet despite their focus on creativity and innovation, both Freedman and Schmidt conceptualize power in terms of resources useful to control or defeat an adversary: neither imagines the possibility that power may inhere in the potential transformation of the self.

There may also be synergies or interdependence between the exercise of control power and protean power. To start, the transformation of an actor or institution is not just a question of openness or willingness to change; in many cases, it also requires material resources of the type associated with control power. In extremis, an actor lacking in control power may be overwhelmed by an external challenge before it has a chance to undergo the self-transformation that the situation requires. This interdependence may also be present in the other direction, meaning that an actor or institution cannot exercise or deploy its control power resources without first transforming itself. As such, the successful exercise of protean power may have the effect of increasing an actor's ability to exercise control power, or vice-versa. Finally, control power and protean power may in some cases even mutually reinforce each other (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018a, b).

So how would we recognize the generation or exercise of protean power? Katzenstein and Seybert assert that "protean power resides in the agility of actors, the actualization of potentialities, and an openness to accept and promote novel solutions that others might not have thought of or tried out" (2018a: 53). But beyond these generalities, Katzenstein and Seybert do not define the types of innovation or transformations of the self that might constitute the exercise of protean power, perhaps because any such list would seem to contradict the open-endedness of innovation.

We propose that the exercise of protean power would include any of the following:

- Significant changes in the mandate or principles on which an actor's formal claim to legitimacy is based.
- Significant changes in an actor's organizational structure or decision-making process.
- Pursuit of actions or policies that were previously excluded, including:
- the allocation of significant resources to an activity or purpose that was previously considered undesirable or unfeasible;
- significant changes in the cooperative relationships that the actor considers appropriate, including the type of actors that are considered appropriate partners.
- And more, given the unpredictable nature of innovation.

Katzenstein and Seybert also do not define the sort of unexpected developments that might motivate or even require an actor to exercise protean power, likely for similar reasons, but we propose that this would include the following:

- A development whose nature is so new that that the actor concerned had no reason to expect or prepare for it.
- A development whose nature is familiar but the actor was advised that it was so unlikely to occur that it was not necessary to prepare for it.
- A development whose nature is familiar and whose occurrence was expected or even observed but whose scale overwhelms the actor's control power resources and thus necessitates an alternative response.
- And more.

In more concrete terms, such developments could involve a change in government policy such as a decision to impose sanctions or go to war, a technological change such as the invention of nuclear weapons or social media, a change in patterns of economic activity such as globalization or recession, or even an occurrence in the natural world such as a pandemic or climate change. And as some of these examples suggest, the developments need not be especially sudden.

Before we apply the protean power concept to the capacities of the European Union, we find it helpful to compare and contrast it to a variety of other concepts and debates related to the EU's role in world politics.

Part III: Related conceptualizations of the EU in world politics

This part of the paper reviews various concepts in the literature on the EU's role in world politics as they relate to the phenomena expressed in the concept of protean power. First, it reviews various understandings of EU power and actorness, which tend to overlook the conditions and dynamics of protean power. It then considers the strengths and limitations of literatures on EU crisis management and resilience, which engage more explicitly with uncertainty without linking the phenomenon to a clear understanding of power.

The power(s) of the EU

Ever since the European Community's first efforts to assert itself collectively on the international stage in the early 1970 s, scholars and other observers have wondered what type of actor or power the Community (and later, Union) actually is or might become, and thus what role it plays or should play in world politics. Many of these analyses have combined descriptive and prescriptive narratives. What they share is a tendency to treat the EU as a *sui generis* phenomenon whose nature or identity demands a label.

This literature traces its origins to Francois Duchêne's (1972, 1973) characterization of the community as a 'civilian power' well suited to conditions of complex interdependence and the declining role of military force. As a civilian power, argued Duchêne, the community could influence world politics by applying its economic instruments to the pursuit of values linked to its "inner characteristics," namely the promotion of "equality, justice and tolerance" and an "interest for the poor abroad" (1973: 20). Three decades later, but in a similar spirit, Ian Manners proposed that we conceive of Europe as a 'normative power' whose historical experiences, hybrid polity and constitutional configuration gave it a special "ability to shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" (2002: 239).

More recently, scholars have downplayed the normative ways in which the EU acts in world politics. For example, Sophie Meunier and Kalypso Nicolaïdis (2006) describe the EU as a 'trade power' that limits access to its internal market in order to obtain costly concessions from its trading partners. Similarly, Chad Damro (2012: 682–3) argues that "the EU is, at its core, a market [so] it may be best to conceive of the EU as a market power" that uses persuasive and coercive measures to impose its economic and social market-related policies and regulatory measures on other polities. Andrew Moravcsik (2017) even describes Europe as a "genuine superpower [that] rivals or surpasses the United States and China in its ability to project a full spectrum of global military, economic and soft power."

Perhaps the closest that this literature has come to the realm of protean power is Brigid Laffan's concept of "collective power," which she defines as the EU's ability to address crises by "creating capacity through the mobilization and application of resources, including finance, knowledge, human capital and deploying and innovating the policy toolkit" (2023:626). Yet notwithstanding Laffan's focus on agility and innovation, the emphasis remains on the EU's ability to shape outcomes by controlling others.

The aforementioned works differ from the concept of protean power outlined above in two important respects. First, while they differ on the ends that the EU pursues and on the instruments that it uses, they all conceive of the EU's power as control power—as the EU's ability to get others to do what they are otherwise not inclined to do. Second, they portray world politics as a realm of calculable risk where better information would enable the EU to choose more effective policy options. The point is not that these concepts are wrong or analytically useless. But they have little to say about the EU's ability to improvise and innovate in the face of unexpected developments—i.e., its protean power.

The actorness of the EU

Another line of inquiry into the EU's role in world politics focuses on the *actorness* of the Union, typically understood as its "capacity to behave actively and deliberately in relation to other actors in the international system" (Sjöstedt 1977: 16). Decades ago, Hedley Bull (1982: 151) famously declared that"'Europe' is not an actor in international affairs and does not seem likely to become one." In Bull's view, only a state, not an intergovernmental or supranational community, could truly act in world politics. Many scholars thus opted instead to conceive of the EU as "a variable and multi-dimensional presence, which plays an active role in some areas of international interaction and a less active one in others" (Allen and Smith, 1990: 20). For example, Ian Manners and Richard Whitman (1998) proposed that the EU's international role be understood in terms of the extent and depth of relationships it has developed with nation-states and regional groupings. Most pointedly, Christopher Hill (1993:306) argued that the Union suffers from a 'capability-expectations gap,' lacking the ability to meet external expectations due to the difficulty of achieving consensus among the member states and assembling the resources needed for action.

The 'actorness' question nonetheless returned as the EU gained legal competence and institutional capacity for external action. Definitions vary, but more and more scholars argue that the EU is an actor in-the-making, meeting some criteria for actorness but falling short on others. For example, working from a rational institutionalist perspective, Joseph Jupille and James Caporaso (1998) define actorness in four dimensions—recognition by others, authority, autonomy and cohesion. Taking a more constructivist approach, Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler (1999) identify three dimensions—presence, opportunity and capability. Their third dimension, capability, refers to the internal capacity to respond to any opportunity, and is thus relevant to the concept of protean power. Bretherton and Vogler's conceptualization of actorness thus leaves space for decentralized institutions or polities like the EU to exercise protean power by improvising and innovating in the face of unexpected developments.

In sum, scholars increasingly treat the EU as an actor in international relations, linking variations in its effectiveness to its various resources and capabilities, the variety of forms of power that it can exercise, and the range of internal and external limitations on its action (e.g., Thomas 2012). They concentrate not on what the EU is but rather on what it does (Smith 2005: 63). And they recognize that the EU, "like other states and non-state actors… uses different forms of power in different situations" (Cross and Karolewski 2017: 4). This conceptual evolution creates space for inquiry into the EU's ability to exercise protean power.

Crisis-led reform, crisis management and resilience

Jean Monnet may have been the first to suggest that the EU would be "forged in crises" but he was not the last to make this point. Luuk van Middelaar (2021), a

former senior advisor to EU Council President Herman van Rompuy, recounted how a series of crises forced the EU to overcome its legal constraints and reinvent itself. Writing in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Erik Jones, Daniel Keleman and Sophie Meunier (2021) argued that the EU has confronted multiple crises in recent years and each time emerged stronger. Federico Maria Ferrara and Hanspieter Kriesi (2021) linked various modes of crisis-led reform to the insights associated with four major theories of integration. Yet none of these authors conceived of this process as a form of power or influence.

Another relevant body of literature is devoted to the EU's capacities for crisis management, including the relatively new concept of resilience. A crisis situation is generally understood to involve a threat to core values, urgency, and a high degree of uncertainty (Boin et al 2005: 3–4; see also Riddervold et al 2021: 7–8), while crisis management involves "the decisions and actions taken by decision makers as they prepare for, react to, and recover from crises" (Dayton 2009). This literature's focus on uncertainty—"In crisis situations, decision makers often have an incomplete understanding of the origin and risks of the problem being confronted, and an uncertain understanding of the impact that their actions will have on alleviating or exacerbating it" (Dayton 2009) —overlaps with Katzenstein and Seybert's discussion of the conditions for the exercise of protean power. However, the crisis management literature's focus on early warning, systemic redundancy, resource allocation and recovery, leaves little space for an organization's or polity's capacity for significant transformation, which is the essence of protean power.

A possible exception to this tendency is the growing interest in resilience, defined as "the capacity of a social system… to proactively adapt to and recover from disturbances that are perceived within the system to fall outside the range of normal and expected disturbances" (Boin et al. 2010: 9). Scholars do not agree on the meaning of the term as it applies to the EU (Juncos 2017: 4) but the centrality of reform in the EU Global Strategy's definition of resilience—"the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises" (2016: 23) —suggests potential synergies with protean power. On the other hand, to the extent that resilience refers to a capacity to 'recover from'—i.e., to resume an original form without substantial change—it is conceptually distinct from the transformation of the self that is central to protean power. For example, the Global Strategy's definition of resilience is located within a discussion of states and societies *outside* the EU, revealing an institutional blindness to the potential transformation of the EU itself (Joseph 2016). Hence the importance of understanding better the ways in which, and the conditions under which, the EU might innovate and transform *itself* in the face of unexpected developments.

Part III: Propositions on the EU's protean power

Although Katzenstein and Seybert did not develop the concept of protean power in order to comment on the capacities of the European Union (which receives only five, very brief mentions in the 2018 book), the concept should be as applicable to the EU as to any other actor, institution or network in world politics. This part of the

paper thus translates the concept of protean power as presented above in Part I into more concrete propositions regarding the EU's role in world politics, including factors that enable and constrain the EU's exercise of protean power.

When we refer to the protean power of the European Union, we are not saying that the EU is a protean power. Instead, we are referring to the EU's capacity to exercise protean power. And by 'exercise,' we do not mean that protean power is an instrument that the EU selects and uses to achieve its aims. Instead, the exercise of protean power involves an actor or institution exploiting its potential to innovate or self-transform in response to new and unexpected circumstances. We are thus referring to the EU's capacity to deal with unexpected developments within, across or beyond its borders by transforming itself, by generating new practices and revising its institutional structures. On some issues, and in some time periods, the EU's protean power may be quite limited, while elsewhere it may be extensive. Finally, when we say 'European Union,' we mean both the collectivity of the member states and the community institutions that speak and act on behalf of the member states and their citizens.

The EU's exercise of protean power could take multiple forms. For example, as discussed in general terms above at the end of Part I, this could involve significant changes in the mandate or principles on which the EU's formal claim to legitimacy is based; significant changes in the EU's internal structure or organizational form; or the EU's pursuit of actions or policies that were previously excluded, including the allocation of significant resources to an activity or purpose that the EU previously considered undesirable or unfeasible, or significant changes in the cooperative relationships that the EU considers appropriate, including the type of actors that are considered appropriate partners. But it could take other forms as well.

Like any actor, a number of factors could enable, as well as constrain, the EU's capacity to exercise protean power. The irony is that some of the characteristics of the EU that have been blamed for its supposed weakness in terms of control power may actually be sources of strength in terms of protean power. As a guide to empirical research, we propose that the following factors may enable or limit the EU's protean power—that is, its capacity to respond to unforeseen developments by adopting policy innovations or structural transformations in a timely or coherent manner.

Enabling factors:

- Experimentalism: The EU is understood by the governments of its member states, their citizens, and interest groups as an ongoing experiment in governance.
- Decentralization: The EU's decentralized and multi-nodal structure provides multiple sources of information, reduces risk of group-think, and enables member states to serve as laboratories for policy innovation.
- Informality: In certain EU institutions, most obviously the Council, decision-making has long relied on informal norms and processes of consensus formation that facilitate innovation when needed.
- Novelty: EU institutions lack deep historical or cultural roots.

Limiting factors:

- Rule-dependency: The EU is constituted by treaties and functions largely through legislation, both of which are slow to change.
- Bureaucracy: In certain EU institutions, most obviously the Commission, decision-making has long proceeded through highly bureaucratized channels, which tend to limit innovation.
- Decentralization: The decentralized nature of EU decision-making, particularly the need for agreement among various EU institutions with different mandates and constituencies.
- Intergovernmentalism: The need for consensus among member states can enable individual member states to veto policy innovation and structural transformation or to condition their support on other measures that they desire.
- Budgeting: The EU's rigid, multi-year budget and the fact that most resources are controlled by member states.

It also bears noting that while Katzenstein and Seybert present the protean power concept in universal terms, and warn specifically against assuming that it applies only to 'weak' actors (2018: 53), the empirical chapters in their volume focus almost entirely on private actors, industries, movements and networks—not a single chapter explores the protean power of a state or international organization, whether intergovernmental or supranational. Even if the EU is to some extent *sui generis*, its assertion of public authority, its organizational structure, and the resources it commands more closely resemble a federal state or international organization than a private actor. As such, the propositions outlined above for the EU could be adapted to assess the exercise of protean power by another international organization and perhaps even a state.

Finally, it is important to note that innovation and transformation may be positive in functional or normative terms, but are not necessarily so, depending on the dynamics involved and the standards applied. They may also divert the EU from its original aims and/or make it more difficult to achieve aims that are valued by its constituent institutions, governments and peoples. In fact, they may contain the seeds of future dysfunction and crisis (Lavenex 2018; Zeitlin et al. 2019; Howarth and Quaglia 2021).

Part IV: Summary of the papers

We turn now to the focus and findings of the other contributions to this Special Issue, which apply the concept of protean power to a wide range of EU policies and relationships. Though written before Donald Trump's return to power and subsequent overturning of the transatlantic security community, they reveal a great deal about the EU's ability to innovate and transform itself in response to unexpected developments abroad. The first three articles focus on the EU's relations with its eastern neighbors Russia (Casier; Juncos and Pratt) and Ukraine (Thomas). Shifting focus to the south, the next three articles explore protean power dynamics in the EU's relations with Turkey (Aydin-Düzgit and Kaliber), and hybrid actors in the Middle East (Lecoq and Müller). Then two papers examine the EU's protean power

in relation to its policies in specific issue-areas—trade (Young) and health (Wolff and Ladi). These papers draw various conclusions regarding the forms of protean power and the factors that enable or limit it. In conclusion, Helene Sjursen and Michael Barnett comment on the value and limitations of this approach to understanding the EU's role in the world, while Peter J. Katzenstein revisits protean power in light of contemporary developments.

Tom Casier's paper identifies elements of protean power in the EU's response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent war, particularly in the innovative use of the European Peace Facility. This paper's principal contribution is highlighting the relational aspect of protean power, including interactions between the Union's simultaneous exercise of protean and control power and between the exercise of protean power by the EU and by Russia. In so doing, it demonstrates how the exercise of protean power can undermine another's exercise of control power while also creating more uncertainty. As for the enablers of protean power, Casier points to a combination of contextual factors of deep crisis and shock and the EU's centralization and informality that enabled the Union to 'reinvent' itself and thus to respond flexibly to unforeseen developments.

In their contribution, **Ana E. Juncos** and **Simon Frankel Pratt** adopt a pragmatist approach to protean power in order to show how Russian aggression led the EU to transform the very core of its security identity. In particular, they argue that the EU has been able to break 'taboos' and engage in a 'creativity of action' when venturing into previously unthinkable actions such as the delivery of lethal weapons to a country directly engaged in a military conflict. They also observe that as the EU generates protean power, it has to navigate complexity and uncertainty both outside and within its own system. However, in contrast to Casier's findings, the EU's agility and thus its ability to generate protean power are limited by the Union's complex and multi-level governance that slows collective decision-making and by the reliance of bureaucracies like the European Commission and the EEAS on institutionalized operating procedures.

In his paper on EU openness toward Ukraine from the breakup of the Soviet Union to Russia's wars of aggression, **Daniel C. Thomas** argues that enlargement policy is potentially a good example of protean power as it involves the possibility of new member states, an extension of the external frontier, and thus a redistribution of interests and values within the community and its institutions. Based on EU responses to unforeseen developments in Ukraine from independence in 1991 through the aftermath of Russia's invasion in 2022, he concludes that the Union's protean power capacity in this area is real but highly contingent—shaped and limited by pre-existing norms, material interests, and the shifting dynamics of intergovernmental decision-making that have sometimes resulted in deadlock (1991, 2006, 2014) and other times enabled significant innovation on route to transformation of the Union (2022 and 2023).

Senem Aydin-Düzgit and Alper Kaliber review the EU's relations with Turkey, particularly its response to the 2015 migration crisis and the failed coup in 2016. They demonstrate how the EU exercised protean power, even if to a limited degree, through improvisation and innovation when aiming to reduce the number of Syrian migrants transiting through Turkey. The use of protean power was in this

case combined with resources normally associated with control power such as visa liberalization or accession negotiations and may have had the unintended effect of provoking others to generate greater control power. Like Casier, Aydin-Düzgit and Kaliber show how the EU's informality enabled it to generate protean power and thus to be innovative in policy formation. In addition, they note that the EU has less motivation to respond to radical uncertainty with innovation when it does not perceive high risks.

Patrick Müller and Sharon Lecoq focus in their paper on the EU's approach to hybrid actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah, arguing that by their status and capacity they bring elements of uncertainty to international relations. As they argue in the paper, existing policies offer little help in such situations. Instead, the EU's protean power encompassed flexibility, polycentric learning and adaptive foresight. The examples of innovation in EU's peacebuilding framework include reliance on external partners or representatives of other, like-minded countries, when dealing with the hybrid actors, as well as institutional innovations such as the establishment of the European Institute of Peace.

Sarah Wolff and Stella Ladi examine the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing in particular on the EU's vaccination strategy and on the Team Europe initiative. They demonstrate that a high degree of internal agility and innovation with regards to public procurement enabled the EU to achieve remarkable results internally, whereby ca. 70% of its population was vaccinated in a relatively short time. However, the authors also note that these developments were coupled with the exercise of control power externally and resulted in the EU being accused of 'coronationalism'.

Alasdair Young reviews several major and unexpected challenges to the EU's trade policy since the Cold War and finds that the EU has shown considerable protean power in this area. In particular, he observes that the EU responded to uncertainty in trade by expanding the Union's exclusive trade competence and by adopting policies that had previously been considered inappropriate or undesirable. However, Young finds that the EU's exercise of protean power was more likely in areas when the Union already had greater competences and was thus less dependent on consensus among the member states.

Finally, the collection concludes with three reflections on what Pomorska and Thomas' framework paper and the various empirical papers indicate about the heuristic value and limitations of the protean power concept for studying the external relations of the European Union. Helene **Sjursen** starts by asking a question whether the Union's ability to innovate is sufficient to explain its robustness in the post-liberal world order. She also argues that in the case of the EU, innovation did not only lead to surprise but sometimes also to continuity, as we know from the history of European integration. But, even more importantly, she invokes Arendt to insist that for the EU's foreign policy it is more crucial to ensure collective action, rather than "just" to innovate. Finally, Sjursen poses also some questions for the future research agenda, such as why do some actors manage to generate protean power and other not?

Michael Barnett observes that the work on protean power is a response to International Relations as a discipline being predominantly focused on studying *power*

over rather than *power to*. He discusses in detail two central elements of protean power: uncertainty and adaptation and argues that the cases in this Special Issue are not of uncertainty because many of the discussed development could have been predicted. He then argues that one of the most revealing discussions in this volume is on the relationship between the control and protean power, where protean power can be either part or a precursor to control power.

Finally, **Peter J. Katzenstein** opens up the discussion to the broader understanding of current International Relations. He argues that protean power involves *both* generating *and* exercising, rather than generating *or* exercising. He also reminds us that arguments between control and protean power are also arguments about language, which "is both a mirror and a maker of the world." He argues that complementarity and uncertainty coexist. Finally, Katzenstein closes this Special Issue by linking the debate on protean power to the current international situation and the second Trump administration, whose initiatives in global politics he considers an example of both the exercise and the generation of protean power.

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