Risky Thinking: How Scenarios Can Help the EU Bounce Back from Strategic Shock
Parkes, Roderick; McQuay, Mark

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DGAP REPORT

Risky Thinking

How Scenarios Can Help the EU Bounce Back from Strategic Shock

Roderick Parkes
Head, Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies

Mark McQuay
Associate Fellow, Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies

In Brief

Since coming to power in December, the Scholz government has blundered into a series of foreseeable crises: medical shortages; reliance on Russia for gas; Ukraine's need for robust support. France's President Macron anticipated all three crises, giving weight to his calls for Europeans to pursue autonomy and reduce dependence on the outside world. Policy makers are now demanding scenario exercises that illustrate the obvious dangers of interdependency to back up their policy shift.

- A decade of crises has shown how the EU's global interdependencies can expose it to risk, and policy makers are looking to correct their prior embrace of cross-border connectivity, with France, Germany, and the European Commission pursuing "European strategic autonomy."

- They are requesting foresight exercises to help rethink such tasks as protecting cross-border critical infrastructure, demanding scenarios in which the EU's interdependence with foreign countries is a threat to help them work out how to reduce these.

- This case-study shows that scenarios can be a corrective to threat-driven consensus-building: the pursuit of European autonomy risks creating precisely the hostile external environment and internal vulnerabilities that justify it and therefore deserves scrutiny.

Scenarios Matter

After a decade of international crises, European policymakers now routinely consume strategic foresight and in particular illustrative scenarios that anticipate real-world problems. European think tanks and consultancies have in turn made scenario planning part of their core offering, designing imaginative exercises to simulate challenging situations, foretell real-world dilemmas, and help participants think through decision processes before these even arise. But policymakers are generally dissatisfied with the results, and they have added "foresight fatigue" to their list of Covid-related disorders.[1] They complain about spending days in online workshops responding to imagined events which generate few real-world lessons. So what is the problem – and why do they keep calling in think tanks nonetheless?

Our experience shows that good scenario planning for public policy, like strategic foresight more broadly, should comprise three broadly equal disciplines: politics, science and the creative arts. This is hard to achieve. At the EU level, the Commission covers the science (both of the policy field and the scenario methodology) and the Council does the politics. They tend to outsource the creative input to think tanks, and so the most undervalued element falls to outsiders. For their part, think tanks have not always treated this role with rigor, seeing scenario-planning as an excuse for self-indulgent creative writing. Yet the creative discipline, coupled with think tanks' outsider status, are precisely what is required to correct the other two, to prevent politicians defining the science or – as in the case of Covid – science defining the politics.

This paper details a case where think tanks used creative arts to bring discipline to science and politics **(Box 1)** – and it happens to link into the most important strategic debate of the decade, on European autonomy and the EU's approach to critical interdependencies with other states.

BOX 1. THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OF SCENARIO PLANNING

Scenario planning for public policy incorporates three disciplines – politics, science, and the creative arts. In theory, each should complement the other. In practice, they tend to compromise one another. Incorporating all three in a balanced way is particularly hard at the EU level, where governments tend to handle the political; the Commission, the science; and the creative is an afterthought left to consultancies. The EU's use of scenarios in a review of critical infrastructure (CI) illustrates why the creative discipline matters.

• During the 2016 Schengen crisis, EU governments concluded that Europe's interdependence had gone from source of strength to vulnerability. Consequently, the Commission started to review the safety of the critical infrastructure underpinning big EU projects.

• Commission and governments employed think tanks to invent scenario exercises to think systematically about CI risk. But the highly imaginative scenarios created by think tanks mismatched both the politics and science of risk.

• Disappointed by the exercise, the Commission now itself created scenarios and tailored them directly to the prevailing political narrative in the Council: European autonomy. From the sidelines, think tanks judged that this was leading in the wrong direction.

• Think tanks are responding by using creative tools to challenge the prevailing assumptions about European vulnerability and autonomy. It remains to be seen if they will overturn the dominant narratives, but the creative cross-checkis vitally important.

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1   The complaint is not new, simply more widespread than before. See: Silke Haarich, and Elvira Uyarra, "Evaluation, foresight and participation as new elements for regional innovation policy practice," 42nd Congress of the European Regional Science Association: August 27th - 31st, 2002: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/115609/1/ERSA2002_099.pdf>, p.17.

THE BACKGROUND: THE EU ACKNOWLEDGES THAT IT CREATES RISK

In 2016, with the Schengen crisis at its peak, the metro and airport in Brussels were bombed by terrorists. Amid the fallout, EU officials acknowledged for the first time something that member governments had long articulated: The EU had become a target. Since the start of the global financial crisis, the EU had been the subject of disinformation campaigns in places like Russia, where state-controlled media deliberately mischaracterized its trade deals and visa schemes as a threat, and foreign security services were suspected of trying to damage the EU's international reputation.[2] But until the attacks in Brussels, the focus of the EU's risk management efforts had been the vulnerabilities of individual member states, with Brussels intervening only to ensure that each member was taking care to protect itself – primarily from man-made accidents and natural disasters – and so could legitimately call on other members for a measure of solidarity in times of need. That focus now shifted.

Officials feared the EU had become a lightning rod for global threats.

EU officials turned their attention to a new possibility: that the EU had stopped being a source of stability for member states and become a lightning rod for global threats. The first sign of this shift in thinking was the effort to ensure the physical security of EU officials and buildings, which were situated close to the site of the metro attack. Next, they faced up to the threats faced by Europeans in the line of duty: Border officials drawn from member states but serving under the EU flag had been shot at by smugglers, there were reports that a member state's postal service had been the target of a bomb plot in retribution for its role in organizing joint European deportation flights, and an outspoken European mayor had been violently attacked for her work helping migrants who had made their way across the Schengen border.[3] Finally, officials started to consider how EU integration projects like the Eurozone or Schengen exposed *all* Europeans to risk.

The Commission's Directorate General for Home Affairs (DG HOME) began to rethink its risk methodology. It focused on big EU integration projects like Schengen, and their underlying "critical infrastructure."[4] This term had come to prominence in the West in the early 2000s, typically referring to transport, energy, healthcare, information, water, and financial and electoral systems: the organizational underpinnings of Europe's liberal market economies. CI became the focus because the Commission now realized that a failure of the infrastructure underpinning the European Single Market could have existential implications for the EU. This was not so much because CI might be attacked ahead of a classic territorial attack (as was the case, for instance, when Russia cut fiberoptic cables between Crimea and the Ukrainian mainland), but because an outage would be the nail in the coffin for the notion that pooling sovereignty is a means of resilience.

The EU's vast critical infrastructure undergirds its cross-border economy and ensures that neighbors in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and North Africa remain plugged into it. But following the Brussels attack, these transnational links gradually lost their status as conduits for wealth creation, falling prey to hostile rivals. Countries like Russia and Turkey exploited Europe's cross-border dependencies to spread instability and coerce the EU to change political direction, creating crises that threatened to cascade out of control.[5] Commission leaders acknowl-

2   These included a leaked phone call between EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton and Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet discussing the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, and among high-ranking US officials, who appeared to make disparaging remarks about the EU. See: Adam Taylor and Ishaan Tharoor, "The crisis in Ukraine, as told by leaked phone calls," The Washington Post, September 3, 2014: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/09/03/the-crisis-in-ukraine-as-told-by-leaked-phone-calls/> (accessed January 4, 2022).

3   On the debate at the time: Roderick Parkes, "The EU as a Terrorist Target: Why, Where and How," EUISS Brief, May 4th, 2016: <https://www.iss.europa.eu/content/eu-terrorist-target-why-where-and-how> (accessed January 4, 2022).

4   Commission Staff Working Document, "Comprehensive Assessment of EU Security Policy," SWD/2017/0278 Final, July 26th, 2017: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52017SC0278> (accessed January 4th, 2022).

5   Thomas Wright, "Prepared Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee Hearing on Global Security Challenges," March 2, 2021: <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/hearings/21-03-02-global-security-challenges-and-strategy> (accessed February 8, 2022).

edged that any further failure to anticipate the EU's vulnerabilities could see citizens reject European integration wholesale. The "permissive consensus," the unspoken pact between Europe's voters and EU bureaucrats that allows Brussels to lock member states into long-term decisions, looked to be on the verge of breaking for good.[6]

THE TASK: RETHINKING THE EUROPEAN CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE DIRECTIVE OF 2008

The EU's approach to critical infrastructure protection was unquestionably outdated. The relevant rulebook, EU Directive 2008/114, had been drawn up in the aftermath of the 2004 attacks on the Madrid transport system, and borrowed heavily from risk methodologies developed after the 9/11 attacks on the US's financial and defense infrastructure. Due to concerns about sovereignty, the Directive had been confined to transport and energy assets, and even then certain sub-sectors like nuclear power plants were exempted from consideration.[7] Despite its narrow ambit, the Directive was further stymied by member states' disinclination to label national assets as having "European" implications[8] But by 2016, the same member states that had set strict limits on EU activity in this field in 2008 began pushing for change, and Finland, Romania, and Germany used their EU Council presidencies to demand a new risk methodology.[9]

But how? It would be hard to create a methodology that was both comprehensive and concise enough to adequately address all the possible risks to Europe's infrastructure. The sheer range of potential adversaries, threats, and means was overwhelming. Among others, there were "insider threats," whereby hostile groups gain employment in sensitive EU sectors like nuclear power plants; "accidental drone strikes" resulting from the transfer of military technologies into the commercial sphere; and "hybrid attacks," where hostile governments exploit weaknesses in the EU's infrastructure in order to destabilize or coerce it into action. Cash-strapped member states like Croatia and Greece worried that expansive new EU risk obligations would make new infrastructure projects prohibitively expensive, while wealthier states like Germany and Denmark were wary of having to foot the bill.

These difficulties were encapsulated in the debate about how the EU should move from CI "protection" to "resilience." The 2008 Directive had prescribed "protection"; that is, actions to safeguard individual assets whose failure could unleash cascading effects. Resilience, on the other hand, is a much more open-ended concept, which involves building systems of integrated infrastructure that are sufficiently sturdy and adaptable to "resist, absorb, accommodate to and recover from [disruptive] incidents."[10] Resilience is generally agreed to be the better approach, but officials privately conceded that on an EU-scale it could be hugely complex. Trying to strengthen interlinked systems on a European scale could only work if there was some effort to set priorities. If the EU were to prescribe "resilience" without being able – for reasons of politics or methodology – to set priorities, it could well impose crippling new obligations on national operators.

Given this need for concision, the next question was whether the EU could predict the threats that European CI was up against. Here, officials seized on the recent growth of hostile acts from states like Russia. These hybrid attacks might have been causing huge problems, but they were, at least, easier to anticipate than the threats of past decades: Rather than trying to guess what CI accidents might arise or what natural disasters might befall it, the EU merely had to analyze the interests and capabilities of a small number of adversaries, building risk profiles on the basis of intelligence. Across town, moreover, NATO was likewise turning its attention to such state-based threats, and was proving able to develop quite narrow risk profiles. Having watched closely as Ukraine,

6   Swen Hutter, and Hanspeter Kriesi, "Politicizing Europe in times of crisis," Journal of European Public Policy 26, no.7, (2019), pp.996-1017.

7   Irmgard Anglmayer, "European Critical Infrastructure: Implementation Appraisal," EPRS Briefing, February 2021: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/662604/EPRS_BRI(2021)662604_EN.pdf> (accessed January 4, 2022).

8   Two thirds of those European critical infrastructures that have been identified are limited to just three member states in Central and Eastern Europe. See: European Council, Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Resilience of Critical Entities (2020/0365), p.2: <https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2020-12/15122020_proposal_directive_resilience_critical_entities_com-2020-829_en.pdf> (accessed January 04, 2022).

9   Council Presidency, "Work programme of Finland's Presidency in the field of civil protection," 10862/19, July 1st, 2019: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10862-2019-INIT/en/pdf> (accessed January 04, 2022); General Secretariat of the Council, "Council conclusions on strengthening resilience and countering hybrid threats, including disinformation in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic," 14064 December 15th, 2021: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14064-2020-INIT/en/pdf> (accessed January 04, 2022).

10 European Council, Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Resilience of Critical Entities (2020/0365), p.1.

Estonia and others fell victim to such CI attacks, NATO had been able to clearly define the kind of hybrid attacks and other state-based actions that would fall within its remit.

THE ART: BUILDING SCENARIOS TO REVEAL SYSTEMIC RISK

The European Commission has a far broader mission than NATO, pertaining not to the military defense of Europe but its comprehensive political and economic integration. Recognizing that the breadth of the EU's competencies made it a better fit, NATO therefore handed it the lead on hybrid threats. The EU, in turn, began learning from NATO how to hone its own collective threat awareness and risk posture.[11] The Commission, together with EU Council presidencies like that of Romania, brought together security officials from across Europe for NATO-style simulation exercises, encouraging participants to acquaint themselves with the shared nature of their vulnerabilities and the joint EU toolbox at their disposal.[12] Think tanks worked closely with them to design these exercises, which is how the authors of this paper came to be acquainted with the process. The Commission hoped think tanks would bring creativity and a willingness to broach politically tricky issues.

But when a first round of exercises was held in 2019, it was widely deemed a failure. The scenario-setters had failed in their central task of helping national participants prioritize a few of the multiple threats facing Europe's infrastructure. They had been a little *too* imaginative, crafting scenarios that represented worst-case thinking, envisaging how an inventive adversary could cause huge problems for the EU with a single campaign. Their aim had been to highlight the importance of critical infrastructure – but their creativity was misplaced. The participants from national ministries already knew they were vulnerable; what they really needed was help thinking systematically about their vulnerabilities in a way that would help them to uncover patterns. Think tanks had failed to help them go from the particular to the general.

Moreover, participants from EU member states complained that the real-life attacks on their CI hardly fitted the actions imagined by the scenario designers **(Box 2).** Rather than displaying a discernible

BOX 2. THE NATO CONCEPTION OF HYBRID THREATS – AND WHY IT DOESN'T FIT THE EU

NATO has tended to model hybrid threats around five attributes:

Strategic, displaying clear intent on the part of the perpetrator, for instance in using a hybrid attack as a means to gain territory or disable a rival at a key moment;

Sequential, running step-by-step from beginning to completion in a pre-planned sequence;

Simultaneous, playing out in different critical infrastructure domains at the same time, so that an attack on, say, the financial system would coincide with a hostile campaign in the information domain;

Surreptitious, covert and deniable, and thus sitting purposefully below the threshold for invoking Article 5;

And, above all,

Idiosyncratic, reflecting the interests, tactics, and capabilities of the hostile party, allowing NATO officials to model the threat and take advantage of the "intelligence premium."

But the EU's remit is far broader than NATO's; it is concerned with many more aspects of security, has far more potential vulnerabilities, and has no obvious threshold to distinguish between when it should or shouldn't take action. In the first round of EU scenarios, think tanks evidently made the mistake of modelling their hybrid actions around the NATO model – partly because the EU was keen to learn from NATO, and partly because the EU wanted to make use of the "intelligence premium."

11   Piotr Szymański, "Towards greater resilience: NATO and the EU on hybrid threats," OSW Commentary, April 24th, 2020: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2020-04-24/towards-greater-resilience-nato-and-eu-hybrid-threats> (accessed January 04, 2022).

12   Thomas Wahl, "Countering Hybrid Threats on Agenda of Finnish Council Presidency," eucrim, September 10th, 2019: <https://eucrim.eu/news/countering-hybrid-threats-agenda-finnish-council-presidency/> (accessed January 04, 2022).

goal, as in the scenarios, the real-life attacks had usually been probing, as if the perpetrators did not quite know what they wanted to achieve; and rather than occurring simultaneously in multiple domains, they consisted of sporadic, seemingly unconnected events, making sense – or even being identified as part of the same campaign – only in retrospect. Far from unfurling in a sequential way, it seemed as if hostile governments were playing a kind of iterative game, waiting to see how firmly the EU would react before planning their next move. This suspicion that the perpetrators were testing the EU's reaction was confirmed by the fact that the hybrid attacks were seldom surreptitious, although that is meant to be the stand-out feature of hybrid action.

Disappointed by this failure to make sense of the security environment, the German government launched its own EU-wide thought exercise, the Strategic Compass, in 2020.[13] This would produce a joint threat assessment, in which member states were encouraged to share intelligence about their vulnerabilities. Its goal was to improve decision-making on a variety of issues, including CI. In launching this initiative, German defense officials were trying to anticipate a French exercise to imagine scenarios that might trigger the EU's own mutual defense clause (Article 42,7). But, above all, they were trying to push through a shift in Germany's own security policy. They felt that Germany's past policy had been naïve about global power politics, and had privileged the pursuit of trade and economics at the expense of geopolitical realities.[14] The Compass would be about correcting the supposed naivety of Europe's post-1989 policy.

THE POLITICS: DEALING WITH THE NEED FOR CONSENSUS

Over at DG HOME, officials evidently felt that the German initiative could be helpful when it came to rethinking the EU's CI risk methodology – and not only because the Compass's threat assessment would be based on intelligence not ordinarily available to HOME. Berlin had promised to use the Strategic

Compass to bring clarity to four heretofore ill-defined concepts: "capability development," "international partnerships," "crisis-management" and – most saliently – "resilience."[15] HOME officials evidently shared the German view that the lack of a shared threat perception had made joint decision-making all but impossible around European defense and security and that, as a result, the EU's approach to international "partnerships" and "crisis management" had become reactive, amounting to little more than international burden-shifting and crisis containment. The EU was locked in a reactive posture, constantly responding to outside events. This made priority-setting when it came to capabilities and resilience all but impossible.

The EU was locked in a reactive posture, responding to outside events

More important still, the Compass had an overarching political goal which might prove even more helpful to DG HOME: it would clarify the EU's "strategic culture."[16] HOME officials felt this was essential. The Commission officials working on the Critical Infrastructure Directive had figured out why the EU was experiencing such seemingly random CI attacks: When Russia, China or Turkey unleashed a hybrid attack it was not meant to elicit a particular response from the EU; just the opposite, it was designed to find out what the EU's response would be. By developing a strategic culture for the first time, the EU would become more predictable, and these probing attacks would likely cease. After all, the more EU officials had fetishized the notion that the EU's security environment was unpredictable and uncertain, the

13 Sylvia Börner, "EU security and defence: Minister consults with her counterparts," Federal German Ministry for Defense, January 10th, 2022: <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/eu-defence-minister-consults-in-brest-5324534> (accessed January 22, 2022).

14 On this: Thomas Bagger, "Germany, we need to talk," Internationale Politik Quarterly, June 31st, 2021: <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germany-we-need-talk>; Philip Stevens, "After Merkel Germany has to admit the return of history," FT.com, June 24th, 2021: <https://www.ft.com/content/2f53ebd5-92ea-41bc-b758-d1fb1fb0b08a> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

15 Daniel Fiott, Alexander Mattelaer et al. "The EU's Strategic Compass and its Four Baskets," DGAP Report, November 11, 2020: <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/eus-strategic-compass-and-its-four-baskets> (accessed January 04, 2022).

16 Tania Latici and Elena Lazarou, "Where will the Strategic Compass point?" EPRS brief, October 2021: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698057/EPRS_BRI(2021)698057_EN.pdf> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

more unpredictable the EU itself had become, thus encouraging its neighbors and rivals to unleash more seemingly random provocations.

As the Compass talks proceeded, moreover, a strategic culture did begin to emerge in Council. It cohered around the term "European autonomy"; that is, the EU's ability to defend itself and cut dependencies on others. The Commission had itself begun to apply the term "European autonomy" to its own risk science, using it for instance to analyze the EU's supply chain dependencies.[17] And the European Parliament was pushing for the new CI methodology itself to be framed in these terms to ensure Europe could autonomously provide certain critical services like health care, or free and fair elections.[18] When it came to CI resilience, this promised to generate a relatively simple method for looking at the otherwise complex potential combinations of threats and assets: (1) identify vital EU services like maintaining free movement across the EU; (2) single out the systems of infrastructures required for these autonomous services; and (3) work out how to reduce dependencies that would disrupt these services.

Think tanks now found themselves pushed by the Commission to create CI simulations that would highlight dependencies that foreign governments could potentially exploit to disrupt vital services inside the EU. But some were uneasy, complaining that the EU had agreed on a solution – European autonomy – without properly examining the problem it was meant to solve.[19] They worried that the concept of European autonomy simply assumes that international dependencies equate to vulnerabilities, whereas internal EU dependencies are unquestionably positive. Others expressed the fear that building autonomy in this way would, in fact, leave Europe isolated by cutting off links to its neighbors and

partners. In effect, it might actually create the hostile conditions its proponents had used to justify it in the first place.[20] And they were loath to leave unexamined the German narrative that the EU had been naïve to allow these dependencies to develop in the first place.

THE SCIENCE: ANALYZING THE HISTORICAL RECORD

As think tanks launched a new round of scenarios, they resisted the pressure to conform and instead started asking more difficult questions of national politicians and Commission officials, pushing for a closer examination of European autonomy, the risk posture that had started to appear as a vague concept in EU foreign policy documents in around 2015[21] and was now being encouraged in robust form by the Compass.[22] Their outsider perspective was vital here. The Compass exercise was aimed at consensus-building; it was a process designed to forge a shared new European strategic culture, and it coaxed ministers into coalescing around a common narrative. For the think tanks, however, scenario-setting was about preventing group think. The scenario-setters therefore took aim at the notion of European autonomy in the Council and Commission. They questioned in particular the narrative that the EU had been naïve to embrace cross-border trade and interdependence, and that this embrace had led only to a loss of sovereignty and security.[23]

Analysts regarded the Compass as a typical product of political diplomacy with all the drawbacks which that entailed. It was not just that the Compass drafters had been permitted to take "a Christmas tree approach," each member state "decorating" the document with their "preferred" external threats in order to draw attention to their particular national con-

17 European Commission, Commission Staff Working Document: Strategic dependencies and capacities (May 5, 2021): <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/swd-strategic-dependencies-capacities_en.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2022).

18 European Parliament, "Legislative Train: Our European Way of Life," Version as of January 2022: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-promoting-our-european-way-of-life/file-critical-infrastructure-protection> (accessed on January 22, 2022).

19 See for instance: Jeremy Cook, "Europe's call for semiconductor factories: A solution looking for a problem?" Inzimo, August 3rd, 2021: <https://www.inzimo.com/europes-call-for-semiconductor-factories-a-solution-looking-for-a-problem/> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

20 Benjamin Tallis, "Why Europe's Strategic Compass Points to Trouble," Internationale Politik Quarterly, January 14, 2022: <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/why-europes-strategic-compass-points-trouble> (accessed January 26, 2022).

21 Sven Biscop, "From Global Strategy to Strategic Compass: Where Is the EU Heading?" European Security Brief, 121, December 2019: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep21401.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A2bf5e080101b08dc6273dc5b13005321&ab_segments=&origin> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

22 See: European External Action Service, "A strategic compass for security and defence," Draft, 13638/21, November 9th, 2021, p.8. Marcin Terlikowski, "In search of direction: EU Strategic Compass," PISM Policy Paper 9 (195), May 2021: <https://pism.pl/publications/In_Search_of_Direction_EU_Strategic_Compass> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

23 On this: Richard Youngs, "The EU's Strategic Autonomy trap," Carnegie, March 8th, 2021: <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2021/03/08/eu-s-strategic-autonomy-trap-pub-83955> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

cerns.[24] It was also their attempt to provide an overarching narrative to their effort: Negotiators had evidently tried to formulate the Compass as the antidote to the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), with the new emphasis on autonomy serving as a corrective to past openness. The ESS had famously begun with the upbeat assertion that "Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free," surrounded by a ring of friends.[25] The Compass portrays the mirror image: an EU that has allowed itself to become encircled by a ring of hostile actors and threats.

Many academics were certainly supportive of the Compass's "return of history" narrative.[26] But others felt this attempt to paint the 2003 ESS as geopolitically naive was a misrepresentation aimed at legitimating the agenda in Paris and Berlin. True, the ESS's author, Robert Cooper, had been bullish about the global situation in 2003,[27] but he had not been naïve, and had always warned the EU against taking progress for granted.[28] He advocated a strategic culture based on the idea of the "domestication of geopolitics." The EU expands its markets so that issues of power politics – disputes over territory and resources – can be tackled through domestic-style technical regulation from the European Commission and Parliament, and intense mutual scrutiny by governments. The EU has practiced this style of geopolitics since the Cold War, launching multiple market-building projects, including Schengen and the Eurozone, expanding them to neighboring states, and cementing them using cross-border infrastructure.[29]

1 – MANAGING RISK THROUGH TRANSFORMATION

EXTERNAL RISK

Risks over which government has little unilateral control.

Extremely difficult to manage.

Examples: Global recession, conflict, climate change.

INTERNAL RISK

Risks over which government has control.

Easily managed, eg. by classic means like risk registers.

Examples: Fraud, data security, delivery partners.

STRATEGIC RISK

Risks that affect the organization's raison d'être and long-term goals.

Extremely difficult to manage.

Examples: Hostile actions, cronic lack of investment.

PROJECT-BASED RISK

Risks inherent in large-scale projects.

Easily managed, for example through strict reporting and oversight.

Examples: Time overrun, poor implementation.

24   Nicole Koenig, "The EU's strategic compass for security and defence: Just another paper?" Jacques Delors Institute, Policy Paper, July 10th, 2020: <https://opus4.kobv.de/opus4-hsog/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/3582/file/20200710_Strategic_Compass_Koenig.pdf>: Markus Kaim and Ronja Kempin, "Compass or Wind Chime? An Analysis of the Draft "Strategic Compass" of the EU," SWP Comment 2022/C 03, January 17th, 2022: <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/strategic-compass-of-the-eu-compass-or-wind-chime> (accessed on January 22, 2022).

25   Council of the European Union, European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World (2003), p. 27: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf> (accessed January 8, 2022).

26   Hamza Karcic, "How Coronavirus brought realism back," Euractiv, March 23rd, 2020: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/opinion/how-coronavirus-brought-realism-back/> (accessed January 04, 2022).

27   Robert Cooper, "The meaning of 1989," Progress Magazine, December 20th, 1999: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/themeaningof1989> (accessed on January 04, 2022).

28   Robert Cooper, The Post-Modern State and the World Order (London: Demos, 2000)

29   Veit Bachmann and James Sidaway, "Zivilmacht Europa: a critical geopolitics of the European Union as a global power," Transactions 34 No. 1 (January 2009) pp. 94–109.

This long-standing strategic culture – domesticating geopolitics – may sound unusual as a form of geopolitics, but it fits neatly into the mainstream science of risk management. Risk science typically differentiates between four types of risk: (1) internal, (2) external, (3) project-based, and (4) strategic.[30] External and strategic risks are difficult to handle – the former because they lie outside of the principal's territory or management structures, and the latter because they are of such a magnitude that they might pose an existential threat. Internal and project-based risks, on the other hand, are straight-forward and can be handled by internal procedures. The EU's approach to risk management conforms with best practice by transforming external and strategic risks into internal and project-based ones: By expanding and deepening its market, the EU takes matters out of the realm of global power politics and regulates them as if they were domestic technical concerns (see **Fig. 1**, above).

THE PIVOTAL QUESTION: IS THE EU'S TRADITIONAL MODEL OF GEOPOLITICS THE PROBLEM?

There were many reasons why EU officials and national diplomats participating in the scenario exercises might have been reluctant to acknowledge the EU's long geopolitical past **(Box 3)**, but one possible reason stood out: It tied their hands when thinking about the future. During negotiations for the Compass, member states had, by contrast, written off the past. They indicted the EU for having failed to act geopolitically up until now, and so neatly drew a line under the past, painting today's EU as a passive victim of the "return of history" and paving the way for Europeans to adopt classic power politics. This notion – that the EU had no real risk approach of its own – was equally convenient for CI officials in DG HOME, who were looking to graft risk methodology from the US and elsewhere onto the EU Directive. Both groups were pushing for a thorough reversal of the EU's previous risk posture, driving for something more centralized and less reliant on non-EU actors.

Admittedly, the scenario-setters were posing much the same questions as the officials drafting the Compass and those at DG HOME: Had the EU's past policy left it vulnerable? Had past efforts to expand the EU's markets and break down big political issues into smaller technical parts left it overstretched and lacking in cohesion? Had the EU been practicing territorial enlargement and project management when it needed instead to master grand strategy and foreign affairs?" But whereas the narrative around the Strategic Compass set out a choice between "remaining naïve" or "becoming geopolitical," the scenario-setters forced participants to acknowledge that the EU had a 70-year history of successful geopolitical risk management that might be squandered if they embraced needless change – indeed, that a change of approach could fundamentally alter the EU's very constitution, making it more top-heavy and state-like.

This last point – the assessment that the EU is by its very nature and design geopolitical – proved particularly fertile for good scenario design. It helped think tankers and consultants create scenarios that asked truly existential questions of the EU; after all, if the EU is built for risk management, and is failing, then it has a serious problem. Here, scenario-setters were able to draw on a school of thinking that says that the EU is not so unusual: All states are designed to mutualize and manage risk for their citizens or member bodies.[31] They are "risk communities," and historically all such formations have eventually faced a tipping point, a moment when their risk model starts generating "externalities"; that is, negative side-effects that threaten to overwhelm them. Some analysts predict, for instance, that the Covid-19 pandemic will turn out to be just such an existential moment – and not just for the EU, also for the Chinese "command economy" model of risk management.[32]

Until now, however, the EU had been considered ahead of its time, a post-national "risk community" far more advanced than states like China or the US, which tend to fall back onto chauvinism and protectionism when faced with big global problems like climate change, resource competition, or refugee burden-sharing. The EU, with its tried and tested capacity to expand its geographic and regulatory reach and to deal with international problems in a smart cosmopolitan way, was seen as a model for dealing

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30   UK Government, Management of Risk in Government: A framework for boards and examples of what has worked in practice (January 2017), pp. 5-7, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/management-of-risk-in-government-framework> (accessed January 8, 2022).

31   Ulrich Beck, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity (Munich: SAGE Publications, 1992); Peter Pichler, "What Is the European Union? A Cultural Shared Risk Community!" Journal of Contemporary European Research 16 (2020), pp. 364-378.

32   The command economy model is seen to have helped the Chinese government stockpile medical materials and redirect supply chains to its own needs during the Covid pandemic may have been the cause of a leak from a government-run Chinese laboratory or China's heavy economic exploitation of areas home to large numbers of wild animals, creating a virus that overwhelms the global economy on which it depends.

BOX 3. WHY THE COUNCIL AND COMMISSION WERE AT RISK OF "GROUPTHINK"

When designing the scenarios, think tanks noticed that participants at the exercises were unable or unwilling to picture the EU as a mature geopolitical player. They seemed more aware of the US and China's distinctive approaches to managing geopolitical risk, for instance, as this played out during the Covid pandemic. The emergence in late 2019 of the virus in China's industrial heartland had neatly showcased the power of its "command economy" and Beijing's ability to divert supply chains to its domestic needs, stimulating domestic recovery whilst pushing the negative effects into the external sphere. EU policymakers were also able to discern how the US model, based around powerful US corporations within an integrated global economy, responded. They tended, however, to paint the EU as a hapless victim between the two, and called for it to "learn to be geopolitical," putting up barriers around the internal market and then leveraging access to European consumers in order to spread its rules globally.

One reason for the blind spot among participants regarding the EU's long-standing model of geopolitics was that not all the right people were at the table. The participants from the member states were largely the same as those behind the Strategic Compass, and came already convinced about the need for the EU to "become" geopolitical, and so had an interest in ignoring its long geopolitical history. This was the narrative that because the EU had rejected classic geopolitics in the past, it had rejected all geopolitics. In their haste for it to now embrace power politics, they discounted the idea that the EU did, in fact, already have its own peculiar approach to managing geopolitical risk, and dismissed its embrace of market integration and cross-border infrastructure as naïve rather than calculated. As we have seen, this narrative had been tacitly accepted by the powerful axis between Paris and Berlin. Both seemed to agree that the EU naively embraced global interdependencies because of

a German belief in the now discredited notion of "Wandel durch Handel."

As for the Commission, it had tended to send two groups of experts to the scenario exercises: First, officials who had been helping member states manage "classic" security threats to their CI and second, those in DG HOME and DG HR, the directorate general for human resources and security, who had dealt narrowly with the security of EU staff and assets. These were the logical stakeholders when it came to critical infrastructure risk management, especially after the 2016 attacks suggested that EU assets and systems might be a target. But, arguably, they were also the wrong ones. Although both groups dealt with EU security, they did so only in a very narrow sense, and they had only a limited awareness of the EU's own model of security. What was needed was a third group: officials used to planning, financing and managing EU infrastructure projects. The Commission's Directorate General for Mobility and Transport (DG MOVE), for example, is acutely aware of how large infrastructure projects can be used to alleviate geopolitical tensions – but they were not asked to take part.

Lastly, the scenario-setters struggled to rehabilitate the EU's geopolitical pedigree because of another group which was not at the table but nevertheless influenced the debate, specters at the feast. They found themselves unwillingly associated with the various left- and right-wing groups who see European integration as a neo-imperial geopolitical project. These include so-called Russlandversteher, who relish any suggestion that the EU is a geopolitical player, because this strengthens their argument that Russia has legitimate grounds to feel threatened by it. The EU's eastwards expansion, they say, has seen the EU intervene in other countries' internal affairs while bulking up its own territory and population. While the scenario-setters might agree about the danger of the EU unthinkingly transforming itself into the kind of political player that Russia fears, they would certainly push back at the idea that it has already crossed that threshold.

with big international problems. Faced with a choice between continuity and change, the expert advice had always been: more (or an improved version) of the same.[33] Now the question arose whether the EU had reached the limits of what its technocratic model of risk management could achieve, and should now pull up the drawbridge to protect itself and its members, or whether the real problem was its decision to stick with a now outdated but comfortingly familiar approach.

THE SOLUTION: FINDING WAYS TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Like government and Commission officials, scenario-setters (including the authors of this essay) were asking themselves whether the EU had become a threat to itself. But, unlike national and Commission representatives, they had the luxury of being able to at least question the dominant political narrative of the return of history and the EU's geopolitical naivety – and had a certain responsibility to find creative ways of asking tricky questions of law-makers. This meant confronting national politicians and Commission officials with such questions as:

1. *Does the EU's long-standing approach of using cross-border connectivity to defuse geopolitical tensions now make it vulnerable to external threats? Or in an international environment where interdependencies cut both ways, and where China is also using infrastructure investments to spread its norms abroad, might its mastery of cross-border links and infrastructure, in fact, be an asset?*

2. *Even if the EU's long-standing approach of turning geopolitical tensions into technical matters of cross-border regulation has significant drawbacks, is the alternative of European autonomy any better?*

3. *Is the root of the problem really the EU's existing model of geopolitics? Or is the EU's recent shift towards a more protectionist, "strategic" approach actually the cause of the very problems*

it is meant to counteract? Put simply: is the drive for autonomy causing exactly the problems it is meant to solve?

In what follows, we present a scenario designed in 2021 to help German policy makers think more systematically about these questions. It accepts the argument made by proponents of European autonomy that the cross-border infrastructure investments on which EU security has traditionally rested can indeed be a source of vulnerability, and that they can lock in situations of unfairness, as well as serving as a vector for destabilizing the status quo. As such, it accepts the need for a hawkish posture from the EU. But it invites German policy makers to think twice before throwing out the baby with the bathwater. This scenario questions the assumption, implicit in the German vision of European autonomy that such negative dependencies happen only between the EU and non-EU actors, and presents instead a scenario in which an EU member uses critical infrastructure vulnerabilities to fundamentally alter the nature of the EU.

This scenario might be titled "Hungary uses cross-border infrastructure to Orbanize the EU" but it bears a much wider warning. Orbán is not unique, and similar dynamics could emerge almost anywhere in the EU beyond its western "core." The scenario tries to encourage logical consistency from German policymakers, whose prime goals are threat-driven consensus-building in Council and the creation of a clear new risk methodology. If Germany embraces the narrative that interdependence causes vulnerabilities, and that this requires a tough geopolitical response, then Berlin must logically be prepared to be just as tough with fellow member states as with hostile outside powers. If, instead, Germany makes a concerted effort to understand why a fellow EU member state is behaving badly, it must logically extend this understanding to include actors outside the EU. The scenario is one of a matrix of four iterative exercises, two of which accept the hawkish logic of "EU autonomy" but encourage consistency, and two of which accept the traditional EU embrace of interdependence, but again encourage consistency .

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33   Ulrich Beck, The Cosmopolitan Vision. (2006) Polity; Ulrich Beck and Edgar Grande, "Cosmopolitanism: Europe's Way Out of Crisis." European Journal of Social Theory 10 (2007), pp.67-85.

Bridging the Digital Divide

HOW CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT TRANSFORMED THE EU

Seen from Brussels, 2022 is turning out to be a good year for the EU. It is the midpoint of the EU's legislative cycle and it has managed to re-establish trust at home and prestige abroad. Covid-19 has gone from pandemic to endemic, and Europeans are learning to live with the virus. This, in turn, has prompted an economic boom. The pandemic has made Western Europeans more open to spending, and more willing to take risks, propelling the bloc into a post-pandemic economic growth spurt.[34] And the EU's €750 billion recovery plan has allowed member states not only to take decisive measures to support household incomes, jobs, liquidity and investment, but also to harness a new wave of innovation, particularly in the digital space. By the fourth quarter of 2022, GDP growth has exceeded the Commission's already optimistic projections, even in the member economies hardest hit by the pandemic.

But these encouraging growth figures obscure worrying trends. Recovery across Europe is highly concentrated both geographically and sectorally, with big cities and high-tech industries storming ahead while rural areas and industries lag behind. Of the recovery fund, a relatively small sum of €8 billion is allocated to rural infrastructure. And, although a clear decision has been taken to focus it for maximum impact, that decision appears to be having unintended consequences. Policymakers have seen the need to link up deprived areas, and will "bridge the digital divide." Investing in the infrastructure needed to bring 5G and affordable wi-fi to Europe's most remote regions, they will empower rural communities to reap the benefits of digital innovation. The trouble is that only the most tech savvy agricultural businesses are able to adopt "digital agriculture,"

PHASE 1. THE EU'S RISK VULNERABILITY INCREASES
In this phase, EU investment in critical infrastructure alters the political equation for two populist governments within the EU, Poland and Hungary. The resulting political tensions create infrastructure vulnerabilities for the EU as the two governments launch a Europe-wide influence campaign, exploiting the EU's information and election infrastructure to undermine democratic standards.

and they tend to be the biggest. Small-scale, traditional farmers are left more vulnerable than ever to takeover.

Another unintended consequence of the EU's determination to "bridge the digital divide" is a rise in rural-urban political tensions. Encouraged by the scale of infrastructure investment promised by the EU, large numbers of wealthy urban professionals move out of Europe's cities into the countryside, and this trend only increases when Europe is hit by a series of urban heatwaves in the summer of 2022.[35] This wave of urban-rural migration had begun as a trickle in the early days of the pandemic, as remote working became the norm across Europe. At first, newcomers were largely accepted, bringing a much-needed injection of cash to the countryside. But in 2022, tensions begin to flair as prices rise, public services are strained, and cultures clash. It is a phenomenon felt most acutely in the EU's eastern member states, where infrastructure is most in need of modernization, but also where the sudden effects of EU integration have already fueled a sense of inequality.

The Emergence of an Internal Risk

Even as tensions bubble, Brussels remains wedded to the idea that investing in a common European digital infrastructure will help open up rural areas to more

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34   The Economist, "What history tells you about post-pandemic booms," May 1, 2021: <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2021/04/29/what-history-tells-you-about-post-pandemic-booms> (accessed January 29, 2022).

35   Eunice Lo and Dann Mitchell, "How 'Urban Heat Islands' will Intensify Heatwaves in UK Cities," United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, October 1, 2022: <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/guest-post-how-urban-heat-islands-will-intensify-heatwaves-uk-cities> (accessed January 26, 2022).

progressive ideas. It finds confirmation in countries like Czechia and Slovakia that have been quietly modernizing their economies, embracing connectivity, and investing in climate adaptation. But Poland and Hungary are a different story. Their governing elites – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) in Poland, and Fidesz in Hungary – see this modernization as a threat. Both owe much of their electoral dominance to socially conservative rural communities that are suspicious of the political and social transformation associated with the EU,[36] and they fear that any outflux from the cities could dilute their traditional voter base. Seeing no way to alter the EU's spending decisions, the two parties' political leaders separately determine that their electoral hopes are best served by stoking tensions rather than trying to resolve them.

Fidesz and PiS recognize that the EU's considerable investments in cross-border infrastructure projects represent a new vector through which to influence its inner workings, and that they can use the Europe-wide information infrastructure, and the way it shakes up established relationships, to leave their own stamp on European order. Both parties' voter bases – and the parties themselves – benefit sizably from region-specific EU investment in the form of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies and Structural Funds for disadvantaged areas – but they dislike the political goals that increasingly underpin them. Their aim is to increase the political costs for the EU of introducing rule-of-law conditionality and anti-corruption mechanisms to the CAP[37] and to deter changes to the Structural Funds, which look increasingly likely to be diverted away from their voter basesas the GDP of rural areas rises as a result of the recent influx of wealthy urbanites.[38]

With national parliamentary elections on the horizon in both countries and elections for the European Parliament just two years away in 2024, Fidesz and PiS determine they can best achieve their electoral and financial aims by pooling their resources to influence political outcomes across the EU. After 20 years on the receiving end of the EU's political con-ditionality and institutions, they understand its constitutional setup and levers better than anyone. Hungary in particular masters the EU's Europe-wide election system and, through it, its democratic institutions. In spring 2022, intellectuals affiliated with the PiS and Fidesz meet at a retreat in southern Poland and agree to jointly establish a new pan-European pressure group, the Movement to Protect our Rural Way of Life (MPRWL). Headquartered in Brussels, the MPRWL will lobby European institutions on rural concerns, while promoting narratives useful to Fidesz and PiS across Europe **(Box 4)**.

A Narrow Win for Fidesz, a Loss for PiS

The MPRWL's first outing is the 2022 Hungarian election campaign. The Fidesz PM, Viktor Orbán, faces a renewed electoral challenge from a united opposition led by popular civil society leader, Krisztina Halász. Despite the government's best efforts to stifle independent media, Halász's campaign appears to be cutting through with voters. As a corrective, the MPRWL deploys a sophisticated social media campaign, promoting disinformation and false narratives by means of "black hat" influencer marketing[39] and targeted "native advertising."[40] Outside Hungary, the MPRWL works to rehabilitate Fidesz's reputation, promoting its pro-rural policies as emblematic of Europe's traditional way of life, and downplaying questions relating to the rule of law in eastern member states, an issue about which the French president in particular has expressed deep concern, even stating his readiness to suspend member states that refuse to comply.

Helped in part by his compatriots' dislike of the French president (who has had scandals of his own), and their resentment towards a "core" EU member state like France pulling levers, the result of the election is a victory for Orbán, leaving him secure for a further four years. But Fidesz's majority is greatly reduced. In Poland, PiS is worried. The party has a much slimmer electoral margin to defend than

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36   Shaun Walker, "Standing up for the 'real' Poland: how Duda exploited rural-urban divide to win re-election," The Guardian, July 18, 2022: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/18/andrzej-duda-poland-rural-urban-re-election> (accessed February 9, 2022); Budapest Business Journal, "Opposition outperforms in cities, Fidesz still strong in rural areas," October 14, 2019: <https://bbj.hu/politics/domestic/elections/opposition-outperforms-in-cities-fidesz-still-strong-in-rural-areas> (accessed February 9, 2022).

37   In 2022, the CAP will introduce new rules to ensure recipients comply with social and labour regulations. Critics fear that these will be the first of many new restrictions imposed upon farmers, increasing the administrative burden and eventually even overstepping member states' exclusive competencies. See: Natasha Foote, "Social conditionality set to be sticking point in CAP negotiations," January 29, 2021: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/social-conditionality-set-to-be-sticking-point-in-cap-negotiations/> (accessed February 9, 2022).

38   The EU's Cohesion policy is distributed across regions on the basis of their GDP. Each region is classified as Less Developed (GDP <75% EU average), Transitional (GDP 75-100% EU average), or More Developed (GDP > 100% EU average) and receives funding accordingly. As of 2021, seven of eight Hungarian regions and fourteen of seventeen Polish regions are classified as less developed. This classification is set to be reviewed as part of the Cohesion Policy mid-term review in 2025.

39   Black hat influencer marketing refers to the practice of making an influencer appear to have a strong following in the hopes of attracting new organic followers.

40   Native advertising is paid advertising made to fit the look, feel and function of the channel in which it appears in order to appear organic.

BOX 4. THE MOVEMENT TO PROTECT THE RURAL WAY OF LIFE: A WHO'S WHO

The MPRWL draws funding from the EU, albeit indirectly: Corrupt patronage networks in both Poland and Hungary allow local officials to siphon off CAP subsides and divert them towards the organization.[37]

Notable financers who insist on anonymity include Mátyás Nagy, the CEO of Hungarian oil and gas giant MOL, and Réka Tóth, newly-installed CEO of its Slovak subsidiary, Slovnaft, as well as Karol Adamowicz, head of the Polish state-run television station, TVP.

In an effort to disassociate the organization from its Central European founders and gain credibility in the West, outspoken French agro-entrepreneur Michel Pouchain is enlisted as its figurehead.

MICHEL POUCHAIN
MPRWL Secretary General
Agro-entrepreneur

ANDRÁS NAGY
MPRWL private donor
CEO, MOL Group

RÉKA TÓTH
MPRWL private donor
CEO, Slovnaft

KAROL ADAMOWICZ
MPRWL private donor
CEO, Telewizja Polska (TVP)

its Hungarian counterpart, and just one year left to shore up support. Orbán, in turn, has reason to listen to their concerns. Unwilling to lose a tight (if problematic) ally at the European level, he privately reassures the Polish Deputy Prime Minister and PiS grandee, Jarosław Kaczyński, of Hungary's commitment to assuring the party's victory. In the upcoming election, he promises, Hungary and the MPRWL will go above and beyond the means employed so far. Kaczyński does not ask for clarification of what this might entail; nor does he care.

In the run-up to the 2023 Polish legislative elections, the MPRWL duly focuses debate around what it dubs the new "rural-rural divide," and argues that poor-

er rural areas should be trusted to spend EU money in smart ways. It circulates fabricated news stories about urban incomers taking legal action to impose their "non-traditional lifestyles" on locals, which are then amplified by PiS candidates.[41] The MPRWL also leaks transcripts of private communications between Polish opposition leaders, reportedly intercepted by the Hungarian Civil Intelligence Agency, wherein they appear to ridicule "wieśniacy," or "yokels" in the country's rural east. Yet even this leak cannot save PiS. Upon taking office, Poland's new government – aware of Hungarian involvement in the scandal – is ready to break with the unspoken principle of solidarity between Central European states, and actively seeks to distance itself from Budapest.

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41 One fabricated story that gains particular traction involves a couple in the village of Miętne hiring lawyers from Warsaw to sue a pre-school for referring to their child as a girl because "they haven't yet chosen their gender."

PHASE 2. BRUSSELS STRUGGLES TO MANAGE RISK

As spoilers within the EU seek to use the tensions resulting from the bloc's massive infrastructure investment as a means to influence its internal workings, they join together with an outside actor in an attempt to reorient EU policy.

2 – EU ARTICLE 7 PROCEDURE

Proposal from 1/3 member states, Commission or Parliament

Approval of 2/3 majority in Parliament

General Affairs Council Hearings

Clear risk of a **serious breach** identified

Must be adopted by a **four fifths majority** in Council

Proposal from 1/3 Member States or Commission

Member state invited to submit observations

General Affairs Council Hearings

Approval of 2/3 majority in Parliament

Serious and persistant breach identified

Must be adopted by **unanimity** in Council

Member state in question invited to submit observations

Suspension of rights, including voting rights in Council

Must be adopted by **QMV** in Council

After the dent to Orbán's majority and the victory of the liberal Polish opposition, the EU Commission is emboldened in its belief that connective infrastructure almost automatically drives forward political integration and progressive policy: Hungary is the EU's last remaining populist government and will not have sufficient MPs to push through further domestic constitutional changes. But France is skeptical, pointing out that the opposition in Hungary will never have a sufficient majority to reverse Orbán's changes, and insists on the need for strict political conditionality on spending. Paris delights in gaining Polish support: Warsaw will back renewed efforts to censure Hungary for infractions on the rule of law. A core of eighteen member states (a two thirds majority) now forward a proposal to identify a "clear risk of a serious breach" under article 7 of the Treaty on European Union, and the Council duly calls upon Budapest to take immediate action to improve its management of EU funds and to empower the national prosecution service to investigate fraud.

Budapest looks set to ignore this move as it has before: This is the point at which previous article 7 procedures had fizzled out due to the requirement for unanimity in the Council. But the political math is different this time. With Poland's return to the liberal fold and other Central European states ready to line up behind it, the threat of sanctions[42] at last seems credible. Suddenly on the back foot, Fidesz begins

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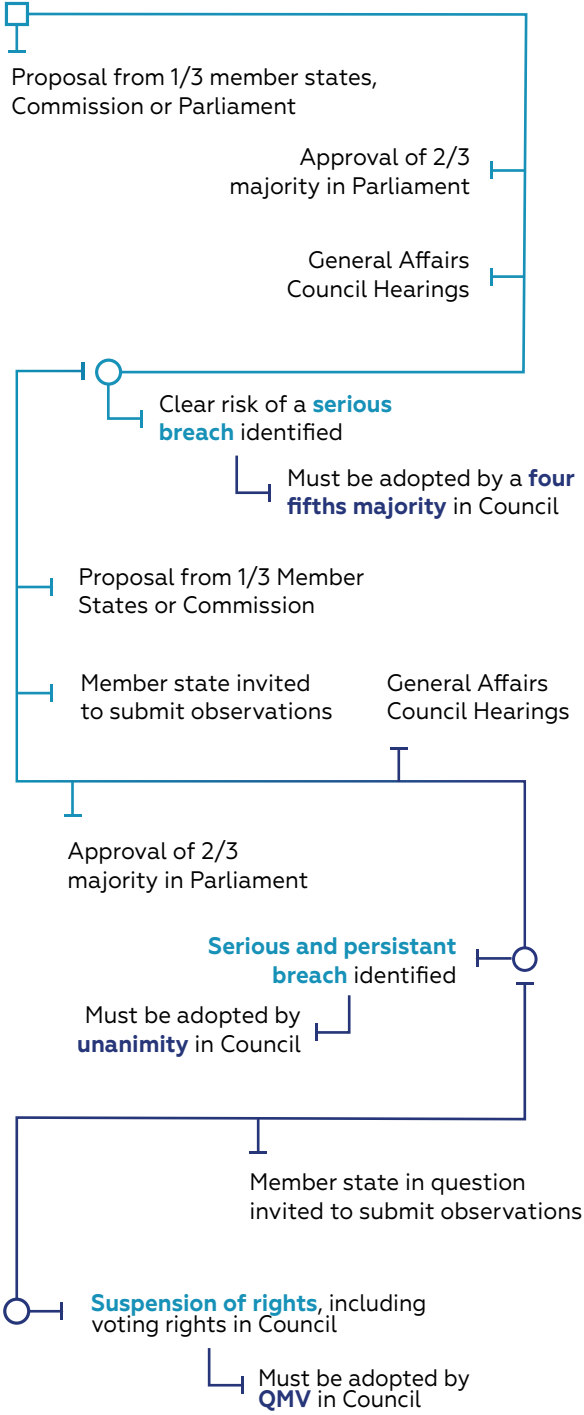
42   Dumbrovsky argues that article 7 could allow the EU to "blacklist individuals and entities that form economic bases of deviating regimes and ban them from participating in EU co-funded projects, submit exports of selected entities to common tariff for third countries, ban candidates of government parties from participating in elections to the European Parliament, refuse individuals nominated by the deviating states to EU posts, require visas for selected individuals to enter other Member States, [and] cease to recognize judicial decisions in civil matters originating in these countries." Tomas Dumbrovsky, "Beyond Voting Rights Suspension: Tailored Sanctions as Democracy Catalyst under Article 7 TEU," Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, March, 2018: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/52925/RSCAS_2018_12.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed February 9, 2022).

to looks elsewhere for support – outside the EU. Under Orbán's initiative, the MPRWL sends a delegation to non-EU member Serbia, where its leader, Pouchain, meets privately with Serbian politicians to enlist their cooperation to influence the internal workings of the EU. Their aims: EU non-interference on internal affairs, cash transfers from richer member states without strings, Serbian EU accession, "widening without deepening," and support for Serbian irredentism.[43]

The Hungarian government reasons that, if the Commission is trying to use the EU's digital infrastructure to spread liberalism to the countryside, then Budapest must respond in kind. With Belgrade's covert support, the MPRWL begins to build up its capacities in the (dis)information sphere. So-called troll farms pop up in urban centers across the Western Balkans. The trolls are easy to hire: The region's rural heartlands have experienced a steep economic decline, prompting large numbers of youths to gravitate towards mid-sized cities like Banja Luka, Bitola, and Subotica. Former farmhands now find work in MPRWL click farms, promoting stories about the loss of traditional values in Europe that run the gamut from credible to conspiratorial.[44] And while the Balkan countryside provides the people power, the troll farms' sophisticated capabilities appear to come from further afield – further East.

The Campaign for Connectivity Fuels Separatism
In the summer of 2023, the story spins off into a series of new twists. One such is the CONIFA European Cup, a tournament for "national" teams unaffiliated with FIFA (**Fig. 3**, below). The tournament is jointly hosted by Corsica and Sardinia as part of an EU-backed drive to build closer ties between the two islands, boost local infrastructure investment, and head off resurgent trends of separatism and fragmentation.[45] It is a niche event, and not one that even its most ardent fans would ever connect to geopolitical machinations in Budapest, Belgrade or Brussels. Early in the tournament, however, things take an odd turn when teams from Felvidék and Székely Land – Hungarian-majority regions of Slovakia and Romania, respectively – face off in

Cagliari. The match is disrupted when hackers hijack the stadium's PA system to broadcast racist slogans. At the time, the incident seems like a tasteless prank, but in retrospect, it seems like a warm-up.

The next day, the two teams travel from Corsica to Sardinia using a new high-speed ferry link funded from an EU Interreg project. During the journey, the ferry's navigation system appears to have been interfered with, causing it to veer off course and run aground on the Sardinian coast. As the ferry takes on water, the Italian coastguard scrambles a quick response. It is not until much later that the footballers realize one of their number is missing. The cause of the incident is unclear, but locals blame the EU; the ferry had been a vanity project, a waste of money which they would have preferred be used to improve connections to the mainland. In Hungary, meanwhile, the incident is linked to the stadium PA hijack, and blamed on anti-Magyar sentiment. It feeds into a sense of grievance both among ethnic Hungarians and in peripheral regions across Europe.

Niche events like those surrounding the CONIFA tournament rank as peculiarities to Brussels ears but resonate in disadvantaged areas across Europe, with local ethnic and economic grievances linked together under the overarching narrative of the downsides of European integration. With each seemingly unrelated episode, the MPRWL coordinates a media narrative that emphasizes Europe's rural-urban, rural-rural and core-periphery divides. In the case of the CONIFA events, it points to the EU's supposed contempt for rural and peripheral regions like Corsica and Sicily, and its imposition of alien political projects, as exemplified by the "hyperferry." Meanwhile, Budapest criticizes Romanian and Slovak authorities' failure to protect ethnically Hungarian teams, pointing to a rise in "anti-Magyarism," and calling on Hungarians outside the country's borders to vote as a bloc in the upcoming European Parliamentary elections.

A Threat Hiding in Plain Sight
With the 2024 European elections fast approaching, threats to electoral security and the EU's autonomous capacity to organize free and fair elections

43   Hungary has already lent financial support to Bosnia's separatist Republika Srpska. See: Edit Intonai, "Orban: Hungary Gives €100 Million Support to Bosnian Serbs," Balkan Insight, December 21, 2021: <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/21/orban-hungary-gives-e100-million-support-to-bosnian-serbs/> (accessed February 9, 2022).

44   Samantha Subramanian, "The Macedonian Teens Who Mastered Fake News," Wired, February 15, 2017: <https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/> (accessed February 9, 2022).
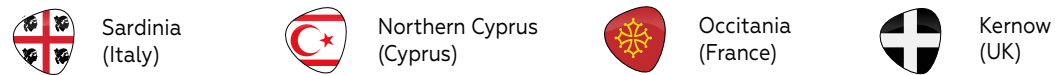
45   Corsica and Sardinia have been described as an "impeded archipelago," divided by French and Italian state-building that has created an "illusory distance between the two islands." The electoral success of Corsican nationalists since 2015 appears to have unlocked a new drive for cooperation, with the two islands agreeing to improve cooperation in culture, transport, economy, and protection of the environment, although implementation has stalled since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. See: Marcel Farinelli, "The impeded archipelago of Corsica and Sardinia," Island Studies Journal, 16(1), 2021, pp. 325-342.

3 – COMPETING "NATIONS" IN CONIFA EURO 2023

GROUP 1

Corsica
(France)

Székely Land
(Romania)

Felvidék
(Slovakia)

South Ossetia
(Georgia)

GROUP 2

Sardinia
(Italy)

Northern Cyprus
(Cyprus)

Occitania
(France)

Kernow
(UK)

GROUP 3

Franconia
(Germany)

Sápmi
(Sweden, Finland)

Skåneland
(Sweden)

Abkhazia
(Georgia)

are high on the agenda in the Council. At a video summit in January, EU leaders reaffirm their strategy for dealing with outside interference from Russia or China, following intelligence that these countries will interfere to keep Fidesz and its sister parties afloat. But they fail to take into account influence operations coming from EU governments themselves, let alone establishing the bounds of legitimate mutual interference between member states. And so, despite its ubiquity across Europe, the MPRWL continues to fly under the radar of most EU governments. It achieves this by using local rather than national media, thus escaping the notice of elites and avoiding association with either Budapest or the disinformation coming out of the Western Balkans, which is attributed to Chinese interference.

For years, Fidesz has been looking for a way to increase its power in the European Parliament. Until now, it has focused on trying to build a small Fidesz-dominated party grouping, but in 2024 Budapest scales up this strategy of obstruction: If the MPRWL can help return a more polarized EP, efforts to censure Hungary under article 7 or to push forward moves to modernize the CAP and Structural Funds will struggle to find support. This gridlock and polarization at the EU level will in turn tempt even more European voters towards the kind of strong-

man political culture that Fidesz revels in. Formerly marginal conservative and agrarian parties achieve strong results in the 2024 election, particularly in the east and south of Europe. The elections also produce positive outcomes for ethnic Hungarian parties outside Hungary, including Slovakia's resurgent SMK-MKP and Romania's UMDR, which are now eligible for EU funding to build up their party apparatus.

A month after the European Parliament elections, Hungary takes over the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU and continues its policy of obstruction: For the next semester, Hungary effectively cripples the EU's ability to act or counteract risk. At a rally in Budapest, Orbán presents his own priorities for his term as Council President without first sounding out the other members of the "Trio Presidency" or other supposed partners. The Council's agenda will, Orbán says, bridge Europe's divides by rebuilding tolerance for traditional values and looking for ways to reduce "intrusive and counter-productive" political conditionality. The same principle of bridging the rural-rural divide, he says, runs through Hungary's aim to reinvigorate the accession process with the EU's closest neighbors in the Western Balkans, but this time with substantially less interference in their internal affairs.

PHASE 3. TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

The risk facing the EU becomes more serious as a spoilers begin to exploit member states' critical infrastructure interdependencies to undermine its values and transform its politics.

Hungary now cements its hold over the Council by targeting specific member states with coercive diplomacy. Its objectives are twofold: first, to see off the threat of censure under article 7, and second to establish an all-purpose blocking minority in the Council. Budapest identifies targets like Romania, Slovakia and Croatia – not because of their political alignment, but because of critical infrastructure dependencies on Hungary and the fact that each has significant, often rural Hungarian minorities.[46] Budapest's first vector of attack is through the MPRWL, which organizes protests to "defend the rural way of life." The protests have a distinctly pro-Hungarian character, and both Romania's UDMR and Slovakia's SMK-MKP lend their support, bussing protesters into Bucharest and Bratislava in their thousands. In Romania, where the UDMR is part of the ruling coalition,[47] supporters demand that the party withdraw from government if Romania votes in favor of censure.

Budapest's second vector of influence is MOL Group, a Hungarian oil and gas giant with significant operations across Central Europe, particularly in Croatia

and Slovakia (**Fig. 4**, below). While MOL is not state-owned, Fidesz has been steadily increasing its control in recent years.[48] Shortly after the 2024 elections, MOL's Slovak subsidiary, Slovnaft, announces that it is in talks to sell a controlling stake of the business to the Kremlin-linked Surgutneftgaz,[49] and the Slovak government is given to understand that MOL's next steps will be informed by Slovakia's stance in the Council. A similar message is given to Croatia, albeit in a more favorable formulation. For some time, Croatia has been negotiating to buy back MOL's 47% stake in formerly state-owned INA, and with the announcement of the potential Slovnaft deal, Croatia is keener than ever. MOL, Orbán suggests, will be willing to finalize a deal very soon – on the condition that Croatia demonstrates "good neighborly relations" in the Council.[50]

Fidesz's offensive does not end with its leveraging of political and resource ties – it uses an implicit threat of disorderly migration too. At the beginning of May, seemingly out of the blue, Serbia warns of mounting numbers of irregular immigrants from as far away as the Middle East and Central America.[51] Just a week later, Hungary reports that the easternmost stretch of its highly-securitized border with Serbia has fallen victim to a cyberattack, leaving border guards unable to prevent a surge of these migrants from entering the country.[52] Despite offers of assistance from the EU borders agency, Frontex, both Belgrade and Budapest say they will handle the situation with their own national capabilities. As migrants cross into the Schengen Area, they are met by Hungarian border guards, who escort them not back to Serbia but to holding centers at the Slovenian and Austrian borders.

The End Game
In January 2025, Hungary hands the EU presidency over to Poland. At the ceremony in Warsaw, Polish Prime Minister Tusk's thoughts go back to an earlier

46   Ethnic Hungarians account for 6.1% of the total population of Romania (2011), and 7.75% of the population of Slovakia (2021). In Croatia, the minority is significantly smaller, at just 0.33%. Similarly-sized Hungarian minorities are also present in Slovenia and Austria. See: National Institute of Statistics of the Republic of Romania; Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic; Croatian Bureau of Statistics.

47   As of 2021, the UDMR contributes 20 of the government's 167 seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The coalition is currently governing with a majority of just 22.

48   Veronica Gulyas, "Mol Deepens Orban Ties with $305 Million Endowment Pledge," Bloomberg, April 1, 2021: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-04-01/mol-deepens-ties-with-orban-via-305-million-endowment-pledge> (accessed February 9, 2022).
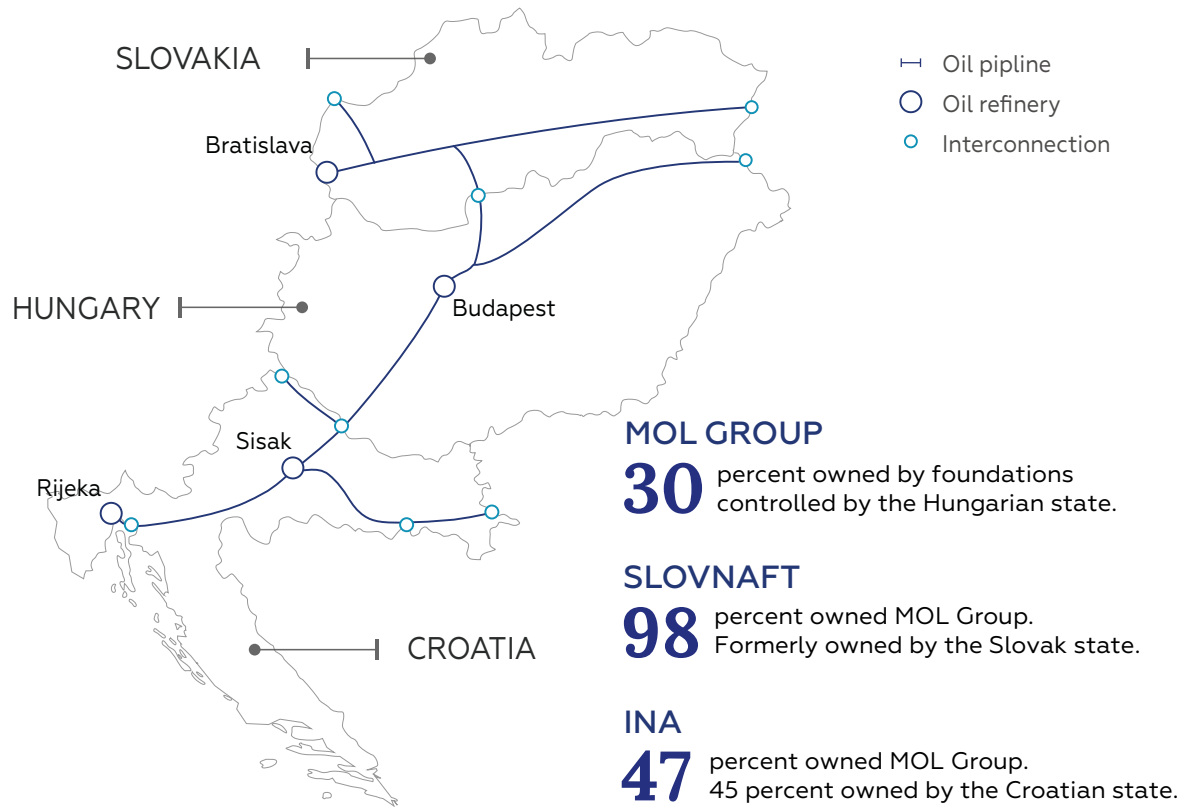
49   In 2009, Surgut Neftegas acquired a 21.2% stake in MOL, making it the company's largest single shareholder. This stake was later re-acquired by the Hungarian government for €1.88 billion. See: Guy Chazan, "Hungary Buys Stake in Oil Company," The Wall Street Journal, May 25, 2011: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303654804576343530886058382> (February 9, 2022).

50   Reuters, "Croatia to start talks with Hungary's MOL on INA buyback," June 10, 2020: <https://www.reuters.com/article/croatia-ina-mol-magyar-olaj-idUSL8N2DN2I1> (accessed February 9, 2022).

51   Serbia previously dropped visa requirements for Iran, before reinstating them under EU pressure. See: Schengen Visa Info News, "EU forces Serbia to return visa regime for Iranian passport holders", October 11, 2018: <https://www.schengenvisainfo.com/news/eu-forces-serbia-to-return-visa-regime-for-iranian-passport-holders/> (accessed February 2, 2022).

52   Frontex operations in Hungary having been suspended in January 2021, no operational support is immediately forthcoming.

4 – ENERGY INTERCONNECTIVITY IN SOUTH-CENTRAL EUROPE

SLOVAKIA

Bratislava

HUNGARY

Budapest

Sisak

Rijeka

CROATIA

⊢ Oil pipline
○ Oil refinery
○ Interconnection

MOL GROUP

30 percent owned by foundations controlled by the Hungarian state.

SLOVNAFT

98 percent owned MOL Group. Formerly owned by the Slovak state.

INA

47 percent owned MOL Group. 45 percent owned by the Croatian state.

era. In 2011, on the occasion of Poland's inaugural presidency, Orbán had introduced him with a congratulatory speech that seemed to mark Central Europe's post-Cold War "return to Europe." But today, Orbán declined to attend. "Everyone in Poland can feel that today is a very important day in our history," Tusk announces, echoing his speech from fourteen years ago, although this time in English.[53] "Here in Poland," he continues, "we know all too well the cost of neglecting European values of democracy and the rule of law. Moving forward, their defense will be at the heart of the Council's agenda." He ends by calling on the Hungarian government to explain Budapest's increasing authoritarianism and its perceived hostility towards its European partners.

Contrary to expectations, Orbán expresses a willingness to make his case before his peers, and this is added to the agenda for an upcoming summit. But on the first day of the summit, Brussels comes to a standstill as the MPRWL stages a rally protesting against what its leader, Michel Pouchain, describes as the Commission's "cynical use of the CAP for political purposes"; that is, rule of law conditionality. At midday, Pouchain kicks off the rally with a rousing and highly misleading speech. But it is not until mid-afternoon that things get out of hand. A small number of protesters begin throwing bricks as the rally passes the EU's Committee of the Regions. As the Police struggle to bring the rioters under control, European leaders find themselves unable to reach the nearby pre-summit dinner – apart, that is, from Orbán, who arrives unusually early.

At the summit, leaders were meant to have a full agenda, hoping to formulate a joint response to an

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53   Tusk's 2011 speech also began with the words "Wszyscy mamy dzisiaj w Polsce poczucie, że to bardzo ważny dzień w naszej historii" [Everyone in Poland can feel that today is a very important day in our history.] See: "Inauguration of the Polish Presidency celebrations - Part 4," (video), January 7, 2011: <https://newsroom.consilium.europa.eu/events/20110701-herman-van-rompuy-visits-poland/94036-4-inauguration-of-the-polish-presidency-celebrations-part-4-20110701> (accessed February 9, 2022).

emerging security crisis in Bosnia sparked by Republika Srpska's announcement of a secession referendum. Most had planned caucus meetings ahead of the summit. But the EU finds both internal reform and external crisis response left in disarray by the simple fact of ordinary people blocking the streets. The heavy concentration of power in Brussels gives way to a vacuum that leaves the EU rudderless. Orbán seems almost organically to emerge into the breach; following Angela Merkel's departure from front-line politics, he became the EU's longest-serving head of state and government, and his subtle ability to move levers in the EU's constitutional system define crisis decision-making in the Council has brought him to the center of EU politics. His politics are quite different to Merkel's, but one thing is clear: Budapest is now in Europe's driving seat, not Berlin.

QUESTIONS FOR GERMAN POLICYMAKERS

The scenario raises a number of important questions about the EU's risk posture that German policymakers would do well to consider:

Conditionality.
The European Commission is sometimes criticized in Berlin for its historical belief that economic integration and liberalization necessarily lead to political integration and liberalization. Such beliefs are now viewed as naïve. At first glance, the scenario does indeed appear to confirm that this belief in the automatic benefits of economic and infrastructure integration is both pervasive in Brussels and naïve. But on closer examination, the question emerges: Is the root of the problem really the Commission's CI policy, or is it perhaps France's insistence on overlaying it with political conditionality and the Commission's failure to stand up to it and assert its principles?

Centralization.
On the face of it, the scenario suggests the Commission's CI strategy has backfired and that its effort to build connectivity and decentralize power to the European periphery has in fact reduced the EU's collective resilience. But looking more closely, it seems the root of the problem may be quite different. The EU is thrown into disarray when critical infrastructure in Brussels is shut down. This begs the question whether European CI is, in fact, overly centralized, and whether this is where the danger to resilience

arises. Has the EU become disconnected from the needs of societies, and too narrowly focused on protecting its own assets, staff and projects?

Enlargement.
As the means by which the EU has historically transformed external threats into more manageable internal risks, territorial enlargement and cross-border connectivity are key elements of its risk posture. Viewed from afar, the scenario seems to suggest that enlargement and connectivity investments are now backfiring, and that the 2004 expansion to Hungary and other eastern member states (and now to the Western Balkans) is incorporating unmanageable geopolitical problems and equally unmanageable political leaders into the EU. Yet the root of the problem may be the opposite: Is the attempt to manage new members by reducing their political agency and their access to EU connectivity funds perhaps the real problem?

Strategic myopia.
At first glance, the scenario suggests that the EU's long-standing efforts to "domesticate geopolitics" and to turn points of historical inter-state tension into ordinary matters of cross-border regulation have run their course: The scenario involves a "re-

Is a hostile geopolitics atwork in the EU – between member states?

turn of history" to Europe and the EU's incapacity to respond in kind, bolstering the narrative in France and Germany about the need for the EU to "become" geopolitical. But on closer examination it may be that the EU has been too successful at taking things out of the realm of the geopolitical. Is the new push for European autonomy from France and Germany, and their narrative that the EU is not geopolitical, built on member states' amnesia about how geopolitical the EU already is?

Autonomy.
Despite clear concerns about the rule of law in member states Poland and Hungary, policy makers in Berlin remain largely blind to the possibility of insider hybrid threats to the EU. For Berlin, geopolitics is something that happens outside the EU, cementing the need for autonomy amongst EU members. The scenario raises the question: Is a hostile geopolitics at work in the EU - between member states? If so, what are the legitimate bounds of mutual interference and leverage within the EU, and when do these become disinformation and coercion? And, even though France and Germany seem to agree on the need for EU autonomy, does the French interpretation allow for the potential exclusion of peripheral member states?

Tipping point.
A nuanced reconsideration of the scenario may suggest that Hungary has understandable and even legitimate reasons to behave as a spoiler. Almost two decades since its accession to the EU, new member states are still treated as "rule takers" rather than "rule makers"; they are not physically integrated into the rest of the EU, and struggle to define connectivity decisions; the Franco-German core dominates the eastern periphery. But does understanding this really help German policy makers? Or have we reached a tipping point where corrective action is needed even if it compounds past mistakes? Could Germany have acted to prevent this scenario unfolding, and if so, when and how?

Reversal.
What are the implications of reaching a tipping point, and has the EU locked itself in to a dangerous course with its seventy-year commitment to economic, political and physical investment? If the European approach to risk has, indeed, reached a tipping point, does the EU's past investment in cross-border infrastructure leave member states with huge liabilities that are simply too costly to maintain? And if this is the case, are we prepared to admit they cannot be protected and to dismantle them? How great is the risk that the EU's methods will be turned against it, leading to the destabilization of Europe, or even a wholesale transformation into a more illiberal system with a strong man Commission – the "Orbanification" of Europe?

Conclusions

EU policymakers want to make the most of strategic foresight and scenario exercises. But they criticize think tanks and consultancies for being self-indulgent in what they produce: Too often scenario design is just an excuse for think-tankers to indulge in creative writing. Nevertheless, creativity is something that policymakers themselves struggle to provide when thinking about difficult futures, due to political and technical constraints. And it is, moreover, a serious discipline. This report has illustrated a case where think tanks took the creative discipline seriously, using narrative scenarios to challenge thinking in the EU's Council and Commission. Since EU policymakers were in this case primarily interested in building consensus about the threats facing the EU, they did not necessarily welcome the scenario exercises. But by making these engaging, think tanks encouraged policymakers to think twice. Policymakers will of course continue to pursue "European autonomy," but they will have considered the matter in the round.

The narrative scenario reproduced in this paper was developed by DGAP. Other EU-focused think tanks have a far more sophisticated offering when it comes to foresight and likewise worked on EU critical infrastructure vulnerabilities. We nonetheless reproduce iit as an illustration of how creative design can engage policymakers in complex and nuanced questions – and also because we know the thinking behind its design. In our assessment, the EU's traditional approach to managing geopolitical risk operates via two levers: expansion (of markets, territory and/or physical connectivity) and decentralization (regulating these connects at the local level and in technical groups). The EU is now asking itself whether this approach is failing, and whether it has reached a tipping point. The scenario exercise here is thus one of a series of four that test different eventualities: two explore the challenges of policy continuity; and the other two, those of policy change. The four scenarios are as follows (see also **Matrix 1**, below):

1 The EU is too decentralized to deal with resurgent power politics, so needs to recentralize;

2 The EU is too centralized to be resilient, so needs to decentralize;

3 The EU is physically overextended, so needs to put up barriers and marginalize peripheral members;

4 The EU is too small to effect global change on issues like climate change which really threaten it, so needs to expand.

MATRIX 1 – FOUR SCENARIOS TO TEST THE EU'S RISK POSTURE

1 THE EU IS TOO DECENTRALIZED

Paris and Berlin push the notion that decentralization exposes the EU to risk because its institutional set-up is too uncoordinated, and its market reliance leaves it locked into technical norms.

The EU embraces a more assertive and protectionist approach led by "core" member states. It thus finds itself able to act more strategically and decisively.

But soon, an uncomfortable truth emerges: If the EU wants to avert risk, it can no longer tolerate unreliable member states.

3 THE EU IS TOO BIG

Paris and Berlin agree that the EU is both politically and geographically over-extended, making it vulnerable to both insider and external threats.

The EU embraces a more protectionist approach led by "core" member states. This allows Brussels to act more strategically and decisively to counteract risk.

This leads to confrontation between "core" member states and those on the periphery, who complain that the EU still treats them as "rule-takers" rather than "rule-makers."

2 THE EU IS TOO CENTRALIZED

Member states shy away from "European autonomy," concluding that it would give too much power to the already top-heavy and overly-centralized EU.

In an attempt to redirect the EU back to its classic risk posture, member states begin to repatriate powers. This allows them to feel more in control of risk.

Before long, the EU finds itself struggling to speak with a single voice. Individual member states find themselves targeted by hostile powers using divide-and-rule tactics.

4 THE EU IS TOO SMALL

Member states conclude that the EU has given up on enlargement too soon. Only by expanding its reach can the EU neutralize geopolitical risks deriving from global, rather than local problems.

The EU fosters market expansion and integration among ever more states by means of infrastructure investment. This allows it to better counter global risks.

Soon, the EU begins to face trouble from unruly member states and unreliable external partners with closely integrated infrastructure.

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