

## Elisabeth Johansson-Nogués The EU's ontological (in)security: stabilising the ENP area.... and the EU-self?

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# The EU's ontological (in)security:

## Stabilising the ENP area.... and the EU-self?

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### **Abstract**

The 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2015 ENP review have made stabilisation of the ENP area one of their main priorities. Our argument here, however, is that the Global Strategy and the ENP review not only seek to mitigate the numerous crises currently affecting the neighbourhood. They also aim to address a set of intra-EU vulnerabilities linked to events in the ENP area that are threatening the EU's own ontological security. We employ narrative analysis to explore how insecurity in the EU and in the ENP area is affecting the EU's relation to the neighbourhood-other and its understanding of the EU-self. Our main findings point to that the Global Strategy and the ENP review provide ample measures to stabilise the neighbourhood. However, whether they have provided a sufficiently compelling narrative to enable the emergence of new emotional structures for the EU and its member states to make sense of themselves and their relation to the neighbourhood-other remains an open question.

**Keywords:** *EU – neighbourhood – crises – ontological security – narratives – self/other*

The 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS) and the 2015 European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) review have made peace and stability in the ENP area a strategic priority.<sup>1</sup> The predominant perception within the EU is that the eastern and southern neighbourhoods seemingly have gone from one crisis to the next since 2011. In the east, the conflict in Ukraine has not only caused armed clashes and territorial truncation, but also strong turbulence in other parts of Eastern Europe. In the southern neighbourhood, the conflict in Syria and the turmoil in post-Qaddafi Libya have added to the EU's trepidations about its neighbours due to the escalating violence, the rise of Islamic State, and the large refugee flows affecting Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The predominant perception in Brussels and many member states is therefore that '[t]oday's neighbourhood is less stable than it was ten years ago' (EC/EEAS, 2015a; European Parliament, 2015). Consequently, one of the principal document coming out of the 2015 ENP review, the *Joint Communication on the Review of the European Neighbourhood Policy*, makes clear that in 'the next three to five years, the most urgent challenge in many parts of the neighbourhood is stabilisation' (EC/EEAS, 2015b).

The push for stability in the neighbourhood is, nevertheless, not only due to the numerous crises affecting the ENP area. Insecurity, directly or indirectly linked to the neighbourhood, has also had concrete spill-over effects on the EU and its member

states. Many EU member states have either become host or transit countries for refugee flows from the ENP area, reportedly the largest displacements of people in Europe since the Second World War (European Commission, 2016). The Nordic and the Baltic member states have become increasingly concerned over Russian military build-up close to their borders and violations of their airspace. Terrorist acts in EU member states committed by individuals or commandos, some with ties to Al Qaeda or the Islamic State, have increased. All these events have generated a strong sense of physical insecurity in EU member states. The events have also had a destabilising effect on internal EU dynamics and routines. The EU and the European integration project is increasingly coming under fire as some EU members are questioning EU solutions to current security problems, forfeiting on concrete facets of the European construction in the name of defending national interests and territory, or challenging the values that underpin EU security agency. The destabilisation of the eastern and southern neighbourhood has, in other words, upset the narrative of the European integration and arguably, on a deeper level, the EU's ontological security. The currently priority placed on stabilising the neighbourhood is, consequently, as much about dealing with the manifold crises related to the neighbourhood as stabilising the EU's 'sense of self'.

This article will analyse the EU's current existential crisis and its aim to re-establish ontological security in and through the neighbourhood by ways of narrative

analysis (Somers, 1994; Patterson and Monroe, 1998). We have reviewed over 60 official documents, speeches, academic literature and newspaper reports in the period spanning 2004 and 2017 to uncover how EU political elite and supporting epistemic community narrate the EU-self and the neighbourhood-other. The article will proceed in the following manner. The first section outlines the conceptual framework. The second section draws up the contours of the ontologically secure EU in the early days of the ENP and contrasts it to the EU's current unsettled sense of self. The final section explores how the EU is attempting to reformulate new narratives for the dual purpose of stabilising the neighbourhood-other as well as stabilising an EU's ontologically insecure self.

### **Ontological (in)security and narratives**

Ontological security refers to the efforts of an actor to safeguard the survival or persistence of a sense of self in contexts of recurrent uncertainty (Laing, 1960/1990; Giddens, 1991). The key premise of the ontological security literature is that all actors instinctively strive for 'biographical continuity', to ensure stability of self's existence as well as confidence in its agency and social interactions (Giddens, 1991). In

International Relations the ontological security scholarship has centred on scrutinising how 'individuals, societies and states make sense of themselves and the world around them' through the creation of stable 'spatial and temporal emotional structures' e.g. habits, routines and predictable intersubjective relations (Kinnvall, 2016: 5). The dominant consensus emerging from such research has been that the primary means by actors locate their spatio-temporal situatedness in the world is through narratives (Giddens, 1991; Ringmar, 2002). Narratives are constellations of related discourses constituted by causal emplotment – i.e. the arranging of select events in a logical, coherent order – through which we 'come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives' sometimes, but not always, of 'our own making' (Somers, 1994: 606). In social theory, the purpose of the narrative is, in other words, to provide a social or political collective with a compelling 'plot' or storyline of the origin and evolution of 'we' as a community, communal aspirational goals, as well as features uniting 'us' as members of the group, (Berenskoetter, 2014; Mälksoo, 2015; Subotić, 2016). The main agents of such emplotment are social and political leaders that consciously mobilise compelling stories about the collective self. Our focus here will be on how the EU as a political community – and specifically the EU's political elite and supporting epistemic community – deploys emplotted narratives as ontological

reference points for drawing up the outer boundaries of the EU's subjectivity and thereby provide the means to interpret and act upon collective experiences in an uncertain world.

An issue which has become a matter of some debate among ontological security scholars is whether the collective storyline of 'us' emerges as a product of mostly reflexive (intra-group) or relational (inter-group) narratives. To some authors collective self-narratives are essentially reflexive, i.e. rooted *within* the social collective and based on selected group experience and aspirations (Steele, 2008; Berenskoetter, 2014; Subotić, 2016). Such narratives generally sort different collective experiences into structures of meaning in view of offering the community a biographical continuity based on visions of 'past-self' and 'future-self' with relatively little reference to outside events or actors (Steele, 2008). Ontological security is thus secured through a stable intra-group self-narrative maintaining a consistent link between 'before' and 'after' self. Other authors take a different perspective and focus on individual and collective self-narratives as primarily relational and a result of reiterative processes of interaction and performative practices with significant others. Mitzen (2006a: 354), for example, argues that state identities are 'constituted and sustained by social relationships' as opposed to 'intrinsic properties of the states themselves'. Ringmar (2002: 118) echoes such views when affirming that 'we need others to accept our descriptions of

ourselves, [and] to recognise us as certain types of actors'. Here we side with the former set of literature in positing that the EU self-narrative is largely reflexive and self-referential. While we understand 'the neighbourhood' as an important element in the EU self-narrative, we will sustain that the reference to neighbourhood-otherness is not of an objective, socially exogenous other or a result of an interactive social relationship (socialisation). Our argument rests on that 'the neighbourhood' is a cognitively constructed other, conveniently, or even strategically, manufactured to assist the EU as a political community to make sense of itself in its pursuit of ontological security. This echoes Chernobrov's (2016; see also Campbell, 1998) insight that narratives not only serve to provide a sense of self, but also a storyline of the 'imagined other'. The latter takes on the role as 'a reservoir for any traits the self needs it to contain in order to affirm a continuous and positive self. Construction of [imagined] others can then be seen to contain an ontological need for a secure self-concept' (ibid. : 6).

As we have seen, an ontologically secure self is dependent on stability of the self/other-narratives, habits of interaction among members as well as a communal 'we'-feeling that allow members to interpret the uncertainty of the world and act together (Giddens, 1991). Ontological insecurity, in contrast, occurs when the link tying the before-self and after-self narrative or routines are upset or broken. This may come



about as a result of a major unsettling event (trauma). Natural or man-made traumatic events may uproot the established sense of self as they tend to 'generate powerful emotions, such as a heightened sense of vulnerability and a dread of the unknown' (Kinnvall, 2016: 10). Traumas or profound ontological crises occur when events exogenous or endogenous to the political community – e.g. intense economic crisis, major political turmoil or rapid sociocultural change – cannot be neatly placed into the sense of self-narrative because they represent a challenge to the political community's routines, practices and/or the emotional bond that ties the group together (Mitzen, 2006a).

Ontological insecurity can also arise as a consequence of an erosion of basic trust system among community members. Basic trust within a social or political collective can be said to exist when individual members believe their partners are committed to the relationship and will act on what is best for the group even when the members' individual self-interests diverge (Simpson, 2007). In such a context, positive intra-group frames of attributions, perception of safety and 'we-feeling' emerge, thereby enabling the routines underpinning collective agency. In contrast, basic trust falters when a member fails to honour the collective values, motives, goals held as central of the self-narrative or unilaterally acts in blatant disregard for the communal good. When the basic trust system in a political community unravels, the collective

emotional 'cocoon' that safeguarded the group against an outside uncertain threat environment ruptures (Giddens, 1991). The disruption of erstwhile stable intersubjective expectations and routines undermines the capacity of the community (leaders) to provide continuity and consistency of the self-narrative holding the community together (Campbell, 1998). Members of the group as a result feel disoriented and ontologically insecure. A lack of basic trust, in other words, disables the collective's 'firewall against chaos' and erodes the shared expectations and practices needed for the constant (re-)production of the ontological secure self-narrative (Mitzen, 2006b: 274).

Traumas and declining trust levels, whether taken independently or together, produce a sentiment of anxiety as the coherence of the community's narrative and practices are perceived as threatened and destabilised. When combined, as we will see in the case of the EU, they come to form a 'perfect storm' with deeply unsettling effects on the community's ontological security as 'established structures of meaning fail to make sense' (Rumelili, 2014: 10). To mitigate the felt anxiety, EU political elite have initiated a search for a new causal employment of 'us' and 'them'.

Collectives, as well as individuals, pursue different strategies to reduce ontological anxiety and to counter the perceived threats against the sense of self. The approach which has received most attention in the ontological security literature is

processes of securitisation. Securitisation entails that actors opt to securitise referent objects, processes and/or actors by invoking enemy images of radical otherness and adopting extraordinary measures to regain ontological security, e.g. resurrecting national myths or embracing rigid self-identities (Rumelili, 2015; Mälksoo, 2015; Kinnvall, 2016).<sup>2</sup> However, key to our argument is that securitisation might simply be one of several possible ways to offset ontological insecurity. Here we take up Browning and Joenniemi's (2017) invitation to open up ontological security analysis to alternative pathways of anxiety mitigation.

We will argue that the EU is trying to overcome its current ontological insecurity by the recourse to a re-articulation of the EU-self and the neighbourhood-other narratives to replace those that have become upended due to the dual challenge of trauma and diminishing trust levels. To explore this re-articulation we draw from Huysmans (1998) discussion of the liminality of self/other in the form of the 'stranger'. A stranger is a figure which is simultaneously resides inside and outside of society and for want of a firm inside-outside categorization represents 'difference' (Huysmans, 1998). While an outside other is frequently conjured up in collective self-narrative to reinforce clear-cut distinctions between 'us' and 'them' (Campbell, 1998), the figure of the stranger constitutes a conundrum for the communal self-narrative as it is simultaneously 'us' and 'not-us'. Political communities dread the stranger as it

challenges established self-narratives with its difference. The figure of the stranger renders palpable the anxiety caused by the uncertainty which lies outside the safe confines of routinised relations. The stranger, for its ambivalent sameness-yet-not, unsettles 'the (modern) ordering activity which relies on reducing ambiguity and uncertainty by categorizing elements' into binaries (e.g. friend/enemy) and thus upsets the activity of ordering so central to the communal sense of self (Huysmans, 1998: 241). The political elite, aware of that the legitimacy of themselves as community leaders rest on their capacity to order social relations and of 'making life intelligible' (ibid. 243), are thus prompted to produce new compelling narratives about the collective self to neutralise the challenge of the stranger (Steele, 2008). As we will come back to below, the EU ontological security is currently seen as partly undermined by a set of different strangers (e.g. EU sceptics, unilateralists, illiberal forces, populists and EU citizens turned terrorists). In its efforts to counteract such challenges against the sense of EU-self, EU's political leaders appear to have opted for re-articulating and thereby redrawing the discursive boundaries between EU-self and neighbourhood-other. As we will have opportunity to come back to below, the new storyline indicates a tactical revaluation of the neighbourhood-other narrative whereby the latter becomes a positive 'partner' in EU anxiety mitigation pursuits. Moreover, the imagined neighbourhood-other is also narrated as a *demandeur* for 'more EU' and technocratic

solutions, as well as currently in need of stabilisation for want of liberal values. This produces a suggestive plot whereby the imagined other is used as a rhetorical device by political leaders to gain control over a new, emergent EU self-narrative, try to discipline the stranger and defuse the challenge constituted by the latter.

### **From 'EU as secure' to 'EU under threat'**

The 2004 Eastern enlargement ushered in a need for the European Union to adapt its self-narrative to its new 'we' in relation to its enlarged borders and new neighbours. The European Security Strategy, the EUGS' predecessor, was one of the first documents to coherently articulate the post-enlargement EU sense of self vis-à-vis the neighbourhood. The Strategy starts off proclaiming that 'Europe has never been so prosperous, so secure nor so free. The violence of the first half of the 20th Century has given way to a period of peace and stability unprecedented in European history' (ESS, 2003). The new master narrative of the Europe-EU 'we' was that the EU perceived as stable and safe within what was to be its new and enlarged borders. This 'EU as secure' trope in part drew force from the narrative of the EU as a political space having overcome historical animosity among its member states through incremental,

functionalist co-operation and de facto solidarity since the early days of European integration. The EU was stable and secure because post-sovereign and technocratic joint solutions to political problems, and their accompanying consensus-based deliberative processes, had over time acted to defuse political tensions and generate basic trust among the political elite of the member states (Mitzen, 2006b). 'Independent', 'unilateral' or 'national' action by the member states was simply no longer considered 'attractive or 'feasible' in the context of European integration (Aggestam, 2004: 242). The 'EU as secure' narrative also drew strength from the idea that the EU stood for a certain set of values. The Eastern enlargement process, in particular, had contributed to the EU self-narrative as a liberal value community (Schimmelfennig, 2001). The European Security Strategy narrated the link between values and security as stemming from how Central and Eastern European 'authoritarian regimes' had changed into 'secure, stable and dynamic democracies' as a consequence of the lure of EU membership. The EU's export of liberal values beyond its borders was thus central to achieving 'the vision of a united and peaceful continent' (ESS, 2003). Moreover, as a liberal value community, the EU not only benefitted from stabilising influence on the prospective EU member states, but also from stable and predictable relations among members inside EU institutions. Liberal values were hence

central in the 'EU as secure' sense of self as they generated emotional cohesiveness and trust among EU member states.

The neighbourhood-other, in contrast, was held in the European Security Strategy and the EU narrative more broadly as 'troubled'. The eastern neighbours were perceived in the mid-2000s as in the throes of several deep-seated political and economic problems as well as affected by frozen conflicts (ESS, 2003). The European Commission's (2004) first Strategy Paper on the ENP depicts the Eastern European countries as wrought by 'a history of autocratic and non-democratic governance and poor records in protecting human rights and freedom of the individual'. In the south, the Mediterranean neighbours were portrayed as home to endemic and 'serious problems of economic stagnation, social unrest and unresolved conflicts' (ESS, 2003). However, although recognised as profound, the problems inherent to the ENP area were not viewed as substantially affecting the EU, its member states and/or the European integration process at large at the time. The EU's reading of the troubles in the ENP area was that the locus of both the sources of insecurity and their effects were confined to neighbouring countries and hence not constituting a challenge to the 'EU as secure' narrative (ESS 2003; European Commission 2004). Indeed, the EU's narration of the neighbourhood-other in these years can be seen as a form of 'gated community syndrome', whereby 'Fortress Europe' was perceived so stable and

internally secure precisely due to its discursive move to highlight the existence of insecurity beyond its borders (Zaiotti, 2007). The ontologically secure EU in the mid-2000s was thus clearly constituted through the boundaries drawn between the narrated 'we' and 'troubled-neighbours-as-other' whereby the presence or absence of violence, post-sovereign functionalist practices and liberal values acted as markers for the emplotted intersubjective dividing line.

The 'EU as secure' narrative has, however, slowly come undone in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and ensuing crises in the ENP area. This is in part a consequence of the perceived growth of scale and scope of insecurity in the neighbourhood (trauma) in recent years and the fact that the effects of such insecurity no longer stops at the moot of Fortress Europe. However, the 'EU as secure' sense of self has also succumbed to a number of endogenous challenges which have dented basic trust among member states and in the European construction.

As far as the exogenous challenges, the post-2011 EU narration of the neighbourhood-other points to intensified turbulence. The European Commission (2014) in one of its annual regional ENP Progress Report referred in particularly to 2013 as 'a year of crises' owing to



political instability and continuing difficult socio-economic conditions across a number of countries in the neighbourhood. Security challenges — both domestic and regional — increased and, in some countries, partly reversed democratic reform achievements of previous years and stunted prospects for economic recovery.

The sources of the perceived insecurity are multiple. The ENP Review Communication articulates the view that ‘[i]n the East, an increasingly assertive Russian foreign policy has resulted in the violation of Ukrainian sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity’ (EC/EEAS, 2015b). The ENP Review also notes the negative knock-on effect of the Crimean crisis on other Eastern European countries’ domestic contexts, their relations with Russia, and the ‘protracted conflicts’ that ‘continue to hamper development in the region’ (EC/EEAS, 2015b). In the southern neighbourhood, the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) sustains that

conflict, rising extremism and terrorism, human rights violations and other challenges to international law, and economic upheaval have resulted in major refugee flows. These have left their marks across North Africa and the Middle East, with the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings and the rise of ISIL/Da'esh (ibid.).

The dimensions of neighbouring countries' troubles have thus escalated in the EU's neighbourhood-other narrative in recent years. The perceived growing uncertainty beyond its borders has produced an acute sense of vulnerability in the EU and its member states. The trauma caused by the scale and scope of destabilisation of the ENP countries has caused Commissioner for the European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations Johannes Hahn (2015) to quip that the EU today increasingly appears to be surrounded by a 'ring of fire'.

Yet another trauma contributing to the EU's current existential anxiety is the vanishing notion that neighbourhood instability can be neatly kept at bay by the external borders of the European Union. The European Council (2014) frets in particular over 'the creation of an Islamic Caliphate in Iraq and Syria and the Islamist-extremist export of terrorism on which it is based' which to the EU political elite represents the most 'direct threat to the security of the European countries'. On its hand the ENP Review Communication finds that in regards to refugees, migration and terrorism 'the EU's own interdependence with its neighbours has been placed in sharp focus' in recent years (EC/EEAS, 2015b). The 2015 European Agenda on Security warns that interdependence means that security threats are no longer 'confined by the borders of the EU' (European Commission, 2015). Commissioner Hahn (2015) has expressed concern that these new challenges entail that the EU currently is 'importing

instability'. The erstwhile 'EU as secure' narrative, in which Fortress Europe was depicted as safe as uncertainty and threats were contained by its borders, has in other words become destabilised. This has generated anxiety and dread as the limes separating the new EU (in)security space from the ENP (in)security space have progressively been blurred.

The 'EU as secure' plotment has also in part lost credibility due to a set of endogenous challenges as some EU member governments – and some citizens – are increasingly unwilling or unable to uphold the ontological reference points related to post-sovereign functionalist practices and liberal values which have so far underpinned the EU 'we' as a political community. The Syrian refugee crisis, for example, has unleashed a set of intra-EU contentions which testify to a loss of faith among member states in each other as well as joint, post-sovereign, technocratic solutions to common security problems. A first example is the divided reaction to the European Commission's 2015 proposal to managing the refugee flow through an asylum relocation proposal. The proposal was based on the functionalist principle that all EU member states would be under an obligation to take in a pre-determined and weighted quota of refugees. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia disapproved of the Commission's plans as they alleged technical and financial problems and not wanting to share responsibility for refugees essentially heading for

Germany or Sweden. Their opposition was later overruled as the relocation proposal was passed by the EU Council in September 2015 by an unprecedented recourse to a qualified majority vote, rather than the Council's habitual reliance on consensus. This procedural change deepened the central European member states' grievances as they perceive the vote being instrumentalised as a means of political coercion against them (Taylor, 2015). They have since refused to honour the agreement, alleging Commission intrusion into an area of exclusive member state competency as well as expressing unease over how the Council vote side-stepped the standard consensus-based, deliberative processes that had been characteristic of the EU in the past. A second example of loss of trust among member states and in post-sovereign, technocratic solutions is the imbroglio over the Schengen system. As the refugee crisis deepened in 2015 a number of member states began to unilaterally reinstate national border controls, with Germany and France leading the way. These member states argued that national border controls were needed as they no longer have confidence that EU external borders are efficiently managed. To try to remedy the situation the European Commission began to elaborate a proposal in late 2015 for creating of the European Border and Coast guard agency to replace the existing FRONTEX. The early versions of the Commission's initiative nevertheless quickly became controversial among member states. Sweden, Poland and Slovakia, for their different reasons, voiced concerns over

being presented with what they perceived as yet another technocratic proposal that overstepped the Commission's competencies (de la Baume, 2015). The apprehension about the Commission's role in the context of the asylum and border initiatives prompted the Visegrad group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) to issue a joint statement expressing their conviction that '[t]he institutions of the European Union need to stick to their missions and mandates' (Czech Republic Government, 2016). Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán (2017) has been especially vocal in his critique of post-sovereign and technocratic approaches, arguing that the EU 'has avoided dealing realistically with [migration and border] threats; instead, it crafts policies that concentrate on formulating "European solutions" that solve nothing'. To his mind it is time to abandon technocratic solutions crafted by EU institutions, stating '[f]or decades, the mainstream answer to European problems was "more Europe." We have to recognize, however, that there are areas where we need more Europe and areas where we need less Europe'. The erstwhile stable understanding among EU member states of the EU as the optimal site for technocratic management and consensus-based deliberative processes has thus been upset by the refugee crisis. Moreover, the Schengen member states' current national-first, unilateral-style action, as opposed to joint EU post-sovereign solutions, is also contributing to the destabilisation of the 'EU as secure' narrative. It renders the stranger within the

political community, and the latter's lack of commitment to erstwhile self-narratives and habits of interaction, visible.

A different endogenous challenge linked to the neighbourhood undermining the EU's ontological security is the fact that the narrative of EU's liberal values as a bulwark for peace and security has become unsettled. Most notably some EU member states have suffered attacks of terrorism committed by individuals or groups propelled by radical ideologies. European leaders have tended to interpret such acts as an affront to the values the EU holds central, such as solidarity, freedom, including freedom of expression, pluralism, democracy, tolerance and human dignity (European Council, 2015). However, these same values are currently facing a crisis of legitimacy on two levels. There is a crisis of legitimacy at the domestic level in some of the affected member states as many terrorist acts have been committed by EU citizens turned against their countries and co-citizens, thereby casting a shadow over the state of implementation of such values in contemporary EU societies in the face of social marginalisation and political radicalisation (Lyons-Padilla, et al., 2015). The HRVP Federica Mogherini (2015) recognises this when she contends that

[f]ighting Dae'sh and other extremist groups is [...] also about what we do right here at home.[...] It is about helping young people find good jobs, and finding a

place in our societies for those who feel alienated and left out. It's about sending a message of unity, of belonging, of inclusion.

Moreover, a different crisis of legitimacy stemming from the rise of terrorism, especially Al Qaeda and Islamic State-linked terrorism, is the emboldened rhetoric of the growing number of xenophobic and populist parties all across the EU seeing liberal values as an obstacle to security. Poland's interior minister Mariusz Blaszczak, member of the populist Law and Justice party, has indicated that the surge of terrorist deeds in the EU in recent years is an unfortunate outcome of EU's 'policy of multi-culturalism and political correctness' (*FT*, 2016). Viktor Orbán – who has avowed to make Hungary an 'illiberal democracy' – has derided the EU as 'weak' and 'defenceless' on terrorism due to its liberal values, arguing that 'the European spirit and its people believe in superficial and secondary things: in human rights, progress, openness, new kinds of family and tolerance' when security should be prioritised (Government of Hungary, 2015). These political leaders, similarly to most xenophobic and populist parties in Europe whether in government or in opposition, therefore defend the necessity to establish new value models within their national contexts, as well as in the EU, to ensure security for citizens. European Council president Donald Tusk has expressed concern over such challenges to the EU's liberal democratic values since to his mind the '[l]oyalty to these values remains not only a precondition for the coherence of our

community [...] Anyone who weakens these values will, in effect, lead to the weakening our security sooner or later' (European Council, 2016). The dual crisis of legitimacy on values is thus destabilising the 'EU as secure' self-narrative. The challenge of 'difference' produced by the stranger – whether EU-citizens turned terrorists or illiberal populists – weakens the moral certitude of the EU as the principal security referent for the community, and contributes to a dilution of the communal 'we'-feeling among EU member states.

In sum, in the context of multiple and interlinked crises and growing instability in the EU's neighbourhood, the EU's ontological security is being conditioned by a series of traumas and by declining levels of trust among EU member states and faith in EU institutions. The erstwhile stable structures of meaning and depictions of the world inherent in the EU self-narrative appear no longer to fulfil their purpose and have prompted many observers to fear for the future of the EU and the European integration. The EU Global Strategy voices this concern in stating that '[w]e live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned' (EUGS, 2016: 13).



## **Stabilising the 'neighbourhood'... and the EU self?**

The EU self-narrative of 'EU as secure' has, as we have seen, reached a critical juncture as longstanding ontological reference points have become void of their past meaning. Given the current existential anxiety within the EU, it is unsurprising that the political, economic and security stabilisation of the neighbourhood 'the main political priority for the European Union (EU) in the next years' (Council of Ministers, 2015). Naturally the EUGS and the ENP review, and their accompanying EU Communications, predominantly focus on concrete instruments to stabilise ENP partner countries. However, an attentive reading of the documents also reveal proposals for a new EU self-narrative to overcome traumas and boost the current low levels of basic trust among member states and for European Union institutions and hint at a burgeoning redefinition of the neighbourhood-other.

First, in terms of stabilising the neighbourhood the EU's accent has most notably been placed on directly addressing the instability by making ENP countries more 'resilient' against threats they currently experience (EC/EEAS, 2015b; EUGS, 2016). This has in part meant a narrative whereby traditional EU external action and common foreign and security policy instruments are marshalled to provide

neighbouring countries with the ability 'to withstand, adapt and quickly recover from stresses and shocks' in areas of '[p]overty, inequality, a perceived sense of injustice, corruption, weak economic and social development and lack of opportunity, particularly for young people' (EC/EEAS, 2017a; EC/EEAS, 2015b). Furthermore, the stabilising discourse draws upon earlier tropes in the EU foreign and security policy narratives by reprioritising staples of earlier editions of the ENP as more urgent after the ENP review such as, for example, resolving the various protracted conflicts in the neighbourhood, enabling security sector reform, mitigate organised crime as well as cyber threats. The ENP review's primary goal is thus to provide a causal emplotment of the measures that have been or will be taken in the short to medium term in order to reduce the intra-EU anxiety prompted by the trauma caused by the exogenous change.

However, there is also a re-articulation of the self/other narrative in the relevant documents in recognition of that 'the EU and its member states are subject to many of the [same] structural pressures that test the resilience and expose vulnerabilities of our partner countries' (EC/EEAS, 2017a). The powerful image of Fortress Europe immune to the insecurity beyond its borders has thus shifted into an emergent narrative of '[w]e [the EU] have learnt the lesson: my neighbour's and my partner's weaknesses are my own weaknesses' (EUSG, 2016). The depiction of an 'EU as insecure', vulnerable, in need of 'protection', together with the notion that there is

a need to search for 'resilience within our borders' (EC/EEAS, 2017a) narratively places the EU in a similar predicament as neighbouring countries. The intersubjective separation of EU 'we' and the imagined neighbourhood-other, that used to run along the outer border of Fortress Europe, has after the 2015 ENP review been replaced with a narrative based on a shared EU-ENP (in)security space. The merger of the EU-ENP (in)security space has also had further implications for the self/other narrative. The ENP Review Communication warns '[t]he EU cannot alone solve the many challenges of the region, and there are limits to its leverage'. The Communication therefore calls for '[p]roactive engagement with partners in the neighbourhood' in order 'to address root causes of cross-border threats and to contribute to securing common borders' (EC/EEAS, 2015b). The Council of Ministers (2015) has on their hand advocated for 'the need to empower and enable partners' prevent and manage crises alongside the EU on a range of security-related issues. The EU in this way arguably tries to shift the neighbourhood-other from being mere passive locations of troubles to become authorised agents and valued collaborators in EU-ENP stability production. Such narratives attribute the neighbourhood-other a greater protagonist role in security provision and co-responsibility for managing the EU-ENP security order. This is especially visible in the areas of migration and terrorism. The EU priority of tackling irregular migration, human trafficking and smuggling migration is understood as only

manageable 'in partnership with the countries of origin and transit of migrants' (EC/EEAS, 2017b). On terrorism the EUGS declares that 'terrorism and violence plague North Africa and the Middle East, as well as Europe itself' and the EU will therefore develop 'anti-terrorism cooperation with North Africa, the Middle East, the Western Balkans and Turkey' (EUGS, 2016: 7ff). We argue here that this new EU self-narrative of the EU as vulnerable and in need of its neighbours' help is a first step in the process of mitigating ontological anxiety produced by trauma. The re-articulation of self/other narratives, whereby erstwhile hierarchical modes of discourse (superior/inferior) are flattened out and replaced with more egalitarian narratives, most obviously reduces the self-anxiety stemming from the antagonistic difference when subject positions were further apart. The erstwhile threatening other becomes less menacing as it is reconceptualised as an 'almost-self', with shared concerns and as holding perceived potential (however unwarranted) for security provision.<sup>3</sup>

The revaluation of the other may also help to neutralise the perceived threat of the stranger within the political community. As we have seen, post-sovereign, technocratic solutions to security problems have increasingly come under fire within the EU and calls for 'less Europe' has become common place. However, such narratives have been countered in the ENP review's and the EUGS' emplotment of the neighbouring countries as demanding 'more Europe' and as worthy of more

implications from the EU in providing stability for the EU-ENP area (EC/EEAS, 2015a). The EUGS (2016) affirms that the '[u]nder the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), many people wish to build closer relations with the Union: our enduring power of attraction can spur transformation in these countries'. As a consequence of such demands the compelling EU narrative becomes that the EU must take responsibility and engage with its deserving neighbourhood-other. 'Less Europe' is not an option for those in the EU political elite who believe that the EU cannot simply 'pull up a drawbridge to ward off external threats' (ibid.). Rather, it is contended that, '[t]o promote the security and prosperity of our citizens and to safeguard our democracies, we will manage interdependence, with all the opportunities, challenges and fears it brings about, by engaging the wider world' (ibid.). The ENP Review Communication also offers a way to overcome the intra-EU aversion to technocratic approaches by arguing in favour of greater direct implication by the Council and the member states in identifying ENP priorities and in supporting their implementation (EC/EEAS, 2015b). The EU thus proposes replacing the erstwhile technocratic sense of self with a narrative where the EU becomes a more member state-led enterprise in its dealings with the neighbourhood.

The altered neighbourhood-other narrative can also serve to discipline the stranger within the political community. The Report on the Implementation on the ENP

Review (EC/EEAS, 2017b) paints the picture that the 'EU's own stability is founded on good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights, and promotion of reforms in these areas is key to the ENP's objective of stabilisation'. There is thus an implicit self-narrative that internal EU stability is intimately linked with EU's liberal values, which in turn could be read as an effort to discipline individual member states into upholding these values in their own domestic jurisdictions. However, such disciplinary practices to stabilise the EU's self-narrative have not yielded much result. It is indeed in the terrain of stability and values the EUGS and ENP review's attempt to provide new ontological reference points is more tentative. There are indications that the contentions among member states related to the EU's liberal values conditioned the drafting of the Review Communications. The Staff Paper, accompanying the ENP Review Communication, revealed that '[s]everal Member States, think tanks, and business community stakeholders indicated that a better balance needs to be found between promoting values and interests (including stability and security in the neighbourhood)' (EC/HRVP, 2015). Such affirmations appear to indicate that there was no shared and unconditional faith among all stakeholders that EU's liberal value-promotion in the ENP area has in the past been conducive to stability. Commissioner Hahn (2015) have thus advocated for a more pragmatic, less forceful, approach to values in the ENP area and a stronger expression of a yet to be defined set of EU

'objectives and interests'. The EUGS calls this 'principled pragmatism', signalling a discursive shift away from liberal values toward a value-cum-'EU interest', to guide agency on EU-ENP stabilisation. This is a potential new, if nebulous, ontological reference point around which to construct a narrative to counteract the national Eurosceptic, populist and isolationist political forces that is currently questioning the EU's liberal values, while simultaneously catering to defenders of such values. The value-cum-EU interest trope can therefore be said to aim to project new temporal and spatial emotional structures around which the EU and its member states can re-situate their future EU 'we' in a changing EU-ENP security environment. However, the weakness of the principled pragmatism narrative is that it so ambiguously sits on the fence between liberal and illiberal preferences. As a consequence, it has so far failed to provide the basis for establishing new habits of interaction and fomenting the 'we-feeling' needed for an ontologically secure EU foreign and security policy agency. What is more, it is clear that such ambiguity has inevitably dented the legitimacy for and moral certitude of the narrative of the EU as a liberal value community able to project its values both within and beyond its borders.

In sum, the (in)security in the EU-ENP area has unsettled longstanding existing intersubjective boundaries between the EU-self and the neighbourhood-other and caused ontological insecurity within the EU and its member states. To attempt to

remedy (at least part of) the existential anxiety the EU's political elite has tried to endow the EU-self and the imagined neighbourhood-other with new storylines to overcome anxiety and to neutralise the challenge of the stranger. The EU's political leadership clearly hope that such new narratives will help reduce the felt impact of current EU-ENP (in)security traumas and reverse declining trust levels as '[f]orging unity as Europeans – across institutions, states and peoples – has never been so vital nor so urgent. Never has our unity been so challenged' (EUSG, 2016: 16).

## **Conclusions**

The EU is currently suffering from a bout of ontological insecurity. The changing security environment in the ENP area and a faltering commitment to erstwhile narratives of EU integration process have caused members of the EU political community to question what the EU 'we' is today. EU officials, member states and citizens feel vulnerable due to diverse traumas related to the proliferation of crises in ENP countries and the EU's inability to hold insecurity at bay by its borders. EU officials, member states and citizens also perceive vulnerability because of key aspects of the European integration process, such as post-sovereign technocratic, joint and



consensus-based solutions to problems as well as liberal values, are increasingly being challenged. The healthy basic trust system that has underpinned the EU's foreign and security policy in the last decade has thus begun to erode, a trend that arguably have been further accelerated by the 2016 Brexit vote. The EUGS and the 2015 ENP review, and their accompanying documents, can for this reason be read as attempts to show actorhood on problems affecting the neighbourhood-other as well as re-scripting an EU self-narrative and of the neighbourhood-other in hopes that it will permit the EU and its member states to re-establish ontological security. Whether the EUGS and the ENP review together provide sufficiently compelling narratives to enable the emergence of new stable emotional structures for the EU and its member states to make sense of EU-self in relation to the neighbourhood-other, and thus mitigate ontological insecurity, remains an open question.

Our study also makes a contribution to the debates in the International Relations literature of how emotions matter in specific social or political circumstances. Our use of the concept of ontological (in)security here has helped us highlight that emotions are fundamental to how threats and vulnerability are interpreted by a political community. Ontologically secure actors are able to face and cope with uncertainty in a different way than the ontologically insecure. If a political community is confident in its own temporal and spatial situatedness, its reaction to

insecurity will be muted. Under certain circumstances the community might even act to disregard and/or perpetuate insecurity, if it might perceive uncertainty as conducive to its own overall symbolic and institutional order and/or international narrative (e.g. 'EU as secure'). In contrast, the ontologically and emotionally insecure actor will react to insecurity wishing to transform it. This might involve a radicalisation of self-other difference (securitization) or, as in our EU-ENP case, the articulation of alternative narratives designed to establish new self-other routines and to neutralise the stranger in order to reconstitute the political community's joint emotional governance.

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<sup>1</sup> The ENP is the EU's umbrella policy for all major political and socioeconomic initiatives directed towards the eastern and southern neighbourhood. The 'ENP area' encompasses all the countries included in the European Neighbourhood Policy: Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Moldova, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia and Ukraine.

<sup>2</sup> We hold that securitisation processes is not applicable in our case study as the EU political elite have opted not to draw a clear discursive line between self and a radical other. Securitisation, in essence, relies on a 'discourse of exclusion' and 'turning the stranger into an enemy'-other (Kinnvall, 2004: 754). In our discussion of the 'stranger' we note that by definition it is neither fully self nor other, hence it would be difficult to make the stranger subject to securitization prior to being 'expulsed' from the self and re-narrated as a radical other.

<sup>3</sup> We believe that the re-articulation of the neighbourhood-other narrative is simply a discursive move, which does not correspond to any empirical verifiable improvements in neighbouring partners' security provision capability.