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# FROM DEBORDERING TO GEOPOLITICAL AGENCY: THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL'S EVOLVING BORDER AND TERRITORIAL DISCOURSE[2]

> "Together, we should push forward these [geopolitical] changes that have not happened for 100 years."
>
> Xi Jinping to Vladimir Putin, 22.03.2023, Moscow

> "If 50 months ago, when I took office, someone had asked me: 'What is [in] your new geopolitical agenda?' for sure I wouldn't have said: I am going to have a pandemic. I am going to have a war in Ukraine. I am going to have a war in Gaza'. Nothing of that was foreseen. So, what it is going to be – the new [geopolitical agenda]? I don't know."
>
> Joseph Borrell, 18.02.2024

## INTRODUCTION

The European Union has undergone substantial transformations during a period characterized by multiple, overlapping crises – commonly referred to as a *polycrisis* – including the COVID-19 pandemic, sustained migratory pressures, and, most notably, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These events have significantly influenced the EU's conceptualizations of borders and territoriality and, more fundamentally, have reshaped its geopolitical vision and evolving self-perception (Hoeffler, Hofmann, Mérand, 2024). In response, the Union has intensified its proactive engagement with the external environment, formulating and implementing new strategies within its enlargement, neighborhood, and global partnership policies.

Concurrently – and as part of a broader, long-term trajectory – the EU's internal evolution has led to notable shifts in its institutional model. In the area of external action, this means both adjustments in the official distribution of competences and the increasing relevance of informal mechanisms in the practical operation of EU institutions (Bocquillon, 2024).

By integrating these two dimensions of transformation, this paper aims to map the European Union's evolving approaches to its external borders, its notions of European

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territoriality, and its emerging geopolitical agency. This is accomplished through an analysis of the European Council's role in designing the EU's external actions. The main research question is: How has the EC has been responding to challenges in the external environment in terms of thematic and spatial focus? Methodologically, the paper employs a critical content analysis of European Council Conclusions from 2022 to 2025, treating these as strategic documents that frame the Union's external policy agenda. The conceptual framework is grounded in the author's previous research on the EU's external policies and the European Council's role in shaping them (Jańczak, 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2020).

## EUROPEAN COUNCIL AND ITS ROLE IN FRAMING THE EXTERNAL POLICY OF THE EU

The European Council plays a crucial and strategic role in shaping the European Union's external actions, particularly in matters relating to borders and territoriality (Przybylska-Maszner, 2018). Since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, that redesigned the institutional balance within the EU, the European Council has consolidated its position as the Union's (highest) political authority, entrusted with determining its strategic direction (Rewizorski, 2013: 40). Although its formal competences are primarily limited to providing general political guidance, its operational influence is significantly shaped by informal mechanisms. These mechanisms enable member states to address sensitive issues – such as border management and territorial integrity – with enhanced flexibility and responsiveness (Rittelmeyer, 2014: 25).

During times of crisis – including the waves of migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – the Council has been frequently perceived as a personalized and constructive forum capable of taking swift and decisive action to safeguard the EU's territorial and political coherence (Kabat-Rudnicka, 2016: 74). Its capacity to act decisively is grounded in the interplay of national, institutional, and individual sources of power within the Council (Tallberg, 2008: 703). This dynamic enables a convergence of national leadership, institutional priorities, and individual leadership styles.

The European Council's agenda has grown markedly in both scope and complexity, particularly with regard to external affairs (Alexandrova, Carammia, Timmermans, 2014: 67). Agenda-setting has evolved beyond routine scheduling to involve the selective identification of geopolitical hotspots and emerging threats. This allows the Council to strategically frame EU external actions in response to territorial disputes, border crises, and regional instability (Carammia, Princen, Timmermans, 2016: 809). Such a role is especially vital in light of the relatively underdeveloped and fragmented nature of the EU's high-politics external policies, which frequently lack the cohesion and decisiveness characteristic of traditional state actors (Milczarek, Zajączkowski, 2015).

Operating in an increasingly unstable and volatile international environment, the European Council compensates for institutional limitations by assuming the role of the EU's *de facto* geopolitical strategist. Through its conclusions, statements, and policy orientations, it reaffirms the Union's external borders, addresses territorial threats, and

articulates expectations toward global actors. The Council's influence on the EU's external actions – particularly in the domains of borders and territoriality – represents a pragmatic adaptation to global instability, thereby positioning it as a central actor in the Union's geopolitical conduct.

## BORDERS AND TERRITORIALITY IN THE PROCESS OF CHANGING GLOBAL ORDER

Despite the widespread discourse on globalization and regional integration, borders – far from becoming obsolete – continue to play a critical role in shaping contemporary European integration processes. The provocative assertion that "Borders (still) do matter!!!" encapsulates a renewed awareness in both academic and policy spheres of the political, cultural, and strategic importance of boundaries. As the European Union navigates complex challenges including migration, pandemics, and geopolitical tensions, the analysis of borders reveals much about the internal nature of political-territorial units and their relations with the external environment (Browning, Joanniemi, 2008).

Although the European project is often lauded for advancing a "borderless" continent, it paradoxically hinges upon the continual negotiation and redefinition of borders. This tension is most apparent in the EU's practices of bordering, debordering, and rebordering (Popescu, 2012), which reflect ongoing and contested processes of inclusion and exclusion. While the Schengen Agreement symbolized the high point of integration via the abolition of internal border controls, subsequent crises – including the 2015 migration influx, the COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine – have re-legitimized state sovereignty over border control as an instrument of security and political authority.

Kristof's (1959) classic distinction between *frontiers* (as zones of permeability and negotiation) and *boundaries* (as fixed territorial demarcations) remains pertinent to contemporary EU border and spatial policy. Modern political-territorial entities embody a dual character: they are *boundary-seeking* in their efforts to consolidate authority and identity, yet *frontier-tolerant* in their selective facilitation of transnational flows of capital, labor, and information (Kristof, 1959: 280). This duality transcends administrative considerations, illuminating how borders are ideologically constructed around social norms, collective values, and identity narratives rather than merely geographic lines.

Indeed, borders are increasingly conceptualized as social and political constructs rather than solely physical or legal demarcations. They function as sites of contestation where power, culture, and identity intersect and are negotiated. The EU's external borders – particularly in response to migration and armed conflict – demonstrate how borders act as both tangible enclosures and symbolic thresholds of belonging. The reintroduction of national border controls during the COVID-19 crisis and the militarization of the Union's eastern frontier following Russia's aggression underscore how borders are reactivated in the face of perceived threats, serving as instruments of political response and societal reassurance.

A border-structuring approach thus offers a powerful analytical lens for assessing both the EU's internal coherence and its external geopolitical positioning. As Brown-

ing and Joenniemi (2008) argue, borders should not be viewed as passive delimiters, but as active expressions of political intentionality and identity construction. From this perspective, European integration is not a linear progression towards the erasure of borders, but rather a complex, negotiated process in which the functions and meanings of borders are continuously rearticulated.

Although founded on the premise of transcending classical geopolitics, the EU increasingly engages in practices of territorial statecraft. As Parkes (2020) suggests, geopolitical actors must articulate how they assert control over space and influence the territorial behavior of others. The Union's actions – ranging from migration management and external border governance to its strategic stance on Ukraine – manifest a distinctly geopolitical orientation. Despite its self-conception as a normative power, the EU deploys spatial strategies to project influence and order. In this context, borders emerge as instruments of geopolitical signaling. The EU is no longer post-geopolitical; rather, it embodies a redefined form of geopolitics (Bojinović Fenko, Brsakoska-Bazerkoska, 2024).

In conclusion, European integration does not render borders obsolete; instead, it transforms them into flexible, multilayered constructs that mediate complex interdependencies. While crises and conflicts expose the vulnerabilities of liberalized border regimes, they also reaffirm the enduring centrality of borders in understanding Europe's evolving political and territorial architecture.

## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Building upon the preceding conceptual framework, the subsequent chapter undertakes an empirical investigation. A content analysis of the European Council Conclusions from 2022 to early 2025 reveals a marked and sustained emphasis on issues related to borders and territoriality. The political discourse encapsulated in these documents demonstrates how statements, deliberations, and decisions on these subjects coalesce around six interrelated thematic clusters: Post-COVID debordering, External border protection, Territoriality and territorial integrity, State borders, Decoupling and (external) (neo-)functional rebordering, and Changing global order and the EU's border expansion. These focal points illustrate the European Union's strategic engagement with both internal structural shifts and external geopolitical pressures in an increasingly unstable international environment. The sections that follow will present and critically examine each of these thematic areas in detail.

### Post-COVID debordering

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Council consistently underscored the need to dismantle border-related barriers that had arisen from emergency rebordering measures enacted during the crisis. This concern was particularly pronounced in efforts to safeguard the integrity of the Single Market and to uphold the free movement of goods, services, and individuals, even amidst public health restric-

tions. Nonetheless, this cluster of discourses – centered on the imperative to restore a pre-pandemic, "borderless normality" – is included here primarily for contextual completeness and will not be subjected to further detailed analysis. Its exceptional and transitory nature, situated within the broader objective of reestablishing open internal borders, renders it analytically distinct. In contrast, the thematic clusters addressed in the subsequent sections reflect more durable transformations or the emergence of strategic priorities in the European Union's evolving approach to borders and territorial governance.

### External border protection

The European Council has consistently stressed the principle of securing the European Union's external borders, seeing this as a crucial element of the Union's broader security and stability framework. While initially articulated within the context of addressing irregular migration and enhancing operational border management, this focus has evolved considerably over time. The discourse has shifted from general declarations of protective intent toward more nuanced concerns, notably regarding the strategic manipulation of migratory flows. In particular, the instrumentalization of migration by actors such as Russia and Belarus has been framed as a form of hybrid aggression, prompting a recalibration of the Union's border-related security posture. In its most recent conclusions, this discursive trajectory culminates in explicit calls to reinforce the EU's overall defense capacities, signaling an increasingly securitized and geopolitically informed approach to external border governance.

In 2021 it was stressed in the Conclusions, that the EC "underlines in particular the importance of […] effectively protecting the EU's external borders," (EC Conclusions 2, 25.06.2021). Further, "The EU remains determined to ensure effective control of its external borders" (EC Conclusions 3, 22.10.2021). They suggested "reinforcing border control" (EC Conclusions 4, 16.12.2021). At the same time the EC "assessed the implementation of its past conclusions, aiming to develop a comprehensive approach to migration which combines increased external action, more effective control of EU external borders, and internal aspects, in compliance with international law, EU principles and values, and the protection of fundamental rights" (EC Conclusions 7, 09.02.2023).

Together with the growing border pressure it was stated that "The European Union will step up its action to prevent irregular departures and loss of life, to reduce pressure on EU borders and on reception capacities, to fight against smugglers and to increase returns" and "The European Union remains determined to ensure effective control of its external land and sea borders." (EC Conclusions 7, 09.02.2023). It was stressed that the EC "calls on the institutions and Member States to engage in concerted efforts to mobilise all relevant policy areas at national and EU level to enhance internal security, including by […] protection of the external borders" (EC Conclusions 14, 27.10.2023). The EC asked for "more effective protection of EU external borders," and was „determined to counter the ongoing hybrid attacks at its external borders launched by the Russian Federation and by Belarus." (EC Conclusions 15, 15.12.2023).

Further one could find the information, that "The European Council recalls its determination to ensure effective control of the Union's external borders through all available means, including with the support of the European Union, in line with EU and international law." (EC Conclusions 20, 17.10.2024). It "underlines that the defence of all EU land, air and maritime borders contribute to the security of Europe as a whole, in particular as regards the EU's eastern border, considering the threats posed by Russia and Belarus; in addition, considering the threats on the rest of the EU borders, stresses the importance of their defence" (EC Conclusions 22, 06.03.2025). Finally, it was stressed that "the European Council calls for an acceleration of work on all strands to decisively ramp up Europe's defence readiness within the next five years" (EC Conclusions 23, 20.03.2025).

### Territoriality, territorial integrity, state borders

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the European Council has placed unprecedented emphasis on the principles of territoriality, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of internationally recognized state borders. These concepts have emerged as central tenets in the Union's political declarations, reflecting a reaffirmed commitment to upholding the international rules-based order. While initially articulated in relation to the Ukrainian context, this normative posture has since been broadened to address wider geopolitical developments, including escalating tensions in other parts of Europe and beyond. The European Council's rhetoric and strategic decisions increasingly portray the defense of established borders not merely as a reaction to immediate armed conflict, but as a fundamental imperative in an international environment characterized by rising instability, normative erosion, and intensifying geopolitical rivalries.

Quickly after the war started it was announced that the EC "demands that Russia immediately ceases its military actions, unconditionally withdraws all forces and military equipment from the entire territory of Ukraine and fully respects Ukraine's territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence within its internationally recognised borders" (EC Conclusions 1, 24.02.2022). This set of arguments has been further repeated in every single conclusions (EC Conclusions 2, 24–25.03.2022; EC Conclusions 3, 30–31.05.2022; EC Conclusions 4, 23–24.06.2022; EC Conclusions 5, 20–21.10.2022; EC Conclusions 6, 15.12.2022; EC Conclusions 7, 09.02.2023; EC Conclusions 8, 23.03.2023; EC Conclusions 9, 29–30.06.2023; EC Conclusions 17, 22.03.2024; EC Conclusions 18, 18.04.2024; EC Conclusions 19, 27.06.2024; EC Conclusions 20, 17.10.2024; EC Conclusions 21, 19.12.2024). It was furhter stated that "the EU will continue cooperating closely with neighbours and reiterates its unwavering support for, and commitment to, the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia and of the Republic of Moldova" (EC Conclusions 1, 24.02.2022).

In summer 2022 the EC "expressed deep concern about recent repeated actions and statements by Turkey. Turkey must respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all EU Member States" (EC Conclusions 4, 23–24.06.2022). Two years later it stressed that "Lebanon's sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected" (EC Conclusions 20, 17.10.2024).

Those principles were understood not only spatially: "The European Union needs to ensure its sovereignty and competitiveness in strategic sectors by strengthening its resilience and productivity, mobilising financing, reducing its strategic dependencies, investing in the skills of the future and making its economic, industrial and technological base fit for the green and digital transitions, safeguarding cohesion and the level playing field in the Single Market" (EC Conclusions 16, 01.02.2024).

Finally, they were interpreted in the broader context, as stressed in the statement that "The European Union has always upheld and will continue to uphold the UN Charter and the rules and principles it enshrines, in particular those of sovereignty and territorial integrity, political independence and self-determination" (EC Conclusions 23, 20.03.2025).

## Decoupling – towards (external) (neo-)functional rebordering?

Building upon the aforementioned dynamics, a form of neo-functional rebordering has begun to materialize at the macro-political level. The European Council has increasingly advocated for strategic decoupling in domains of global connectivity that intersect with security concerns. This shift signals a deliberate turn toward selective disengagement from interdependencies perceived as vulnerable or politically instrumentalized. As such, it marks a new phase in the European Union's approach to rebordering – one that emphasizes resilience, strategic autonomy, and the recalibration of external linkages over the pursuit of unqualified global integration. This evolving strategy reflects the Union's broader effort to adapt to an international system defined by systemic rivalry and contested interdependence. Already in 2022 the EC suggested "reducing our strategic dependencies in the most sensitive areas such as critical raw materials, semi-conductors, health, digital and food, and by pursuing an ambitious and robust trade policy, as well as by fostering investment" (EC Conclusions 2, 24–25.03.2022). And further declared that "The European Union will phase out its dependency on Russian gas, oil and coal imports as soon as possible" (EC Conclusions 2, 24–25.03.2022, EC Conclusions 3, 30–31.05.2022) stressing "the need for Europe to reduce its strategic dependencies, to increase its overall defence readiness and capabilities and to further strengthen its defence technological and industrial base accordingly" (EC Conclusions 19, 27.06.2024).

## Changing global order

The developments outlined above can be interpreted through the lens of the European Council's evolving assessment of the broader geopolitical environment in which the European Union operates. The EC has increasingly recognized a profound and accelerating transformation of the international order – characterized by the resurgence of authoritarianism, armed conflict, and intensified strategic competition – which poses direct challenges to the EU's foundational principles regarding borders, territorial-

ity, and adherence to international law. In response to this shifting global landscape, the Union has recalibrated its strategic priorities. Border-related issues are no longer treated solely as questions of internal governance but are increasingly framed as integral to the defense of the EU's core values, political sovereignty, and normative identity on the global stage.

Already in 2022 the EC stated that "By its illegal military actions, Russia is grossly violating international law and the principles of the UN Charter and undermining European and global security and stability" (EC Conclusions 1, 24.02.2022). And further "Russia's unilateral decisions deliberately violate the UN Charter and blatantly disregard the rules-based international order" (EC Conclusions 5, 20–21.10.2022). Almost immediately the EC recognized "new security situation in Europe which is a major shift in its strategic environment" (EC Conclusions 2, 24–25.03.2022), "and has shown the need for a stronger and more capable European Union in the field of security and defence" (EC Conclusions 3, 30–31.05.2022). Moreover, it claimed, that the "New strategic environment which requires defence readiness and a significant increase in Europe's long-term strategic capacity to take more responsiblity for its own defence" (EC Conclusions 9, 29–30.06.2023). Pro-active approach was proposed with the words that "In the face of the new geopolitical reality, the European Union will act decisively to ensure its long-term competitiveness, prosperity and role on the global stage" (EC Conclusions 7, 09.02.2023). But it was noticed that also internal adjustments of structural nature are need: "The European Council highlights the budgetary challenges that the Union and Member States are facing in a context of repeated crisis, geopolitical turbulences and uncertainty" (EC Conclusions 16, 01.02.2024). And "In the face of a new geopolitical reality and increasingly complex challenges, the European Union is committed to acting decisively to ensure its long-term competitiveness, prosperity and leadership on the global stage and to strengthen its strategic sovereignty: (EC Conclusions 18, 18.04.2024). It was additionally translated into further efforts in external policy, as claimed that "In a time of heightened conflict and tension, alongside an alarming trend of disregard for international law, the European Council reaffirms its unwavering commitment to effective multilateralism and to the rules-based international order with the United Nations at its core, steadfastly upholding the UN Charter and the rules and principles enshrined in the UN Charter, including those of sovereignty and territorial integrity, political independence and self-determination" (EC Conclusions 20, 17.10.2024). And finally, it states that "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its repercussions for European and global security in a changing environment constitute an existential challenge for the European Union" (EC Conclusions 22, 06.03.2025).


## EU('s borders) expansion

One of the European Council's principal responses to the evolving geopolitical landscape has been the renewed impetus to accelerate the integration of neighboring countries, thereby effectively extending the boundaries of the European integration project eastward. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have become central to this stra-

tegic orientation, reflecting both a demonstration of solidarity in the face of external aggression and a deliberate attempt to enhance stability along the EU's eastern periphery. Simultaneously, the countries of the Western Balkans continue to occupy a prominent position in the European Council's conclusions, reaffirming their significance within the broader enlargement agenda. Nonetheless, the documents also convey a degree of concern regarding the limited progress observed in certain accession processes.

In 2022 the EC took "note of the preparation of the Commission's opinions on the application for EU membership of Ukraine as well as the Republic of Moldova and Georgia" (EC Conclusions 3, 30–31.05.2022) and soon later recognized "the European perspective of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia. The future of these countries and their citizens lies within the European Union" (EC Conclusions 4, 23–24.06.2022). This approach was repeated in different forms, among others by statements that: "The European Union acknowledges Ukraine's determination to meet the necessary requirements in order to start accession negotiations as soon as possible" (EC Conclusions 7, 09.02.2023), and "underlines the importance of Ukraine's EU accession process" (EC Conclusions 8, 23.03.2023). The EC declared it would "continue to work closely with Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia and support their reform efforts on their European paths" (EC Conclusions 14, 27.10.2023). Those declarations ware framed by a wider reflection: the EC underlined "that enlargement is a geo-strategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity" (EC Conclusions 15, 15.12.2023). Finally "The European Council decides to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and with the Republic of Moldova" (EC Conclusions 15, 15.12.2023), and "decides to grant the status of candidate country to Georgia" (EC Conclusions 15, 15.12.2023). Support for membership has been repeated several times and the it was declared that "The European Union will continue to work closely with the Republic of Moldova and support its reform efforts on its European path" (EC Conclusions 19, 27.06.2024), underlined "the European Union's steadfast support for the Republic of Moldova and its accession path" and "reaffirms the Union's readiness to support the Georgian people on their European path" ( EC Conclusions 20, 17.10.2024). Finally the EC welcomed "the commitment of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova to European integration" (EC Conclusions 21, 19.12.2024).

Similar acceleration was observed in case of Western Balkans. In 2023 it was declared that the EC "will open accession negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina, once the necessary degree of compliance with the membership criteria is achieved" (EC Conclusions 15, 15.12.2023, EC Conclusions 17, 22.03.2024) and "is ready to complete the opening phase of the accession negotiations with North Macedonia" (EC Conclusions 15, 15.12.2023).

Geopolitical changes reversing some integration tendencies made the EC to call "on Georgia's authorities to clarify their intentions by reversing the current course of action which jeopardises Georgia's EU path, de facto leading to a halt of the accession process" (EC Conclusions 19, 27.06.2024). Finally it regrated "the Georgian government's decision to suspend the country's EU accession process until 2028" (EC Conclusions 21, 19.12.2024).

## DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The subsequent section undertakes a detailed analytical examination of the European Council's narratives concerning borders and territoriality. This analysis is conducted along two interrelated dimensions. First, the six key argumentative clusters identified earlier – Post-COVID debordering; External border protection; Territoriality, territorial integrity, and state borders; Decoupling and neo-functional rebordering; Changing global order; and EU expansion – are examined in chronological sequence. Each European Council meeting held between 2022 and 2025 is systematically analyzed to assess the presence, recurrence, and evolution of these thematic categories, thereby enabling the identification of temporal trends and the intensification of specific border-related concerns.

Second, the analysis addresses the spatial orientation of each EC conclusion. This involves mapping the geographical references made within the Council's border-related discourse – identifying the specific countries, regional configurations, or global zones that are cited or targeted. This spatial dimension provides insight into the geopolitical focus of the Council's strategic agenda, revealing patterns of regional prioritization and potential shifts in geographical emphasis over time.

For both components of the analysis, the findings are presented in the form of detailed tables that depict the frequency, timing, and geographical distribution of each thematic narrative. These visual representations are intended to elucidate underlying regularities, thematic shifts, and the dynamic interplay between temporal and spatial dimensions in the European Council's changing approach to borders and territorial governance.

As illustrated in Table 1, the prominence of the various argumentative clusters has shifted markedly over time. References to post-COVID debordering – initially prominent in early 2022 – disappear abruptly following the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. From that point forward, the European Council's conclusions become increasingly dominated by discourses centered on territoriality, territorial integrity, and the inviolability of state borders, which emerge as the most consistently emphasized themes. Shortly thereafter, the narrative of strategic decoupling – reflecting growing concerns over security and the pursuit of strategic autonomy – gains temporary prominence. This is subsequently followed by a noticeable rise in references to the changing global order and the eastward expansion of the European Union. This discursive progression reflects a clear reorientation of the Council's border-related agenda, shaped by the intensifying geopolitical volatility of the period under review.

The geographical analysis, as presented in Table 2, reveals several notable patterns in the spatial orientation of the European Council's discourse. Consistent and prominent attention is directed toward actors situated directly beyond the EU's eastern borders – most notably Russia and Belarus – reflecting their central positioning as perceived threats to European security. Among the EU's eastern neighbours, Ukraine receives the most sustained and intensified focus, particularly following the escalation of armed conflict. Moldova and Georgia are also recurrently referenced, although with comparatively less consistency. In contrast, the Western Balkan states appear only

Table 1

**European Council Conclusions with thematic focus**

| Conclusions | Post-COVID debordering | External border protection | Territoriality, territorial integrity, state borders | Decoupling rebordering | Changing global order | EU expansion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| EC 1, 25.05.2021 | X | | | | | |
| EC 2, 25.06.2021 | X | X | | | | |
| EC 3, 22.10.2021 | X | X | | | | |
| EC 4, 16.12.2021 | X | X | | | | |
| EC 5, 24.02.2022 | | | X | | | |
| EC 6, 25.03.2022 | | | X | X | | |
| EC 7, 31.05.2022 | | | X | X | X | X |
| EC 8, 24.06.2022 | | | X | | | X |
| EC 9, 21.10.2022 | | | X | | X | |
| EC 10, 15.12.2022 | | | X | | | |
| EC 11, 09.02.2023 | | X | X | | X | |
| EC 12, 23.03.2023 | | | X | | | X |
| EC 13, 30.06.2023 | | | X | | | |
| EC 14, 27.10.2023 | | X | X | | | X |
| EC 15, 15.12.2023 | | X | X | | X | X |
| EC 16, 01.02.2024 | | | X | | X | X |
| EC 17, 22.03.2024 | | | X | | X | X |
| EC 18, 18.04.2024 | | | X | | X | |
| EC 19, 27.06.2024 | | | X | X | | X |
| EC 20, 17.10.2024 | | X | X | | X | X |
| EC 21, 19.12.2024 | | | X | | | |
| EC 22, 06.03.2025 | | X | X | | X | |
| EC 23, 20.03.2025 | | X | X | | | |

**Source**: The author.

intermittently and without sustained regularity, suggesting a more fluctuating or conditional prioritization within the Council's external agenda.

From mid-2022 onward, a significant increase in references to Middle Eastern countries is observable, aligning with the region's escalating tensions and strategic significance. In parallel, mentions of African states – previously more prominent – largely disappear from the Council's conclusions, with only occasional reappearances noted at later stages. East and Southeast Asian countries continue to receive only marginal attention, while other global regions, such as Latin America and the Caribbean (e.g., Haiti, Venezuela), are mentioned so sporadically that they have been excluded from the current tabular analysis.

An especially noteworthy trend is the declining use of broad regional designations in the Council's conclusions. General references to categories such as the Eastern Partnership, Africa, Indo-Pacific, ASEAN, or the Western Balkans have become less frequent in more recent texts. The primary exception to this pattern is the Middle East, where both regional and country-specific references have increased. This shift may re-

Table 2

**European Council Conclusions with geographical focus**

| State/region | EC 1, 25.05.2021 | EC 2, 25.06.2021 | EC 3, 22.10.2021 | EC 4, 16.12.2021 | EC 5, 24.02.2022 | EC 6, 25.03.2022 | EC 7, 31.05.2022 | EC 8, 24.06.2022 | EC 9, 21.10.2022 | EC 10, 15.12.2022 | EC 11, 09.02.2023 | EC 12, 23.03.2023 | EC 13, 30.06.2023 | EC 14, 27.10.2023 | EC 15, 15.12.2023 | EC 16, 01.02.2024 | EC 17, 22.03.2024 | EC 18, 18.04.2024 | EC 19, 27.06.2024 | EC 20, 17.10.2024 | EC 21, 19.12.2024 | EC 22, 06.03.2025 | EC 23, 20.03.2025 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Belarus** | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |  | X |  | X | X |  | X |  |
| **Russia** | X | X |  |  | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |  |
| **Ukraine** |  |  | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| **Moldova** |  |  |  |  | X | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  | X |  | X | X | X |  |  |
| **Georgia** |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  | X |  | X | X | X |  |  |
| **Armenia** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Azerbaijan** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **East. Partnership** |  | (X) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Kosovo** |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  | X | X | X | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Bosnia** |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Serbia** |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **N. Macedonia** |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **W. Balkans** |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  |  |  |  |  | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |
| **Turkey** |  | X |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  | X | X | X |  | X | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Iran** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  |  | X |  | X |  | X | X |  | X |  |  |  |
| **Syria** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |
| **Israel** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  | X | X | X | X | X |  |  |
| **Gaza** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  | X |  | X | X | X |  | X |
| **Lebanon** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X | X |  | X |
| **Middle East** | (X) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X | X | X | X | X |  | X |
| **Ethiopia** |  | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Mali** | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Libya** |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Sahel** |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Egipt** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |
| **Mauretania** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Sudan** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |
| **Maroco** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |
| **Africa** |  |  |  | (X) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (X) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **China** |  |  |  |  |  | X |  |  | X |  |  |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **N.Korea** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | X | X |  | X |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Indo-Pacific** |  | (X) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ASEAN |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  | (X) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Source:** The author.

flect a strategic move toward more differentiated, state-specific engagement within the EU's external relations, replacing generalized regional frameworks with more tailored geopolitical approaches.

This study set out to explore how the European Council has responded to the evolving external environment in terms of thematic and spatial focus, particularly with regard to borders, territoriality, and geopolitical agency. The empirical analy-

sis confirms that the Council's discourse has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from temporary concerns over post-pandemic governance to enduring strategic priorities rooted in security, territorial integrity, and geopolitical alignment. Chronologically, the most persistent themes have emerged around border securitization and Eastern enlargement, while spatially, the Council's attention has increasingly concentrated on Eastern Europe and the Middle East. This confirms the Council's growing role as a pragmatic geopolitical strategist, capable of navigating complex crises and redefining the EU's external posture. In doing so, the Council has positioned itself not only as a guardian of the Union's territorial cohesion but also as a pivotal architect of its geopolitical future.

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European Council Conclusions 10, Brussels, 15 December 2022, (OR. en), EUCO 34/22, CO EUR 29, CONCL 7.

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European Council Conclusions 15, Brussels, 15 December 2023, (OR. en), EUCO 20/23, CO EUR 16, CONCL 6.

European Council Conclusions 16, Brussels, 1 February 2024 (OR. en), EUCO 2/24, CO EUR 2, CONCL 1.

European Council Conclusions 17, Brussels, 22 March 2024, (OR. en), EUCO 7/24, CO EUR 6, CONCL 2.

European Council Conclusions 18, Brussels, 18 April 2024, (OR. En), EUCO 12/24, CO EUR 10, CONCL 3.

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the European Council has redefined its approach to borders, territoriality, and geopolitical agency in response to a shifting global order marked by multiple, overlapping crises. Through a content analysis of European Council Conclusions from 2022 to 2025, the study identifies six key thematic clusters that structure the EU's border-related discourse. These include post-COVID debordering, external border protection, territorial integrity, strategic decoupling, the changing global order, and EU enlargement. The findings reveal a significant reorientation of the Council's geopolitical focus toward Eastern Europe and the Middle East, with declining emphasis on broader regional frameworks. The analysis demonstrates how the European Council has evolved into a central geopolitical actor, actively shaping the EU's external actions in times of profound instability.

**Keywords:** European Union, geopolitics, European Council, territoriality

## OD ZNIESIENIA GRANIC DO AGENCJI GEOPOLITYCZNEJ: EWOLUUJĄCY DYSKURS GRANICZNY I TERYTORIALNY RADY EUROPEJSKIEJ

### STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób Rada Europejska redefiniuje swoje podejście do granic, terytorialności i sprawczości geopolitycznej w obliczu zmieniającego się ładu globalnego, charakteryzującego się wieloma nakładającymi się kryzysami. Poprzez analizę treści konkluzji Rady Europejskiej z lat 2022–2025 zidentyfikowano sześć głównych klastrów tematycznych strukturyzujących unijną narrację dotyczącą granic. Obejmują one: odbudowę strefy „bezgraniczności" po pandemii, ochronę granic zewnętrznych, integralność terytorialną jako zasadę

porządku międzynarodowego, decoupling, zmieniający się porządek światowy oraz rozszerzenie UE. Wyniki wskazują na istotną reorientację geopolityczną Rady w kierunku Europy Wschodniej i Bliskiego Wschodu, przy jednoczesnym spadku znaczenia ogólnych kategorii regionalnych. Analiza dowodzi, że Rada Europejska aspiruje do roli kluczowego aktora geopolitycznego, aktywnie kształtującego działania zewnętrzne UE w warunkach głębokiej niestabilności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Unia Europejska, geopolityka, Rada Europejska, terytorialność