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Protean power Europe in the southern neighbourhood? EU in the face of migration and political crises

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) has recently faced consecutive, sudden and unexpected challenges of a large magnitude, such as the migration crisis, COVID-19, and the war in Ukraine. Through an analysis of two key, sudden and unexpected relatively recent crises in the EU's immediate southern neighbourhood—namely the 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey—this paper sheds light on whether the EU has generated protean power in response to key emergencies in its wider neighbourhood, and if so, how. Our analysis shows that when high uncertainty pertains to domestic governance of third countries in the neighbourhood, i.e. the military coup in Turkey, where the overall perceived risks are relatively low, the EU employs no form of protean power or resorts to limited forms of control power. In contrast, we see that protean power is generated in the more specific policy field of migration, where we observe radical uncertainty combined with high perceived risks to the EU. We also propose that control and protean power need to be seen as different, yet increasingly intertwined modes of governing unexpected emergencies by the EU.

Keywords Protean power · European union foreign policy · Migration crisis · Coup attempt in Turkey · Turkey–EU relations

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Introduction

We live in a period of radical uncertainty and in the context of multiple crises that extend beyond states' borders. The concept of 'protean power', initially coined by Katzenstein and Seybert (2018), refers to international actors' capability to respond innovatively in these times of unforeseen turmoil and in response to sudden and often unexpected challenges. Although it has so far not received attention as the subject of protean power in the academic literature, the European Union (EU) has also faced consecutive, sudden and unexpected challenges of a large magnitude in its recent past, such as the Eurocrisis, the migration crisis, COVID-19, and most recently the war in Ukraine, a period commonly dubbed with the term 'polycrisis' in the EU. While some of these crises were endogenous, others took the form of sudden turn of events in the EU's larger neighbourhood, hence constituting test cases of whether (and if so, how) the EU generates protean power in response to unexpected external events that create situations of 'deep uncertainty' and bear the potential to have adverse effects on the EU and its member states.

In this paper, we focus on two such sudden and unexpected crises entailing high uncertainty in the EU's immediate Southern neighbourhood—namely the 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey. By using in-depth qualitative interviews with EU policymakers and researchers, as well as original documents and secondary literature, we attempt to shed light on whether the EU has generated protean power through its responses to these key emergencies, with a view to identifying the factors that enable or limit the EU's protean power. We argue that not all types of uncertainty breed innovation in EU foreign policy practice and thus lead to the generation of protean power (Guzzini 2020, p. 452). Our analyses show that when high uncertainty pertains to domestic governance and the prospect of political change in third countries of the Southern neighbourhood, the EU employs no form of power or resorts to limited forms of control power at best. In contrast, we see that protean power is generated in the more specific policy field of migration, where we observe radical uncertainty combined with a heightened perception of risk to the EU. As such, our empirical analysis draws attention to the conceptual relationship between radical uncertainty and risk, and where the two mix, to the mutually constitutive relationship between protean power and control power in the EU's policy practices in the Southern neighbourhood.

In their article opening this special issue, Pomorska and Thomas cite several factors limiting and enabling the EU's exercise of protean power in specific cases. Some of these factors seem to significantly mediate the EU's protean power on our two cases of the migration crisis and the coup attempt. To elucidate, while informality enables the EU's innovative approach to the former, decentralisation, namely "the need for agreement among various EU institutions with different mandates and constituencies" (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 15), seems to limit the EU to act promptly and innovatively in the latter. Intergovernmentalism, characterising the EU's handling of foreign policy issues, severely limited



the EU's deployment of protean power in the coup case, an argument voiced by a number of our interviewees. We also find that informal arrangements, such as the "EU–Turkey statement", which lacks the formal standing of EU law in the case of migration, enables protean power; but that the protean power which is employed as a result can also generate conditions for unforeseen control power on the part of third countries, lending support to the conceptual argument that not all improvisation and innovation underlying protean power may have effects that undermine control (Guzzini 2020, p. 452). In a similar vein, we also show that protean power does not necessarily "produce morally good outcomes" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 53), as our discussion of the case of migration attests.

In what follows, we first engage in a theoretical discussion of the concept of protean power in relation to the cases selected for the analysis, and a review of the existing literature, followed by a survey of the two selected events. We then move on to our analysis of EU responses to these crises. In the light of our conceptual discussion of the indicators of protean power, we assess whether the EU has generated protean power in response to the events, and if so, how. We conclude by summarising our main findings and the main lessons drawn.

Protean power Europe and the EU's southern neighbourhood

The concept of power has been central to the study of political science. Yet, in all its classic formulations, be it in Dahl's (1957) conceptualisation of power as the ability to get others to do what they would otherwise not, or in Lukes' (2005) theorisation of power underlining the significance of social forces and institutional practices in shaping the preferences of individuals, 'power' is treated as a tool of control, in the sense that it always "involves an actor or institution's ability to control others" (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 5). This conceptualisation is based on the assumption that actors operate in a closed environment, where—as long as they have access to information and the necessary resources—they are capable of assessing risks and opportunities and deploying resources to prevent harm and exploit the benefits (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018).

The existing conceptualisations of EU power also largely rest on this general understanding of *power as control.* Although the European wider neighbourhood to the East and the South has increasingly become an area of radical uncertainty and consecutive crises in the past decade, the notions of power that have been used in referring to how the EU responds to the sudden and unexpected challenges in these regions have remained largely limited to the conceptualisation of the EU as a "transformative" (Börzel and Risse 2009), "normative" (Manners 2002) or "geopolitical" (Beshku 2021) power. Zooming in on the wider Southern neighbourhood, the EU's impact on the domestic governance of the countries in the region, and its role in the resolution of the region's conflicts, have mainly been assessed through the conceptual lenses of normative or transformative power, with a focus on whether it possesses either of the two, and on the limits to their exercise (see, among others, Börzel and Van Hullen 2011; Diez and Pace 2011; Del Sarto 2016; Aydın-Düzgit 2018; Dandashly and Kourtelis 2020). EU's conceptualisation as a transformative



power meant that it had the potential to induce domestic reforms in third countries through (often coercive) conditionality and Europeanisation, whereas its branding as a 'normative power' implied that it possessed the "ability to shape conceptions of 'normal' in international relations" (Manners 2002, p. 239). Yet both concepts converged in the way in which they theorised the EU's power in terms of its "ability to get others to do what they are otherwise not inclined to do", hence as control power (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 11).

As the EU's leverage over the Southern neighbourhood countries has already been limited or weakened over time, it has had a minimal effect in influencing political change in the region, leaving the explanatory power of these notions of powerhood very limited. While the term "geopolitical power" has recently been coined to define European foreign policy, the concept has received scant academic attention in conceptual discussions on the EU's power, where its use has remained mostly confined to EU officials (Borrell 2022) and policy circles (Youngs 2022). This may be linked to the fact that the term has been picked up by EU institutions more out of necessity, and in response to the largely geopolitical nature of the conflicts surrounding Europe and beyond; thus it embodies a desire for the EU to act in a certain way rather than entailing an assessment of what it actually does. In any case, the concept of geopolitical power also moves from the premise that the EU should have the capability to assert itself and control others in an increasingly multipolar and uncertain world.

It can be argued that the increasing geopolitical nature of the challenges in the EU's neighbourhood indeed forces the EU to face consecutive and often unanticipated crises in its wider region, the responses to which often require innovative and agile measures. Yet, conceptualising power strictly as control excludes the possibility of accounting for the ways in which the EU, or any actor, can improvise and innovate in the face of the unexpected (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 11). Nonetheless, it is also difficult to imagine for the EU or any nation-state to exert any form of power devoid of resources, when faced with geopolitical challenges.

This brings us to the relationship between control and protean power, which we believe remains under-theorised in the existing literature. We adhere to the Special Issue's definition of protean power as an actor's "ability to confront external challenges by innovating and transforming itself" in dealing with the radical uncertainties of world politics (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 3). This concept stems from "improvisational and innovative responses to uncertainty that arise from an actor's creativity and agility" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 4). However, it is crucial to distinguish between simple policy innovation, which can be associated with control power, and the innovation inherent in protean power. The latter is typically exercised only in the face of radical uncertainties and unforeseen emergencies, whereas traditional forms of policy innovation are more common in relatively predictable crises, where risks and outcomes are more calculable. Hence, simple policy innovation is primarily problem-solving oriented, utilising unconventional or unorthodox methods within remits of control power. In contrast, protean power is driven by improvisation rather than calculation. It does not merely resolve immediate issues but leads to a transformation of both the crisis situation and the actor themselves.



This transformation can result in a radical shift in policy options and instruments, with potentially unpredictable consequences.

Katzenstein and Seybert (2018, p. 5) acknowledge that these two powers "co-exist and co-evolve" in different settings. Yet, this co-existence and the ways in which it affects responses of actors to emergency and crisis situations remain under-theorised. Katzenstein and Seybert (2018, p. 40) assert that "the boundary between uncertainty and risk, control and protean power is unavoidably porous and is often difficult to discern empirically". Nevertheless, they suggest that control and protean powers "are not mutually exclusive" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 6) and there is no normative hierarchy as to the exercise or effects of these powers. Yet, they still tend to conceptualize these powers in relation to how they differ from each other in nature and operation. To elucidate, they argue that while "control power operates in normal situations" with "calculable probabilities of outcomes and measurable impacts", protean power "by contrast emerges typically in situations of uncertainty" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 25) with improvisational responses of agile actors with unpredictable consequences. In a similar vein, whereas the former dominates actors' responses in relatively more predictable, closed and complicated systems, the latter arises in open and complex systems marked by unpredictability and uncertainty (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 17). However, this dichotomous understanding of control and protean power does not allow us to theorise how and in what ways the two types of power interact in responses of international actors to emergencies and crises.

We propose that control and protean power need to be seen as different, yet increasingly intertwined modes (or tools) of governing unexpected emergencies by the EU. We argue that these two types of power often interact with each other in the EU's responses to crisis and emergency situations. In cases where the EU's control power is high, its ability to innovate and to exercise protean power also increases. However, in cases where the EU's resources or tools associated with control power are missing or not functioning, its likelihood of exercising protean power is low. Thus, we agree with Pomorska and Thomas that there may "be synergies or interdependence between the exercise of control power and protean power" (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 8) and in many cases they tend to reinforce each other (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018). We also demonstrate below in the empirical sections that in cases where an event raises high risk as well as radical uncertainty, protean power is triggered along with control power as well as the resources associated with it (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 29). Hence, actor perceptions of a given event—as a case of radical uncertainty, risk, or both—have a central influence on the type of power in operation. Following Zürn's (2020, p. 475) argument that there has to be "directionality" to any type of power, in the sense that "the effects of a response must be compatible with the ideas or interests of the respondent(s)", we further argue that when actors employ a timely and proper combination of these powers, they may compensate for each other's weaknesses, leading to prompt and transformative impacts.

We now turn to the discussion of our two cases to show where and how the EU generated a certain degree of protean power (migration) and where and how it failed to exercise any (the failed coup attempt in Turkey), with a particular emphasis on the



relationship of protean power (or its lack thereof) with control power. We discern the perception of uncertainty raised by these events in EU circles as well as the risk perceptions associated with them, mainly through a series of online and in-person, in-depth qualitative interviews conducted by the authors in Brussels, Berlin and Istanbul in April–June 2022 and September 2023–February 2024. Among the 28 interviewees were 7 officials at the European Commission, the European External Action Service, and the Delegation of the EU to Turkey; 1 member of the European Parliament; 6 members of the German Bundestag; 2 government officials in Germany; 8 senior analysts in European think-tanks; and 4 academics, of whom 19 were male and 9 were female. These interviewees were asked a similar set of questions with a view to understand their perceptions on and framing of issues/crises remoulding Turkey–EU relations in the post-2015 era.

Two unexpected shocks: migration crisis and the failed coup attempt in Turkey

Both the 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey constitute ideal cases to scrutinise the EU's generation of protean power in the face of unforeseen emergencies in its Southern neighbourhood. Both cases can be considered as highly "unexpected developments beyond the EU's external borders" (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 3), entailing a considerable amount of uncertainty for the EU. The 2015 migration crisis, despite the signs, was not foreseen by the EU, and so was largely ignored for a considerable period of time until it reached a peak point. The 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey was completely novel, unanticipated and even shocking for the EU. While the former was perceived by the EU decision makers as an issue of ontological insecurity with a heightened risk of destabilising the very identity of the EU, the latter was perceived as destabilising solely its relations with Turkey, but not the EU itself. Hence, these two distinct, yet comparable cases are elucidating as they enable us to study the impact of different perceptions of crisis on the exercise of protean power or lack thereof. In the former, the means of control power at the disposal of the EU, i.e. the prospect of visa liberalisation and progress on accession negotiations and upgrading the Customs Union set the groundwork for the EU to deploy a certain degree of protean power which manifested itself as relatively novel, informal and inter-institutional measures to the migration crisis. Yet, in the latter, the lack or substantially weakening of control power resources of the EU left no room for it to respond promptly and innovatively to the radical uncertainties induced by the coup attempt. Thus, a comparative examination of these two cases also allows us to better comprehend the dynamic relationship or interdependency between control and protean power as well as the political conditions creating synergy between them.

In what follows, we discuss these events with a focus on how they were perceived in the EU (entailing uncertainty, risk, or both) and the ways in which the EU has responded to them. In tracing the EU's protean power, we are looking for EU responses that demonstrate the EU "exploiting its potential to innovate or



self-transform in response to [*these*] new and unexpected circumstances" (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 12).

Migration crisis

In the summer of 2015, close to one million Syrian refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war transited through Turkey and risked their lives crossing the Aegean Sea in hopes of seeking protection in Europe. The debate over the arrival of refugees in Europe was leading to a political crisis in the EU, as no agreement could be reached on how or where to distribute inflows of refugees within European territory to ease the burden on border countries. Therefore, efforts turned to addressing the issue with countries of transit and origin, most notably Turkey, as it was facing a huge refugee influx.

The crisis could have been anticipated by the EU, yet it was largely ignored until it reached a peak point. Syrian refugees first began to arrive in Turkey after the onset of the Syrian civil war in 2011. After 2013 their numbers began to escalate drastically, reaching 1.5 million in 2014 and 2.5 million in 2015.[1] The figures were regularly published by EU agencies and institutions, whereas various NGOs drew attention to the possibility of an approaching crisis and offered multiple solutions (European Union Institute for Security Studies 2016, p. 103). Yet, it wasn't until the total number of illegal immigrants who reached the Greek borders in 2015 rose to 856,723 from 41,038 in 2014 that the EU recognised the existence of a severe migration crisis at its borders.[2] These numbers quickly translated into heated and often polarised public and political debates in EU member states, over the risk of potential "flooding" of EU members with Syrian refugees (Berry et al. 2015). There were even discussions on how far-right parties in member states such as Germany were capitalising on the migration crisis to strengthen their support base and weaken centre parties. Hence, not only were the ultimate numbers of Syrian refugees who would head for the EU uncertain, but the perceived political and societal risks by the EU member states were also very high. Our interviewees have all confirmed the heightened perceptions of uncertainty and risk posed by the migration crisis in the EU. In the words of one interviewee (26), "the disagreement between the member states on how to share the burden meant that you could have thousands or even millions of people stranded at the borders, which would also mean catastrophe for Germany and the EU." Another interviewee (24) underlined that "disaster scenarios circulated by the far right led to a huge panic in many centrist parties."

In response to this emergency, the EU finally reached an agreement with Turkey on 18 March 2016, officially known as the "EU–Turkey Statement", and more commonly referred to as the "EU–Turkey deal". The deal that was reached was largely possible thanks to a form of flexible and informal institutional governance, where the time pressure and the perception of immediate risk made it impossible for the issue to be handled through formal hierarchical means (Smeets and Beach 2020).

[1] http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik.

[2] https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/12/5679451d6/million-refugees-migrants-flee-europe-2015.html.

The deal stipulated that of all irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands after 20 March 2016, those who did not apply for asylum and those whose claim for asylum was declared inadmissible in line with EU and international law would be returned to Turkey; for every Syrian being returned to Turkey, another Syrian would be resettled to the EU from Turkey directly; the visa liberalisation roadmap with Turkey would be accelerated with a view to lifting the visa requirements for Turkish citizens at the latest by the end of June 2016; and the EU would disperse €3 billion under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, with an additional €3 billion to be dispersed in 2018. The statement also committed to the furthering of Turkey's accession process to the EU, by upgrading the customs union and re-energising accession negotiations by opening new chapters (Aydın-Düzgit et al 2020).

We suggest that the EU's response to the migration crisis entails a certain degree of protean power to the extent that the EU–Turkey migration deal constitutes an innovative response which builds on previous EU policies in the neighbourhood, yet also contains novel dimensions. The return components of the deal can be considered typical of EU readmission agreements with third countries, one of which was signed with Turkey in December 2013. Similarly, visa facilitation/liberalisation is almost always a component of EU's readmission agreements, as an incentive for third countries to sign the readmission agreements. Yet, this new deal also introduced two novel measures: the resettlement scheme of Syrian migrants in the EU in exchange for those who would be returned to Turkey, and EU financial assistance to a newly established Facility for Refugees. Furthermore, the EU established a linkage between the deal and Turkey's largely stalled accession process as well as Turkey's previous contractual relations with the EU, by promising to upgrade the 1995 Customs Union agreement between Turkey and the EU and to accelerate the opening of accession negotiation chapters.

The deal has been heavily criticised on humanitarian grounds as well as from the perspective of international law (Lehner 2019). Some of our interviewees have also expressed that the migration deal is a clear manifestation of the EU's "moving away quickly from its values to pragmatism" (Interviewee 14) and that "it doesn't conform to the EU's commitment to provide housing to refugees etc." (Interviewee 21, also Interviewees 5, 15). Hence, innovation through the exercise of protean power in this case entails a certain degree of transformation of the EU's identity as a promoter of human rights in international politics. Nonetheless it can be considered as a "novel solution" if one takes into account the fact that it served the primary EU purpose of reducing the migratory tension at the EU–Turkey border, providing support to the argument that "innovation… may not necessarily be positive in functional or normative terms, depending on the dynamics involved and the standards applied" (Pomorska and Thomas 2024, p. 14). Indeed, the deal had an immediate and rather drastic impact in terms of reducing the volume of irregular migration flows across the Aegean, as well as loss of migrant lives at sea.[3] Progress vis-à-vis returns and

[3] Overall in 2015, there were close to 1 million arrivals in Europe travelling through the Eastern Mediterranean route. This figure dropped down to around 182,000 in 2016 and 42,000 in 2017. In 2018 the numbers increased slightly to 51,000. The number of fatalities and missing persons recorded in the



resettlements has been steady, though not meeting exactly the 1:1 criteria foreseen in the EU–Turkey Deal, as the number of returns from the Greek islands has remained low compared to the number of resettlements.[4] As such, European Commission President Ursula Van der Leyen stated that the deal "remains valid and has brought positive results."[5] Our interviewees were also convinced that migration would continue to be "a guaranteed area of cooperation" (Interviewee 6) between Turkey and the EU in the near future (Interviewees 1, 2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 18, 23).

Hence, despite the rampant critiques, the EU managed to deploy a rapid and relatively innovative tool kit to serve its primary goal of reducing the number of Syrian transit migrants through Turkey, which it ultimately did. EU managed to exercise protean power, albeit limited, through the combination of improvisation, "local knowledge and accumulated experience" (Katzenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 17). Nonetheless, the discussion of this crisis and the response deployed by the EU to counter it suggests that the EU's agility to deliver such a quick response, and the ultimate effectiveness of this solution (hence the EU's protean power) cannot be decoupled from the resources underlying the control power which it already enjoyed over Turkey at the time. Had it not been for the prospect of visa liberalisation which Turkey demanded for decades from the EU, the upgrading of the customs union agreement which constitutes a basis for expanding the economic relationship between the two sides, and the prospect of further progress on accession negotiations which would bring Turkey one step closer to EU membership, it would be much less likely for the EU to accommodate Turkey in this agreement and deliver this relatively quick and effective response. Hence the instruments of the EU's control power—rooted also in the EU's long contractual relationship with Turkey (which involves the prospect of accession, giving the EU a certain amount of leverage over the country), combined with successful and novel, informal and inter-institutional collaboration within the EU—enabled the EU to employ a certain degree of protean power in the face of the migration crisis.

Yet, as Turkey slid further into authoritarianism with an even more diminishing membership prospect and thus declining EU leverage (Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016), the sustainability of this deal has increasingly begun to be questioned (Adar 2022), largely due to the control power that this innovation has generated in favour of Turkey and at the expense of the EU. In other words, the effect of Europe's

Footnote 3 (continued)

Aegean Sea dropped from 434 in 2016 to 62 in 2017 and 174 in 2018 (See the first, second and third annual reports on the Facility for Refugees).

[4] One year after the statement, there were 27,000 arrivals, 1504 returns, and 9400 relocations. The Commission and the EU Member States also committed to providing significant support to the Greek authorities in the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement, to improve migration management and reception conditions in Greece. However, progress reports on the EU–Turkey Statement suggest that the Greek islands continue to be under great pressure due to slow processing of asylum applications, as well as limited capacity of reception and pre-removal facilities and staff (for example, see European Commission. *Seventh Report on the Progress made in the implementation of the EU–Turkey Statement.* COM (2017) 470 final. 6.9.2017).

[5] Statement by President von der Leyen following the meeting with Turkish President Erdoğan, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/statement_21_1603.

protean power contributed to Turkey's control power vis-à-vis the EU, demonstrating how "focusing [exclusively] on actor attributes tends to conceal reversibilities in positions that changing practices make visible" (Katzsenstein and Seybert 2018, p. 282). This outcome has been most visible in the way in which Turkey used the migration deal as a tool to extract further political and economic concessions from the EU. The first major threat by Turkey to annul the deal and to allow the free movement of refugees into the EU came in 2016, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, in the form of silencing the EU's criticisms towards massive purges and increased repression in the country; and later during the constitutional referendum campaign in 2017, when several EU member states cancelled local rallies organised by the Turkish government in support of the referendum for a presidential system[6] (Leonard and Kaunert 2021, pp. 741–742). The threats on both occasions paid off, with the gradual toning down of EU's criticisms of Turkey's democratic violations (Saatçioğlu 2020), culminating in an official visit by the former Chancellor Merkel in the run-up to the constitutional referendum. That visit was heavily criticised by the Turkish opposition for providing Erdoğan with support and legitimacy, at a turning point for the fate of Turkish democracy.[7] Most of our interviewees in Berlin have affirmed that the migration deal has provided Turkey with a leverage that would significantly tone down Germany's objections to the rule of law violations within the country (Interviewees 24, 25, 26, 27, 28).

A similar display of control power came in the winter of 2020, when the Turkish government actively encouraged and organised for the transport of refugees to the Turkish–Greek border after a Russian airstrike killed 33 soldiers in the Syrian province of Idlib (Amnesty International 2020). It justified its position by referring to the lack of European support to Turkey's policies in Syria, and by doing that, also attempted to divert the domestic outrage away from itself (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020). The issue was finally resolved when both sides agreed on the financial compensation package to Turkey, which resulted in the dispersal of the entire EU budget for the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey as well as some additional EU funding (Leonard and Kaunert 2021, p. 745). Hence, through leveraging the deal, the Turkish government was able to secure additional funds in an ailing economy as well as strengthening its legitimacy during times when its domestic and foreign policy was challenged on the inside (Taş, 2022, p. 15), as in the run-up to the constitutional referendum and in the aftermath of the casualties suffered in Idlib.

In summary, the migration crisis has given rise to a mixed experience of uncertainty as well as heightened risk for EU decision makers, who responded with an innovative deal enabled by informality (hence protean power), using also resources associated with its control power (visa liberalisation, financial compensation, accession negotiations, customs union upgrade), but with unforeseen protean power effects which ultimately enhanced Turkey's control power vis-à-vis the EU. It is also

[6] Turkish citizens who reside abroad also have the right to participate in general elections and referenda held in Turkey.

[7] "President Erdoğan to Present Merkel Visit as Show of Support: Main Opposition Leader", Hurriyet Daily News, 1 February 2017. https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-to-present-merkel-visit-as-show-of-support-main-opposition-leader-109171.

suggested that the EU's protean power may further be limited if it fails to introduce novel policies under recent conditions of increasing anti-migration sentiments and economic unease in Turkey. As one of the interviewees (6) put it, "The EU can't just keep putting in more and more money in this area. An alternative is taking the chapter on foreign and security policy and deliver on that. It's essential to look at the sources of migration as in the case of Afghanistan and Syria."

The failed coup attempt

Turkey has a long history of coups, yet the latest attempt was different in many respects. On the night of 15 July 2016, a faction within the Turkish armed forces affiliated with the Gulen movement attempted a coup d'état against the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*—AKP) government. Tanks rolled onto the streets of Istanbul and Ankara; soldiers blocked two major bridges in Istanbul connecting the European and Asian sides of the city; fighter jets bombed the national parliament; the coup plotters opened fire on civilians; some media outlets including the major state TV channel were forced off air; and finally before midnight the coup attempters issued a statement saying that "the political administration that has lost all legitimacy has been forced to withdraw".[8] President Erdoğan, who was on vacation in a sea resort at the time, went live on Turkish TV and addressed the nation on FaceTime to urge the people to take to the streets and resist the military. A night of confrontations, loud blasts and gunfire ensued, mostly in Istanbul and Ankara, until the Turkish intelligence unit declared that the coup attempt was suppressed in the early hours of Saturday morning. During the coup attempt nearly 300 people, most of them civilians, were killed and more than 1,535 were injured. Immediately afterwards, a wave of sweeping operations started in order to reveal those who were behind the uprising. Officially, Fethullah Gulen, a Turkish cleric who had been living in exile since the 1990s, and his clandestine Gulenist movement were blamed for the failed coup attempt. Now labelled as the 'Fetullahist Terrorist Organization' (FETÖ), this movement had long been the Islamist and close ally of the AKP government.

The coup attempt came as a shock to the Turkish public and took the EU completely by surprise. Even so, as early as 16 July, the President of the European Council, the President of the European Commission, and the EU High Representative declared on behalf of EU member states, "The EU fully supports the democratically elected government, the institutions of the country and the rule of law" (European Commission 2016). Yet, aside from this official statement of support to the elected government, there were no solidarity visits to the Turkish

[8] *Milliyet* (Turkish daily), July 26, 2016, https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/darbecilerin-sozde-sikiyonetim-plani-ortaya-cikti-2284300.

government by EU officials or EU member state leaders (İçener 2016, p. 74).[9] As a former senior diplomat notes, "apart from the British prime minister nobody from the EU visited Turkey because of uncertainties" (Interviewee 7). One declaration of support, the European Council's official condemnation of the coup attempt, was perceived as equivocal by Turkish officials as it came three days after the coup attempt had taken place and failed. A large number of our interviewees testify in alignment with Pomorska and Thomas's (2024, p. 15) observation that "the decentralized nature of EU decision-making, the strong norm of consultation among member-states" emerged as a constraining factor for the EU to react swiftly to the coup attempt (Interviewees 1, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 15, 20). The EU's inability to act promptly in this particular crisis is aptly explained in the lengthy quotation from a high-level official at the European External Action Service (EEAS):

> I want to underline that the European institutions and the mechanisms behind them do not have the habit of reacting very quickly on anything that's not foreseeable. The 2016 failed coup took everybody by surprise. So it takes days to react for sure. Yet, it was not slower than any similar event that you could see around the world. Any member state separately or individually could have given a faster reaction. In the EU you have to consult all the ambassadors before you can issue a statement. I have heard several times that the authorities were complaining that the EU was slow and was not as supportive as expected, but in our view this was something which is normal business, neither slow nor fast. In some similar cases, it was even weaker and slower.... The EU is by definition a union of 27 member states. Especially on foreign policy 27 members have not given up on their sovereign rights. None of them would be happy to see Mr Michel or Borrell speak on behalf of them. This is not something that will change today or tomorrow. So the capacity of the EU to respond swiftly to crises is limited by its own definition. (Interviewee 3)

This conviction was widely shared by numerous interviewees pointing to the intergovernmental nature of foreign policymaking in the EU (Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 13). The delayed EU response and lack of a more intensive engagement with Turkey fed substantially into the anti-Western and Eurosceptic narrative of the government. The argument that the coup attempt was a Western plot against Turkey was frequently used by the AKP leaders to justify expanding and renewing the state of emergency and accompanying oppressive and exceptionalist practices (Kaliber 2023). The lack of improvisational, innovative and transformative responses on the part of the EU was instrumentalised by the Turkish government to exercise heavy control power

[9] Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Linas Linkevičius was the first high-level EU member state politician to visit Turkey after the coup attempt on August 22. Elmar Brok, the chair of the European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee and Kati Piri, the European Parliament's rapporteur on Turkey, visited Turkey as the first high-level political figures from EU institutions between August 23 and 25 (İçener 2016, p. 81).



on the Turkish society. The EU was quickly portrayed as a hypocritical actor which failed to take a just, moral and ethical stance for democracy, and this representation found large resonance across the vast majority of Turkish society which stood against the coup attempt. AKP leaders and particularly president Erdoğan have long argued that the EU states were slow and restrained to show solidarity with Turkey and its democratically elected government.

Yet, many EU officials, policymakers, and researchers we interviewed either completely disagreed or partly agreed with this criticism. According to those who partially agreed, the EU states could not figure out what was really happening in Turkey on the night of the coup and immediately afterwards (Interviewees 4, 15). Several interviewees pointed out that the lack of sympathy in Europe towards the autocratising, anti-Western Turkish government was another reason why the EU's support was slow and restrained (Interviewees 8, 11). From the EU's perspective, it was puzzling to understand "how such a subversive and intricate network (the Gulenist movement) remained clandestine throughout the years and how a close ally of the government turned suddenly into a fierce enemy" (Interviewees 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 19). An interviewee also noted that the Turkish government's criticism "is not entirely unfounded. There's a perception in Ankara that Turkey is not an equal member of the NATO alliance as perceived threats to Turkey's security are not taken as seriously as those to the EU or Washington DC. So it comes with the difficult relationship that needs to be managed" (Interviewee 20).

Yet, many interviewees (in particular bureaucrats from the European Commissions and European politicians) tend to reject the accusation that "the EU did not take a stand strongly enough or rapidly enough" (Interviewee 22, also Interviewees 3, 13, 16, 17, 21, 23). "We were simply trying to understand what was happening" (Interviewee 22), and "there was a state of confusion about what exactly was happening" (Interviewee 23, also Interviewee 7). Some interviewees referred to the lack of information (an element of control power) and reservations of EU states and institutions that "the coup might be staged" (Interviewee 18).

The fact that Turkey's oppressive policies during the Gezi Park protests in 2013 and its "unilateral actions in Syria against the Kurdish community" had already eroded the mutual trust between the two may be cited as another reason explaining the EU's reserved reaction (Interviewee 6). Nevertheless, as several interviewees acknowledge, "During the night of the coup or just after that, it would have been possible for the EU to have a clear stance against the plotters of the coup while at the same time being critical about the government's response to it. That would be the right thing to do" (Interviewee 4).

It seems that the coup attempt fostered a high sense of uncertainty on the part of the EU decision makers on what was actually happening in Turkey and the direction in which the events would unfold. Nonetheless, our interviews and the available data do not suggest a heightened perception of risk on the part of the European decision makers with respect to how the coup attempt would have an effect on the EU and its member states. The incident was perceived exclusively as a matter of Turkey's domestic affairs, which the EU would be best positioned not to interfere or engage with in any way.

As a manifestation of a heavy dependence on control power, on 20 July the Turkish government imposed a state of emergency, partially suspending fundamental



rights and freedoms as well as some articles of the European Convention on Human Rights (Venice Commission 2016). The nationwide emergency rule was extended seven times in a row for three months at a time, until it was formally lifted in July 2018. The state of emergency was heavily used and abused by the Turkish government to suppress dissent and to further consolidate its grip over the society. The government issued 37 unchecked emergency decrees substantially expanding executive powers, targeting not only coup plotters but also all opposition groups and most notably the Kurdish political movement in Turkey (Kaliber and Whiting 2023). It has become common practice to ban demonstrations and gatherings on the grounds of public security (Arslanalp and Erkmen 2020), to criminalise dissenting political activism through stigmatisation, to prohibit protests and civil disobedience as acts of terrorism, to restrict or entirely put on hold fundamental rights and freedoms, and to pronounce a certain segment of society as a threat to national security (Kaliber 2023).

The EU's relative apathy towards the failed coup attempt persisted in its aftermath, while the Turkish government continued to weaken Turkish democracy and trump fundamental rights and freedoms in the country. The coup attempt and the ensuing large police operations, mass trials, detentions and imprisonment of political activists, and mass dismissals from public posts all created uncertainty for EU–Turkey relations. It is in fact the case that Turkey's membership prospect was already diminished at the time, leaving the EU with minimal leverage on Turkey through accession conditionality. However, this did not lead the EU to develop creative and novel policy instruments or mechanisms to deal with the Turkish question. It can be argued that the lack of an innovative response in this case was largely due to the fact that while the coup attempt and its immediate aftermath produced an experience of uncertainty for EU decision makers, this was not combined with an experience of risk to the EU. The potential political instability aroused by the coup attempt and illiberal practices by the AKP government was perceived as destabilising for Turkey–EU relations, but not for the EU itself.

Assessing EU protean power: innovation or more of the same?

In this article, we have sought to explore the conditions that can enable and/or constrain the use of EU's protean power, through an analysis of the EU response to two sudden crises in the EU's wider neighbourhood, namely the 2015 migration crisis and the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey.

We have found evidence for the use of protean power and control power in the migration crisis and complete lack of EU agency in the case of the failed coup attempt. We have shown that whether an incident raises uncertainty, risk, or both, has a bearing on the type of power employed by the EU. In the migration crisis, where the perceived uncertainty and risk were high on the part of the EU, it managed to use its control power resources to formulate an innovative, albeit normatively questionable, response in the form of the EU–Turkey migration deal. As the failed coup attempt and the further violation of Turkish democracy and fundamental freedoms in its immediate aftermath raised uncertainty, it did not lead to an experience of risk on the part of the EU, having been perceived largely as a matter of



domestic governance over which the EU has also long lost its control power. Hence, in conceptual terms, we have observed evidence in support of the argument that "not all uncertainty breeds improvisation and innovation" (Guzzini 2020, p. 452).

We have also seen that we need to rethink the relationship between control and protean power in a non-dichotomous and in interactionist fashion, whereby protean power can be generated with recourse to the control power resources which the actors possess. Informality here emerges as an enabling factor for the emergence of protean power, as also demonstrated by the way in which the migration deal was reached. The EU having relatively more control power to exert on Turkey paved the way for it to exercise protean power responding to the migration crisis through creative and novel (though normatively questionable) instruments. On the flip side, protean power can also lead to the generation of unforeseen control power on recipient states, as has been the case with the increase of Turkey's leverage over the EU thanks to the migration deal.

On the other hand, the lack of control power as in the case of the 2016 coup attempt substantially crippled the EU's agility and capacity to exert protean power. Given that Turkey's EU process had already stalled and the relations between the two were substantially weakened by successive crises, the EU did not calculate the coup as a risk for itself. It adopted a wait-and-see approach which highly increased the Turkish government's sense of a lack of solidarity. As observed by Pomorska and Thomas, decentralisation and intergovernmentalism in its decision-making processes have served as limiting factors for the EU in reacting to the crisis promptly and innovatively. As such, the EU was not seen by the Turkish government as a credible ally supporting the democratically elected government in the face of such an imminent threat of a coup, crippling the EU's capacity to exercise control power.

Appendix

List of Interviewees[10]

Interviewee 1: Wolfgang Wessels, academic, Turkish-German University and College of Europe, online, 4 April 2022.

Interviewee 2: Head of Turkey unit, The European Commission, online, 8 April 2022.

Interviewee 3: Policy officer, The European External Action Service, online, 18 April 2022.

Interviewee 4: Researcher of European politics, online, 19 April 2022.

Interviewee 5: Regional representative, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, online, 20 April 2022.

Interviewee 6: Researcher, European Neighborhood Council (ENC), Brussels, 25 April 2022.

Interviewee 7: Former EU ambassador and head of delegation to Turkey, Brussels, 26 April 2022.

[10] The names of the interviewees have been kept anonymous if they required it. Otherwise, their names have been revealed.

Interviewee 8: Senior Fellow, German Marshall Fund, Brussels, 27 April 2022.

Interviewee 9: Academic, Brussels School of Governance, The European Foundation for Democracy, Brussels, 27 April 2022.

Interviewee 10: Desk officer for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Turkey, The European Parliament, Brussels, 28 April 2022.

Interviewee 11: Nacho Sánchez Amor, MEP, EP standing rapporteur on Turkey, Brussels, 28 April 2022.

Interviewee 12: Academic, Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Brussels, 28 April 2022.

Interviewee 13: Head of Division, European External Action Service, Brussels, 28 April 2022.

Interviewee 14: Senior policy analyst at European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels, 30 April 2022.

Interviewee 15: Director, Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP), Berlin, 4 May 2022.

Interviewee 16: Jürgen Hardt, member of the German Bundestag, foreign policy spokesperson of the CDU/CSU Parliamentarian Group, Berlin, 5 May 2022.

Interviewee 17: Member of the German Bundestag (The Social Democratic Party), Berlin, 5 May 2022.

Interviewee 18: Researcher, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), Berlin 5 May 2022.

Interviewee 19: Member of the German Bundestag (Christian Democratic Union), Berlin, 10 May 2022.

Interviewee 20: Researcher, The EU Foreign Policy unit at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), online, 25 May 2022.

Interviewee 21: Academic, The University of Tübingen, Istanbul, 26 May 2022.

Interviewee 22: Political officer, EU Delegation to Turkey, online, 30 May 2022.

Interviewee 23: Head of division, European External Action Service, online, 13 June 2022.

Interviewee 24: Member of the German Bundestag (The Social Democratic Party), Berlin, 27 September 2023.

Interviewee 25: Official, German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Berlin, 12 January 2024.

Interviewee 26: Member of the German Bundestag (Christian Democratic Union), Berlin, 1 February 2024.

Interviewee 27: Member of the German Bundestag (Christian Democratic Union), Berlin, 1 February 2024.

Interviewee 28: Official, German Chancellery, Berlin, 2 February 2024.

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