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Conceptualizing European Strategic Autonomy²

Introduction

Following the publication of the 2016 Global Strategy (EUGS) of the European Union (EU) which presented European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) as a global “ambition” of the EU (*A Global Strategy...*, 2016), the concept of ESA became increasingly embedded in the EU policymaking and is used to justify an ever-growing pile of legislative files. However, its meaning remains elusive due to a plurality of competing definitions and high politicization of its interpretations. As indicated by the empirical research, how ESA is being understood and perceived very often depends on personal, political, or ideological opinions, leading to many controversies surrounding the term. As a result, ESA is a “conceptually ambiguous” (Csernaton, 2022, p. 396) and politically contested term while the European debate about it is considered to be “toxic” by many (*European Parliament...*, interview 21.06.2023).

The aim of this article is to show and analyse how the concept of European Strategic Autonomy is understood in the EU. It undertakes to verify the following hypothesis: despite many competing conceptualizations of ESA, a common understanding of the notion is emerging in the EU. It attempts to contribute to the studies on ESA in two ways. First, it categorizes different conceptualizations of ESA into two main streams, indicating their key building blocks and the political projects they may entail in terms of consequences for the EU. Second, it seeks to complement the debate on ESA (which, so far, has been to a large extent mostly conceptual/abstract) by integrating findings – concerning the meaning of the concept – from empirical research, i.e. interviews with EU officials. The article undertakes to answer the following research questions: how is ESA being defined; what are the main ways to conceptualize it; what is the contribution of the EU institutions to defining ESA; if and what understanding of ESA has been adopted in the EU. To this end, it conducts a thorough qualitative anal-

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ysis of the EU's official documents, academic literature, and think-tank publications on the topic. Additionally, it draws from interviews conducted between April 2023 and July 2023 with the EU officials, as well as experts working on the concept in the European think-tanks, including research services of the EU institutions.

Research methods

As the scientific research on ESA is still developing and only a few exhaustive studies on the topic of ESA have been published yet, the research method adopts the form of case study with the intention to explore, describe, and explain the empirical referent (conceptualization of *strategic autonomy* in the European Union). Over the course of the research, three research techniques were used: qualitative literature review, qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative literature review comprised of review and analysis of scientific texts published (mainly in the area of European studies) that directly engage with the concepts of ESA or the *European Sovereignty* or focus on policies closely linked with ESA such as the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) or trade policy. A special emphasis was given to research and analysis more recent texts, mostly published after 2016. The objective of this research was to map and determine how ESA was referred to in academic publications and how it was conceptualized with the use of scientific tools. Further, a qualitative content analysis of texts was applied to study the official EU documents and publications, as well as publications by the European think-tanks and researchers. Selection of texts was done based on their use of words such as *European Strategic Autonomy*, *Strategic Autonomy*, *European Autonomy* or *European Sovereignty*, or reference to the concept of the European autonomy in documents mainly related to defence and security. Texts from the period 1998–2023 were surveyed. The objective was two-fold: first, to establish how, when and in relation to which policy domains, ESA was referred to by the EU institutions and think-tanks, and second, to continue mapping conceptualizations of ESA and place specific cases under one of the developed classifications. Specifically, this procedure focused on analysing: 1) how ESA has been defined, 2) what were the differences in understandings of ESA, 3) what were the main elements and policies of ESA, 4) what did the use of the concept postulate, 5) what was the relation to the EU, 6) what was the overall political meaning of the concept. Focus on think-tank publications next to the official EU publications was justified by an observation that it was primarily in publications of European think-tanks during the period 2016–2023 where the notion of ESA was conceptually developed. This decision has been later supported by data collected during interviews which indicated that the European think-tanks played an important role in advancing European understandings of ESA. Third, to further deepen research on understanding of ESA among the EU institutions and policymakers, define their engagement with it and verify partial conclusions from previous stages of research, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted between April and July 2023. In total, 26 interviews were conducted, including: 15 interviews with members of staff of the EU institutions (Council of the European Union, European Commission, European Parliament, and European Exter-

nal Actions Service), 11 interviews with analysts from 7 European think-tanks based in Brussels, Paris and Helsinki (including European Union Institute of Strategic Studies) and 1 interview with representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of an EU Member State. Individuals were selected based on their engagement with the concept of ESA as evidenced by either publications, or public engagements, or through direct recommendation by other individuals that were interviewed.

Following Haughton's remark that "the study of the EU would benefit from the adoption of a more combinatorial approaches" (Haughton, 2016) this article adopts the strategy labeled as „combinational" (Katzenstein, Sil, 2010) or „analytical eclecticism", that has been recently applied to the study of the EU foreign policy (Pohl, van Willigen, 2015). It uses analytical concepts from several theoretical traditions, including the notion of empty signifier (Huysmans, 1996), constructive ambiguity (Jegen, Mérand, 2014; Crespy, Vanheuverzwijn, 2019) as well as draws assumptions from discourse theory and discursive institutionalism that look at institutional discourses as instruments of political change and influence (Schmidt, 2008; Carstensen, Schmidt, 2016, 2018).

Defining European Strategic Autonomy

Academic literature studying the European Strategic Autonomy has only recently started to interpret it with the application of scientific theories. Previously, strategic autonomy was either defined through the exposition of the content of the concept (by indicating what strategic autonomy should or could mean) or was not defined at all. Different conceptualizations providing content to the notion of ESA will be the subject of analysis in the next section. However, starting from the period of 2021/2022, a new wave of studies of ESA emerged. These studies often place the phenomenon in a broader context of social sciences. Recently, contributions that trace the evolution of the concept to make some sense of the perplexed debate about ESA have been published (Lavery et al., 2022). Particularly worth mentioning are the two issues of academic journals dedicated to the topic of ESA that were published recently: a 2022 special issue of "European Foreign Affairs Review" and a 2023 issue of "Common Market Law Review" (vol 60, no. 3). They contain a plethora of valuable interpretations and scientific elaborations of ESA that also refer to each other. For example, Hoffmeister proposes a definition of a strategic autonomy that is rooted in legal analysis but also incorporates insights from political science: "striving for multilateral solutions, while being able to take lawful action alone to safeguard the Union's values, fundamental interests, security, independence and integrity" (Hoffmeister, 2023, p. 673). Bento has also recently proposed a well-elaborated definition that, drawing from several disciplines, defining strategic autonomy as a "leeway available to the strategic actor to choose, adopt, and pursue achievable ends, within a relevant timeframe, given the power capabilities available, and their effectiveness in the prevailing circumstances" (Bento, 2022, p. 65). Both definitions are preoccupied with providing a meaning (content) to the concept rather than interpreting it. However, there is also a growing scholarship that interprets ESA in a more distanced manner, with the use of conceptual tools of social sciences. Helwig and Sinkkonen conducted a preliminary analysis of ESA

through the lenses of main theories of International Relations (Helwig, Sinkkonen, 2022) and Helwig used social constructivism to analyse “the ideational process that pushes the strategic autonomy narrative to the forefront” (Helwig, 2022, p. 22). This article draws from that research as well as their observation that the “‘strategic autonomy’ is the term of choice that EU and Member-State representatives use in order to describe the Union’s response to global challenges” (Helwig, Sinkkonen, 2022, p. 1). It also follows recent original scholarship that analysed ESA through the lenses of the Science and Technology Studies and Poststructuralist Discourse Theory (Oliveira Martins, Mawdsley, 2021; Csernaton, 2022; Jacobs et al., 2023) and takes inspiration from work by Csernaton who interprets ESA as an empty or floating signifier (Csernaton, 2022, p. 402). Combining these insights, this article approaches European Strategic Autonomy as an empty concept that is used to indicate how the European Union aims to respond to external challenges. As such, ESA is being saturated by different meanings in different conceptualizations and by different actors. The following section focuses mostly on the conceptualizations put forward by European think-tanks after 2016, it also links these conceptualizations with valuable scientific contributions where they share an interest in particular interpretation or understanding of ESA. The positive role of think-tanks in shaping the European foreign policy has been recently demonstrated in studies on ESA and think-tanks (Veselinovič, 2022). It has also been confirmed during interviews that contribution from European think-tanks is relevant for work on ESA by researchers and policy advisors in the EU institutions (*European Parliament...*, interview 7.06.2023; European External Action Service, interview 14.04.2023).

Two streams of conceptualisations of European Strategic Autonomy

Framing of the concept of ESA in the global context painted by the EUGS has symbolically opened a new chapter in the development of the notion of strategic autonomy. From 2016 onwards there is a visible evolution of how the concept of ESA is being defined. First stream of interpretations of strategic autonomy remains more traditional in the sense that it places the scope of the concept more-or-less in the field of security and defence. These interpretations in general explore elements present in pre-2016 conceptualizations, from capabilities development to the build-up of the European defence industry. Nevertheless, this strand of conceptualizations does evolve and indeed is advanced with new and original elaborations, for example through the exploration of a triangular structure of strategic autonomy comprising political, operational, and industrial dimensions. They will be called the *military-centric conceptualisation of ESA*. Second stream of interpretations will be labelled the *comprehensive conceptualisations of ESA* as it refers to ESA as a comprehensive (multi-sectoral) concept.

The military-centric conceptualisation of ESA that has flourished in the years 2016–2019 is in fact a direct continuation of the original stream of conceptualisations of strategic autonomy that dates to the origins of the idea in the French strategic thought and the debates surrounding the creation of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU. On the European level, the idea of ESA (although not the exact

label) made its first appearance in the Saint-Malo Declaration (December 1998) which established key elements of ESA: capable force (operational capacity), capacity to use it (decisional/political capacity) and capacity to provide it with necessary means (industrial/technological capacity). The industrial aspect is crucial and as showed by Schilde, the push to integrate and strengthen the European defence industry dates back to 1980s may well be a key factor behind the development of CSDP in the first place (Schildt, 2017). Both the industrial and technological elements are considered tightly linked to the concept of ESA and gave rise to ambitious European initiatives in the European space and defence industry sectors. This understanding of ESA became dominant in the EU in years 1998–2016, in particular within the field of CSDP that was consequently developed during that time. “Strategic Autonomy” was mentioned in this context in the EU documents related to CSDP in 2009, 2010, and multiple times in 2013, 2014 and 2015 (*European Parliament resolution...*, 2009; *European Parliament resolution...*, 2010; *European Parliament resolution...*, 2013; European Commission, 2013; European Council, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2014; Council of the European Union, 2015).

After the publication of the 2016 EUGS scholars and analysts working on the European security and defence felt compelled to revisit the concept and provide it with more theoretical depth. The most important development in this regard is the fact that concept of ESA has been given a three-dimensional structure. In this optic, strategic autonomy comprises of three key elements: operational autonomy, industrial/technological autonomy and political autonomy. Operational autonomy can be defined as the ability to deploy force; industrial autonomy is the ability to provide tools necessary for force deployment; and political autonomy is the ability to independently decide when, how and to what objectives it should be deployed. Together, they provide for a triangular military-centric model of ESA. Operational autonomy should be implemented through development of military planning capacity and key military capabilities (i.e. so-called strategic enablers), industrial autonomy should be implemented through development of the EDTIB, and political autonomy should be implemented through development of institutional capacity. These elements are being elaborated in many think-tank publications in the post-2015 period (Arteaga, 2017; Biscop, 2015, 2016, 2019; Kempin, Kunz, 2017; Järvenpää, Major, Sakkov, 2019; Mauro, 2018). Military-centric understanding of ESA has been also hitherto dominant in the academic research on ESA (García Pérez, 2019; Howorth, Keeler, 2003; Howorth, 2017, 2018, 2020). Recently, several robust scientific studies were published and provide for an in-depth analysis of European security & defence policy that touches upon important aspects of ESA in the military-centric context (Bartels, Kellner, Optenhögel, 2017; Fiott, 2019; Calcara, 2020; Koppa, 2022). The military-centric conceptualisation of ESA indicates what is a desired result – for Europe – of achieving the strategic autonomy. This issue is unavoidable, as it directly touches upon a fundamental question of *what is strategic autonomy for*. The answers given by the military-centric interpretations differ depending on the level of ambition one wants to ascribe to Europe, nevertheless they usually point to the EU’s role as a security and defence actor. For example, Brustlein states that Europe should “strive to become a military power” (Brustlein, 2018). Nevertheless, these conceptualizations in general define the strategic autonomy as the ability of Europe to act as a security provider beyond its borders, and internally. Of

course, ESA in the security and defence domain cannot be disconnected from foreign policy and ultimately was always meant to enhance EU as a foreign policy actor.

Second stream of conceptualizations (*comprehensive*) expands on all the initial elements of ESA and can be characterized with several key features. First, the concept of ESA becomes increasingly linked with the issue of sovereignty and is being used to denote a state of sovereign self-conduct of a polity (the EU in this case), which is expressed by a heavy emphasis on political autonomy and autonomous decision-making, particularly in relation to questions of grand strategy. Second, the applications of the concept of ESA are being increasingly made in policy sectors beyond the security and defence – something, that is being labelled here as a *broadening* of the concept. This broadening serves a functional connector, bringing greater coherence and unity between different strands of the EU policy to strengthen the EU's general performance as an autonomous actor. In other words, ESA becomes increasingly treated as a unifying orientation that can be partially pursued within different policy sectors. It is also an attempt to build coherence between internal and external policies as well as between internal and external outcomes of specific policies. Third, resilience is being notoriously connected with ESA – either both notions appear along each other in the discourse or the conceptual essence of resilience is being directly connected to the strategic autonomy. It is usually used in the context of strategic dependencies that limit Europe's capabilities and actorness and in the context of the security of supply chains. Fourth, the focus on capabilities or capacity to act that was originally at the heart of ESA is maintained, although no longer limited to only military capabilities. Finally, stirred by external factors, the discourse on ESA within this stream of conceptualizations becomes increasingly internally oriented, leading to reflections on how strategic autonomy should be pursued through also internal action.

The rise of comprehensive conceptualisations of European Strategic Autonomy is the most interesting development related to the concept. These narratives often use the three-dimensional structure of the ESA that was developed by the military-centric conceptualisations but take it to another level. The defining feature of the comprehensive conceptualisations of ESA is that they are preoccupied with the EU's overall performance in the global context. They do not limit the concept of ESA to one sector but rather assume that in order for Europe to become strategically autonomous, ESA should be implemented in multiple sectors and in relation to many challenges that could negatively affect European interests and hinder its capacity to act. This new *global perspective* on ESA focuses on Europe's "distinct interests and norms and the need to create capabilities to pursue those globally and across several policy areas" (Helwig, 2020, p. 12). Since 2019, this perspective is present in a growing number of think-tank publications (Grevi, 2019; Helwig, 2020; Tocci, 2021) and was in fact the subject of development by the think-tanks of the EU institutions themselves. Studies published by the European Union Institute of Strategic Studies (Fiott et al. 2021), European Parliamentary Research Service (Anghel et al., 2020; Damen, 2022), Analysis and Research Team of the Council's General Secretariat (Analysis and Research Team, 2021) all contribute to the comprehensive conceptualization of ESA as they treat it as a multisectoral endeavour aimed to strengthen EU's global actorness. In this optic EU's multi-sectoral policies that are relevant for strategic autonomy comprise

of a plethora of initiatives and instruments that make up for Europe's posture on the global stage – from regulatory power, trade agreements and the international role of the Euro currency to technological and scientific innovations and investments necessary to ensure that Europe will be able to compete globally in technology and industry.

Another novelty of the comprehensive conceptualisations of ESA is that they often point towards a need to develop an approach that conceptually transcends sectoral, institutional, and political divisions in Europe. As an idea, ESA is necessarily linked to the European Union and the spirit of European integration as an endeavour in which states come and work together to form an answer to challenges that surpass their individual capacities. In a way, ESA can be seen as a logical consequence of the institutional maturing of the EU as a polity. Over the last 30 years the EU has been developing various policy tools of differing reach and power in multiple sectors. At the same time, it has been progressively faced with a growing number of internal and external crises that threaten the well-being of its citizens and economy, and perhaps even the existence of the European Union itself in its current form. Since the global environment is only likely to further deteriorate in the decade to come, the EU must be able to make use of the whole spectrum of its external and internal instruments to effectively protect its society and interests. It requires a certain level of internal unity and a coherent strategic understanding of stakes as well as of the extent of one's own capacity to act. The evolution of the idea of ESA can be interpreted as a conceptual response to this necessity. It is a result of acknowledgment of the complexity of the threats associated with transformation of the global order and the understanding that they require equally complex solutions tied by an overarching principle that guides their implementation. In this context ESA answers the question of how the EU should approach the rapidly changing external environment to protect its core interests by indicating that the EU needs to be *strategically autonomous*. As the High Representative Borell has stated, strategic autonomy is about "process of political survival" (Borell, 2020) of the EU as a polity. A certain internal re-calibration of the EU is necessary to ensure that the EU is ready and capable to respond to exogenous challenges. In words of Tocci: "the prerequisite for European strategic autonomy is internal unity, cohesion, strength and resilience" (Tocci, 2021, p. 5). Strategic autonomy may require in fact a deepening of European integration to "strengthen the basis for European sovereignty" (Grevi, 2019, p. 10). In this perspective, ESA is a concept that defines what the EU wants to be and how it wants to interact with its external environment. The pursue of strategic autonomy, therefore, is presented as an attempt to strengthen Europe as a sovereign polity, not simply as a security and defence actor. As observed by Csernatonì, the evolution of concept of ESA creates a vision of "Europe as a strategically independent and technologically sovereign imagined space" (Csernatonì, 2022, p. 397).

A view from the EU (institutions)

ESA has never had a fixed definition in the EU. Instead, the concept has been acting as a floating signifier, open for saturation with ideas or conceptualizations by various actors. This is still the case today, with the exception that the ambigu-

ity of ESA is in fact becoming constructive, allowing more entrepreneurial actors to put forward their interpretations and discuss them with others, thus leading to a growing consensus on the meaning of the notion. In a general perception of both think-tankers and policymakers, the EU institutions, and the European Commission in particular, have taken the lead in pursuit of ESA, and they are the ones pushing constructive strategic autonomy agenda forward (European Union Institute of Strategic Studies, interview 16.06.2023; European Parliament, interview 5.07.2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, interview 30.05.2023). Officials from the External Action Service, the European Parliament and the Council also point to the European Commission and especially President von der Leyen as the main entrepreneurs behind the current efforts to build ESA (European External Action Service, interview 5.05.2023; European Parliament, interview 6.06.2023). Another important institutional actor in this respect is the European Council. It has been using the term in its conclusions since 2013 and the character of its contribution can be understood in the context of its role in the political system of the EU: it gives political guidance, decides on domain and areas where ESA should be crucially pursued. Officials from various institutions point to the European Council as the appropriate body for reference concerning the decisions on the desired degree of ESA (European Commission, interview 22.06.2023a; European Parliament, interview 5.07.2023; Council of the European Union, interview 13.06.2023). It can be also noted that by flagging particular sectors and issues as linked to ESA, European Council is contributing to the broadening of the concept and also gives it required urgency. This last aspect has been also championed by the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, who undertook to communicate the significance of the notion of ESA to the broader public in the EU.

As indicated in the previous section, research services of the EU institutions have adopted a comprehensive conceptualization of ESA that treats it as a general policy orientation that can be applied to numerous policy sectors. This allowed for a relatively free growth of elaborations that operationalize ESA in relation to concrete issues facing the EU in various policy domains, thus greatly advancing the progress on strategic autonomy by conceptualizing ideas for EU's response towards specific threats and challenges. An important locus of inter-institutional discussions on ESA has been the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS), a network connecting foresight and research services of EU institutions. Within ESPAS framework ESA has been subject of debates, research and workshops and brainstorming for years, pooling input from nine key institutions of the EU (European Parliament, interview 5.07.2023). It has contributed to a gradual dissemination of the awareness and deepened understanding of ESA among the EU staff responsible for policy coordination, strategy and planning. Also, foresight activities of the EU have been crucial to the conceptualization of ESA inside the EU institutions. The establishment of an "internal neural network" for conceptualizing upcoming challenges is also perceived as necessary step for building strategic autonomy of the EU (European Parliament, interview 6.06.2023,). Commission Vice-President Šefčovič has been appointed as the first EU Commissioner for strategic foresight and has led the efforts to establish foresight capabilities in the entire EU and developing long-term strategic analysis of major challenges and risks for the

EU. The four strategic foresight reports published under his term in the years 2020–2023 engage with various aspects of ESA.

Beyond such conceptual work, controversies surrounding European intentions behind the term of ESA in relation to industrial and economic policy compelled European Commission to establish an official interpretation of the notion as related to the economic domain. Soon after taking office, the von der Leyen Commission has published a Communication on Industrial Strategy which stated that “strategic autonomy is about reducing dependence on others for things we need the most: critical materials and technologies, food, infrastructure, security and other strategic areas” (European Commission, 2020). This interpretation became influential, however there was still an intention to “rebalance the concept that was increasingly considered to justify an in-ward oriented EU” (European Commission, interview 22.06.2023b), and to signal to partners outside of the EU that ESA can and will be pursued also through cooperation with them. This was championed by the EU Trade Commissioner Hogan and DG TRADE that drafted the first concept paper, which, after having been positively received by the Commission President has resulted in a trade review publication on “Open Strategic Autonomy” which was characterized to encompass resilience and competitiveness of EU’s economy, responsible and fair EU action and “assertiveness and rules-based cooperation [...] but also its readiness to combat unfair practices and use autonomous tools to pursue its interests where needed” (European Commission, 2021). This document was subjected to inter-service consultations and has been since considered an official EU’s interpretation of ESA in economic domain, while the term “Open Strategic Autonomy” has become the official EU’s official name for ESA. Gradually, the Commission has also moved to a more practical engagement with ESA by filing a plethora of legislative proposals that were meant to bring about aspect of ESA accordingly to the interpretation from aforementioned documents. DG GROW under Commissioner Breton has doubled its efforts to develop proposals aimed to strengthen the resilience of European industry and economy vis-à-vis challenges that may weaken its strategic autonomy, DG COMP and DG CNNCT have spearheaded pioneering legislation in the digital domain that established the foundations for European digital sovereignty and DG DEFIS and DG HOME worked towards placing technologies that are critical for European security under special considerations. On most of these initiatives multiple DGs have been closely collaborating and although they sometimes differ in ideas on particularities of implementation, they nevertheless manage to balance one another and jointly produce proposals that push strategic autonomy agenda forward. A *Critical Raw Materials Act* that was proposed in March 2023 can be a good example of this, as it included contributions from many DGs, including DG DEFIS, DG MOVE, DG CNNCT and others (European Commission, interview 22.06.2023c).

Effectively, the Commission started to advance ESA mainly in areas where it has strong competences, so mostly in relation to trade and various aspects of the single market. By doing so, it has significantly strengthened a more comprehensive conceptualisation of ESA in the EU and extended main European efforts to pursue ESA to include sectors beyond the traditional domain of CSDP. Another result of the centred efforts of the respective DGs of the Commission is a greater emphasis on the resilience and partnership aspects of ESA, as well as a growing acceptance for such

interpretation in the EU.³ Interviews conducted during the course of this research point to growing conviction among EU policymakers that the meaning of the concept of ESA has been stabilized among the EU institutions. This, in turn, leads to a conclusion that since institutional interpretation of the concept has been established, the task of EU institutions is not any more to discuss the meaning of the concept, but to develop initiatives that advance ESA in practice. The institutional approach indicated by several EU officials interviewed during this research is that EU institutions “have moved to the next stage” which is practical application and “left debates and definitions to others” (think-tanks, academics, Member States) (European External Action Service, interview 14.04.2023; Council of the European Union, interview 13.06.2023). What is important is that it is true both in relation to supranational institutions (European Commission, European Parliament) and the intergovernmental ones (European Council, Council). Their engagement with ESA reflects their position in the institutional system of the EU. Due to its intergovernmental character, European Council’s role is considered to be decisive in establishing ESA as a destination and outlining domains that are vital to the pursue of thereof. Supranational actors, Commission and Parliament, are considered to be the ones tasked with forging ESA into political practice and guarding the move towards the goal. The meaning of ESA is believed to have been generally internalized among parts of the staff of the EU institutions and became “a guiding principle”, “a mindset” or an “idea at the back of the minds” of legislators both in the European Commission and the European Parliament (European Commission, interview 08.05.2023, 22.06.2023a; European Parliament, interview 5.07.2023).

Conclusions

This article provided contribution to the study of European Strategy Autonomy in two ways. First, it has categorized different conceptualizations of ESA into military-centric and comprehensive streams. Adoption of this distinction helps to understand how the concept of ESA has evolved and was consequently broadened beyond the domain of security and defence to express a *global* perception of the EU as a polity. These two conceptualizations of ESA can be taken as hitherto dominant (but not necessarily exhaustive) ways to define strategic autonomy by researchers who engaged with the subject. Second, it has complemented the debate on ESA with the empirical verification of the hypothesis stating that a common understanding of ESA is emerging in the EU. That common understanding seems to be centred around the themes of resilience and strengthening of overall security, with objectives of reducing dependencies and limiting vulnerabilities that may present risks/threats for the EU and its citizens. At the same time, it is not confined only to the domain of security and defence but concerns multiple policy sectors (which brings it closer the comprehensive streams of thinking on ESA). Therefore, the hypothesis has been verified positively, however with a caveat: the emergence of a common understanding of ESA in the EU does not

³ This has been confirmed during numerous interviews, including with officials from the Council (13.06.2023), External Action Service (05.05.2023), Parliament (5.07.2023) and the European Union Institute of Strategic Studies (16.06.2023).

fully annulate the political and theoretical discussions around the concept. Nevertheless, they seem to be given less prominence for the sake of enabling action in areas where there is general agreement about the objectives and substance of ESA. There is a growing belief in Brussels that a consensus on the meaning of the concept of ESA is gradually progressing and even if the term itself is still contested by some, the central idea behind it (that of reducing Europe's vulnerabilities that stem from dependencies and weaknesses vis-à-vis external challenges) is generally accepted and supported by the member states and key EU institutions (Council of the European Union, interview 13.06.2023; European Union Institute of Strategic Studies, interview 16.06.2023). The main finding of this article is that the institutions of the EU – while being receptive to the conceptual and political impulses from the member states and think-tanks – play a central and positive role in making strategic autonomy a key element of EU policymaking, effectively advancing ESA in the EU. Not only have they contributed to the conceptualization of ESA but also guided the move beyond the conceptualization phase and towards operationalization and practical implementation. As such, they have led to an emergence of a more consensual understanding of ESA in the EU, thus overcoming some of the negative controversies. European Commission has firmly taken the position of the most entrepreneurial actor behind strategic autonomy agenda in the EU at the same time leading to a more widely accepted interpretation of the term that may better resonate with the European society at large (as represented by the member states, EU institutions, think-tanks, industry associations and others). By embedding its interpretation of ESA into concrete applications, the concept became more operationalized and Europeanised. Also, more member states started to positively engage with the idea of ESA. Even if not always supportive of the use of the term of ESA itself, they are increasingly keen on initiatives that strengthen resilience and reduce critical dependencies and vulnerabilities, particularly in sectors beyond security and defence, and through external partnerships. This points to a conclusion, that the key building blocks that make up the concept of ESA have been successfully planted in the EU. ESA is increasingly embedded in the EU policymaking, from industrial to trade to critical technologies. The controversies surrounding the concept are no longer considered to be a meaningful obstacle to the pursuit of ESA and there is a belief that the term of ESA may even be abandoned but the idea behind it – that of reducing dependencies, limiting vulnerabilities, strengthening resilience, and building capacity to act – will remain a high priority on EU's agenda in the foreseeable future (European Commission, interview, 22.06.2023a, 22.06.2023c; European Parliament, interview 5.07.2023).

List of interviews referred in the text by institution

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Summary

Since the Global Strategy of 2016 which presented European Strategic Autonomy (ESA) a global "ambition" of the European Union, the concept of ESA became increasingly embedded in the EU policymaking. However, its meaning remains elusive due to a plurality of competing definitions and interpretations. The aim of this article is to show and analyse how the concept of European Strategic Autonomy is being defined and to verify the hypothesis: despite many competing conceptualizations of ESA, a common understanding of the notion is emerging in the EU. It traces how the concept of ESA is received and evolves in relation to European think-tanks and EU institutions. The research behind this article is based on an extensive review of academic literature, think-tank publications and official EU documents, as well as interviews conducted with EU officials and members of the European think-tank community.

Key words: European Strategic Autonomy, European Union, strategic autonomy, European sovereignty, think-tanks

Konceptualizacja Europejskiej Autonomii Strategicznej

Streszczenie

Od momentu publikacji Globalnej Strategii Unii Europejskiej (UE) z 2016 roku, która przedstawiła Europejską Autonomię Strategiczną (EAS) jako „globalną ambicję” UE, koncepcja EAS staje się coraz bardziej zakorzeniona w politykach UE. Jednocześnie, znaczenie tej koncepcji pozostaje ulotne w związku z dużą ilością różniących się od siebie definicji i interpretacji. Celem artykułu jest wskazanie i przeanalizowanie jak koncepcja EAS jest definiowana, a także weryfikacja przyjętej hipotezy: pomimo wielu konkurujących konceptualizacji EAS, w UE wyłania się wspólna jej interpretacja. Artykuł pokazuje, jak idea ESA jest przyjmowana i jak ewoluje w odniesieniu do europejskich think-tanków oraz instytucji UE. Badania, o które oparto artykuł obejmowały szeroki przegląd literatury uwzględniający publikacje naukowe, publikacje think-tanków i oficjalne dokumenty unijne, a także wywiady z urzędnikami UE i przedstawicielami europejskich think-tanków.

Słowa kluczowe: Europejska Autonomia Strategiczna, Unia Europejska, autonomia strategiczna, suwerenność europejska, think-tanki

