1. Introduction

Ukraine declared its European integration aspirations for the first time in July 1993. That same month the Ukrainian Parliament voted ‘On the Key Directions of the Foreign Policy of Ukraine’. The document stated that ‘the priority of Ukrainian foreign policy is Ukrainian membership in the European Communities, as long as it does not harm its national interests’ (cited by MFA of Ukraine, n.d.). Since then, Ukrainian history has taken a turbulent path. Yet, this orientation to Europe has remained in the official political discourses of all presidential administrations. When, 20 years after this declaration, in November 2013, the then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych made a decision not to sign the Ukraine–EU Association Agreement, Ukrainians started a peaceful protest on Maidan, the main square of Kyiv. The protest ended in a bloody confrontation between protestors and government-led troops. The violent reaction of the government led to the deaths of 100 protestors – a tragedy that triggered the national Revolution of Dignity and precipitated change in Ukraine’s leadership. In March 2014, Ukrainian Parliament adopted the Resolution ‘On confirmation of Ukraine’s course towards integration into the European Union and priority measures in this direction’. This resolution demonstrated Ukraine’s firm orientation towards Europe and desire to join the European integration process. On 7 February 2019, the Ukrainian Parliament voted to amend the Constitution of Ukraine outlining Ukraine’s strategic course towards membership of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), Ukraine is a ‘priority’ partner for the EU. The EU ‘supports Ukraine in ensuring a stable, prosperous and democratic future for its citizens and is unwavering in its support for Ukraine’s independence, territorial integrity and sovereignty’ (EEAS 2020). Yet, the Ukrainian crisis and the problematic future of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) with no promise of the partners’ EU membership in sight pose a challenge to the EU’s foreign policy and the EU’s exercise of power in this geopolitical region. EU Global Strategy (2016) recognizes this challenge and defines relations with the Eastern Neighbourhood as strategic for the EU. Confronted by major internal socio-political and economic crises and an urgent need to recalibrate its relations with a rapidly changing world outside its borders, the EU is an actor reacting to an ‘unpredictable and uncertain international system’ (Davis Cross and Karolewski 2017b, p. 3). In 2020,
Josep Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and a Vice President of the European Commission, outlined the EU’s path to react: ‘The geopolitical upheavals we are witnessing today underline the urgency with which the European Union must find its way in a world increasingly characterized by raw power politics. We Europeans must adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be’ (Borrell 2020). The instability and fluidity of internal and external contexts dictate that it is essential to analyse how the EU formulates and projects its self-visions as a foreign policy actor, but also to investigate how external actors perceive and evaluate the Union’s foreign policies. Only then can a genuine ‘adjustment of the mental maps’ take place. The increasing speed and the sheer scale of changes in the EU’s neighbourhood and globally means that systematic, timely, empirically informed and innovative reflections on EU foreign policy are urgently needed. Our book contributes to this call by focusing on the most recent developments in EU relations with its Eastern Partnership neighbour, Ukraine. Post-Maidan Ukraine has become a metaphorical and literal battleground where values and visions of EU foreign policy are contested. The intensity and longevity of the conflict warrants close academic attention.

We aim to avoid a typical trap of EU foreign policy research that prioritizes a ‘Euro-centric’ position while overlooking the ‘outside in’ perspective. We will instead assess how the EU is received and reacted to as a foreign policy actor – in our case by its key Eastern European neighbour, Ukraine. We argue that it is essential for European diplomacy to diagnose and understand the nuances of EU reception and perceptions in this volatile strategic country and also to track the expectations on EU action that have materialized. In this region, the EU – as a foreign policy actor – is actively involved in the domestic politics of the partners. Images of the EU and local expectations linked to these images will influence discourses and actions of the key players towards the EU. They will also shape internal public debates in Ukraine and in the EU on the geopolitical choices of Ukraine, at the present juncture and also in the future.

Our book argues the need to critically compare the EU’s self-visions, its role conceptions, with the visions and meanings of the EU that circulate externally. While research on EU external perceptions is a growing field in EU foreign policy studies, comparative studies of how the EU imagines itself vis-à-vis how the EU is seen by outsiders remain rare. Our comparative perspective addresses yet another endemic oversight in EU foreign policy studies – the danger of ‘introspective isolationism’ (Whitman 2019).

Our focus on perceptions and images is deliberate. Perceptions and images aid elites and the general public as they seek to interpret and structure complex situations and relationships. They serve as ‘road maps’ and ‘focal points’, prompting actors on how to define a certain situation and providing them with clues about how to react effectively (Goldstein and Keohane 1993).
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Perceptions and images can influence the analysis of a situation, lead the actors to favour certain types of actions (Cottam and Chih-yu 1992) and ‘serve to justify a nation’s desired reaction or treatment toward another nation’ (Alexander et al. 2005b, p. 28). Definitions of images and perceptions are multiple. Moreover, the terms ‘image’ and ‘perception’ are often used interchangeably. Zhabotynska and Velivchenko (2018, p. 361) warn us that perception is broader than image: ‘While perception implies both the perceiving process and its result, image solely means the result, or the outcome of this process.’ For us, images refer to ‘some aspects of the world which contains within its own structure and in terms of its own structure a reference to the act of cognition which generated it. It must say, not that the world is like this, but that it was recognized to have been like this by the image-maker’ (Cohen n.d.). It is also ‘the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of the behavioral unit, or its internal view of itself and its universe’ (Boulding 1959, pp. 120–21).

For more recent scholars of images in international relations (IR), images are ‘forms of heuristic reasoning, or mental shortcuts’ (Rapport 2017) that guide our behaviours towards the other: ‘patterns or configurations of coherent beliefs about the character, intentions, motives, and emotions attributed to or associated with the outgroup as a whole’ (Alexander et al. 2005a, p. 782).

Our analysis is informed by the ‘cognitive turn’ in the study of IR and foreign policy. In the intellectual core of the ‘cognitive approach’, according to Rapport (2017, online), are beliefs and belief systems as the ‘building blocks for most judgments’; cognitive biases and heuristics as mechanisms to ‘cope with uncertainty … in foreign policy settings’; and ‘judgments about policy risks and costs’; while ‘factors that facilitate and inhibit learning are crucial for understanding the conditions under which such judgments may improve over time’. The cognitive approach also prioritizes scholarly insights into an ‘individual’s group context and emotions’ as moderating inputs into cognitive processes (Rapport 2017, online). To structure our analysis, we introduce a novel combination of role theory of IR and theoretical constructs that emphasize the importance of perceptions in world politics – IR’s image theory, cognitive linguistics’ conceptual metaphor theory and conceptual frameworks developed in the field of external perceptions of the EU. This synergy is fundamental to our analysis of the critical case of Ukraine. It underpins the development of generalizations from the rich empirical evidence. By definition, critical cases are likely to ‘yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge’ (Patton 2002, p. 236). In our book, the synergy between theoretical constructs that emphasize the key role of perceptions and images in the formulation and enactment of foreign policy leads us to offer a set of new concepts.

We start with the premise that external partners of the EU are active and reflective agents that respond to EU policies. When the partners perceive the
existence of incongruences in EU behaviour – specific to the bilateral relations or the EU alone – clashes and gaps between perceptions, expectations and actions are inevitable. We link the concept of Other to such gaps and define Otherness as the perceived distance between an external actor and the EU. We argue the concept of perception gaps to be a key device to understand the dynamics of foreign policy interaction and propose a framework of three gaps. The perception gap exists between Others’ perceptions of the EU and the EU’s self-perception. The expectation–performance gap is the gap between Others’ expectations and their perception of EU role performance. Finally, the hope–performance gap is the gap between Others’ hopes and perceived performance. The third type of gap is of a deeper psychological nature and reflective of mismatches between different image elements: cognitive, affective and evaluative. We elaborate the three gaps in Chapter 2: Theoretical Innovations and Chapter 9: Comparing Perceptions.

This perspective brings our book to the forefront of the scholarship on EU perceptions. We propose a new theoretical framework and add empirical input to the emerging debate on the EU as a foreign policy actor who proclaims its readiness not to impose its views and norms onto its external partners (according to EU Global Strategy 2016). We also address a persisting gap between scholarship of IR and regional studies.

MAPPING OUR POSITION

Responding to the call by the EU’s High Representative Borrell (2020) to ‘get serious about devising credible approaches to dealing with today’s global strategic actors: the United States, China, and Russia’, we focus on perceptions of the EU in Ukraine affected by the ongoing and violent Russia–Ukraine conflict. According to the estimations by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) cited by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2019), conflict-related casualties in Ukraine constitute 40,000–43,000 people from 14 April 2014 to 31 January 2019, including 12,800–13,000 killed. OHCHR (2021, p. 7) recorded a ‘total of 3,077 conflict-related civilian deaths’. There is no foreseeable resolution, at least in the immediate future. According to Borrell (2020), the EU reaction to such crises ‘should be differentiated and nuanced, but clear-eyed and ready to defend EU values, interests, and agreed international principles’. Our research offers pathways to differentiated and nuanced communications of the EU with Ukraine.

As mentioned above, we expand the arsenal of analytical tools in the field of perceptions research. We revisit and explicitly link theories that lacked systematic dialogue, despite their shared focus on political imagery and psychology in the conduct of foreign policy. Relying on conceptual metaphor theory, a crucial element in our theoretical framework, we dig deeper into the
mechanisms behind the emotive/affective elements of the imagery and address a number of major mismatches inside and outside the EU. As such, we answer one of the main calls in the IR studies informed by the cognitive approach – the call for ‘substance’ while factoring better understanding, emotions and local voices (Herrmann 2021). We undertake a systematic comparison between the EU’s self-visions and external perceptions of the EU, as a gateway to understand conceived and prescribed roles and their evolution. Here, following the latest findings in the field of EU external perceptions, we turn to the local, regional and global factors behind the formation of perceptions of the EU and its roles, alongside EU-specific factors. This multi-level consideration of factors is intentional as one of the main challenges to the cognitive approach in IR and foreign policy studies lies with ‘individual-level psychological mechanisms’ that ‘may augment or offset one another, as well as interact with variables at the governmental, societal, and international levels of analysis in unpredictable ways’ (Rapport 2017, online). Finally, we dissect the resulting mutual images in terms of perceived power, intent and affinity.

To understand how and why the conceived and prescribed roles may differ and evolve, we undertake a systematic analysis of perceptions, analysing views among elites. We explore perceptions among decision-, policy- and opinion-makers in a perceiver (Ukraine) and a sender (the EU) (see the detailed description of our sample and analysis protocol in Chapter 3: Methodology). In the former case, these are individuals who have stakes in Ukraine’s relations with the EU (politicians in key positions, business and civil society leaders, newsmakers and news producers and cultural personalities). In the latter case, these are EU practitioners who deal with Ukraine as a part of their professional portfolio. Our methodological choice to draw on empirical evidence from elite opinion in this book echoes similar methodological choices made by image theory, role theory and the general current of EU external perceptions research which have all also prioritized analytical insights into the opinions of ‘movers and shakers’. We are clear that this choice comes with its limitations. Research into external perceptions of the EU (overviewed below) demonstrates that different cohorts and discourses may have different priorities assigned to cognitive, normative and affective elements within the images of the EU. However, ‘[I]t is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision makers’ (Jervis 1976, p. 28). Unsurprisingly, elites are among the targets of political psychology which prioritizes exploration of ‘their personality, motives, beliefs, and leadership style, and their judgements, decisions, and actions in domestic policy, foreign policy, international conflict, and conflict resolution’ (Huddy et al. 2013, p. 1). According to Mills, elites are ‘in positions to make decisions having major consequences… They occupy the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centred the effective means of the power and the wealth and the celebrity which they
enjoy’ (Mills 1956, p. 3). Interest towards ‘cognitive processes of individual leaders operating in chaotic environments’ (Rapport 2017, online) is also in the centre of the cognitive approach in the studies of IR and Foreign Policy Analysis.

THREE WAVES OF EU EXTERNAL PERCEPTION STUDIES

The study of images and perceptions in IR scholarship has a long-standing, albeit somewhat peripheral, tradition. The story of material power and interests has captured the attention of IR scholars more often than intangible matters like images and perceptions. The pioneering works by Boulding (1956, 1959) laid the foundation for future studies of cognition and political psychology in IR scholarship. For example, in the 1960s, Kelman (1966) claimed a critical role of perceptions and images in IR and advocated for their comprehensive consideration to explain the conduct of foreign policy. White (1968) investigated enemy-images. Yet, these ideas remained marginal. Social psychologist Siamak Movahedi (1985, pp. 18‒19) astutely observed that the predominant reluctance to ‘acknowledge the significant role of social-psychological, cultural and ideological forces in the daily conduct of international affairs’ was due to a particular pre-set vision of foreign policy – as a ‘rational-bureaucratic and strategic process’.

Role theory was among the first challengers to this way of thinking, starting with the seminal work by Holsti (1970). At about the same time, the foundational work by Jervis (1976) offered novel insights into perceptions and misperceptions grounding its inquiry in cognitive approaches to foreign policy making. Images of external state actors were explored by Richard Cottam (1977), Deborah Larson (1985), Martha Cottam (1986) and Richard Herrmann (1984, 1985; cf. Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995). Since the 1980s, the works of Herrmann and his colleagues have succeeded in establishing image studies as a distinct field in IR and foreign policy analysis (for a review see Herrmann 2013). Within psychology, the social psychology of foreign policy became a new field of research and invited readers to consider the politics of international images (Movahedi 1985). Other studies turned to cognitive linguistics approaches in the study of images and perceptions in IR and the role of media discourses in shaping and disseminating images (for example, Lakoff 1991).

From the outset, studies of images and perceptions in IR and foreign policy scholarship had been preoccupied with states as main actors. The only supranational polity – the European Union (EU) – made limited advances in its common foreign policy between the 1950s and 1990s. The situation has changed with the EU becoming a more ambitious and coherent external relations actor. With the EU’s policy aspirations evolving – evidenced by the
release of the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003 – the EU realized that its images as a credible, reliable and legitimate external relations partner mattered and that such images could have real-life impact on foreign policy conduct – inside and outside the EU. In the early 2000s, the field of EU foreign policy studies turned its attention to the study of images and perceptions. We argue that since its inception, the area of EU external perceptions has evolved in three phases, or ‘waves’, with implications for our research design and priorities: (1) the early 2000s–2009; (2) 2009–2016; and (3) 2016–present day.

‘First Wave’

In the first years of the new millennium, there were three major break-throughs in the project of European integration: the launch of the common currency, the Euro; the establishment of the no-border Schengen zone for free movement of people and goods; and the ‘Big Bang’ enlargement which embraced many former socialist countries of Europe and nearly doubled the number of EU member states. These initiatives presented the EU to the world as a vibrant, growing and innovative polity. The EU economy – and the Euro in particular – was performing well in that period. The line of new EU candidate countries was growing. It comes as little surprise that the EU’s self-visions in the early 2000s imagined the EU as an actor who brings prosperity and freedom for its citizens. The EU saw its ‘European model’ as successful and worthy of being emulated by others around the world. At this time, the EU had also become the global leading aid donor. The decision of some ‘big’ member states not to join the US-led ‘coalition of the willing’ (and the unanimous public opposition against it in all EU states) reflected on the EU’s self-image as a ‘peaceful’ international actor.

Yet, it was exactly the same event – the Iraq War following the 9/11 attack – that also presented the EU to the world in a more ambiguous light. This global context informed the EU’s expectations to be seen externally as a benign peaceful international leader who exercises its ‘soft’ power skilfully and supports multilateral structures in a democratic liberal rule-based world order. At the same time, disunity within the EU was of concern. An external image of the EU as an entity whose members were not able to act in unison in the global security arena emerged. Incipient rifts in the EU’s images triggered the initial interest in the perceptions of the EU outside its borders, and specifically in the context of the globalizing and increasingly multipolar world.

Research in the ‘first wave’ of EU perceptions studies took place within a broader framework of European integration scholarship and engaged with theoretical models that dominated EU studies field at the time. Among those were conceptual models explaining EU international identity (Duchêne 1972; Manners 2002; Elgström and Smith 2006; Lucarelli and Manners 2006; Pardo
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2015), as well as EU foreign policy actions, capabilities and goals (Smith 2002; Bickerton 2011; Whitman 2011). Here, we overview three pioneering studies that chose distinctly different explanatory frameworks. They are informed by existing literature in the field of EU studies as well as image and perceptions in IR and foreign policy (for a detailed review of the theoretical choices in the area see Chaban and Elgström 2021b, as well as Chapter 2: Theoretical Innovations).

Cognitive and political communication studies approaches and methods informed one of the first projects in the area of external perceptions of the EU – ‘EU Global Perceptions’ (2002–ongoing) (Chaban and Holland 2008; Chaban et al. 2009). Echoing the ‘cognitive turn’ in IR studies, this research engaged with concepts of schema, framing, conceptual metaphor, as well as political communication studies concepts of agenda-setting and common knowledge paradigm. Theoretical synergies with EU studies’ hypothesis of a capability–expectations gap (Hill 1993, in Chaban and Holland 2008) and ‘Normative Power Europe’ approach (Manners 2002, in Chaban et al. 2015) proved promising, demonstrating links between cognitive science/political communication and IR/EU studies concepts and explanations. The same period featured two other foundational projects engaged with very different theories. The project ‘Images of the EU as an International Negotiator in Multilateral Settings’ was informed by IR’s role theory as well as by an external perception perspective (Elgström 2007b, 2008) advancing it in its application to a supranational actor in IR. Another project ‘External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor’ (2006–07) was set within a framework of social identity theory, with close interest to EU international identity concepts (Lucarelli 2007; Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2009).

This book learns from the ‘first wave’ studies. These studies had a firm focus on robust methods and empirical evidence (see also Chapter 3: Methodology) and advocated theoretical synergies. This period demonstrated that it is beneficial for studies of images and perceptions in EU scholarship to straddle several disciplines when they seek for theoretical explanations. Yet, the ‘first wave’ had its limitations. Theoretical synergies remained limited, and this included a lack of conceptual dialogue between role theory, social identity, cognitive and communication theories, and theoretical frameworks specific to EU studies. Our book addresses this deficit. We explore the innovative conceptual potential of interactions between theorizations that emphasize the central role of images and perceptions in the formulation and execution of foreign policy (see Chapter 2: Theoretical Innovations).

Another lesson from the studies that defined this period is in justifying the importance of empirical research of EU external images and perceptions, especially when reflecting on the effectiveness and legitimacy of EU foreign policy. Studies of EU perceptions undertaken in the early 2000s agreed in their
main findings. The world saw the EU as an ambitious and capable international actor, a savvy multilateral player and a potentially influential pole in an emerging multipolar architecture of the world. EU external perceptions studies revealed a particular ‘story of the EU’. They cast the EU into a primarily economic role on the global stage – an economically strong actor, able to disadvantage others through its protectionist policies. On the other hand, external observers recognized its socio-economic innovations – the Euro and Schengen – to perform well and increase the prosperity of the EU citizens. International perceptions also acknowledged the EU as a successful model of regional integration. The ‘Big Bang’ enlargement rendered an image of the EU in terms of opportunities – a growing body, an exciting construction project, an exclusive club that opened its doors to ‘younger’ members in order to invigorate the ‘old’ EU-15. Yet, offsetting these rather positive perceptions, the EU’s internal divides undermined perceptions of the EU’s qualities of an international leader. Observers around the world did not see the EU as a leading aid donor despite the reality of it being one. Finally, perceptions research also found that although external partners saw Europe to possess certain values and norms, such as peace, the normative identity of the EU was not the most immediate reference cited by outsiders.

‘Second Wave’

The contexts of the globalizing and increasingly multipolar world post-Cold War informed the initial inquiries into EU external perceptions in the early 2000s. Competition for global attention has grown since then. The rise of soft power in international relations has brought to the forefront the importance of projecting attractive images and a preoccupation with maintaining a good reputation.

In addition to the proliferation of highly motivated state and non-state actors that wished to produce, disseminate and trigger positive images of themselves internationally, there appeared a plethora of channels through which to achieve these objectives. A changing communication landscape – and specifically, horizontal flows of information facilitated by the multi-modal medium of the Internet – created a polyphony of voices in IR that can communicate instantly and directly with receivers and offer a means for immediate interaction. Perhaps more importantly, projection of images in international relations – about Self and Others – stopped being a prerogative of the trained media professionals or external relations practitioners, and became a preoccupation of multiple stakeholders. In a predictable twist, images produced by diverse narrators through official channels as well as traditional and new media became increasingly scrutinized and challenged in terms of credibility and legitimacy. The EU – a global actor keen to influence the world – now had to
address the challenge of multiple voices inside and outside the EU and master diverse communication channels.

The end of the first decade of the new millennium exposed the EU to a number of internal crises that began to tarnish the EU’s reputation in the world. Among these were the failure of the Constitutional Treaty in 2008 and the beginning of the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis in 2009. On the other side, the Lisbon Treaty of 2009 – the EU’s response to the post-9/11 world – took a strong step forward in reshaping EU external service and bringing EU foreign policy considerations to the forefront. These events triggered the ‘second wave’ in EU external perceptions research. A growing number of projects demonstrated a broader range of research perspectives including an emphasis on issue-specific perceptions as well as a wider geography exploring perceptions of the EU far away from the Union’s borders and in the EU’s neighbourhood. In Ukraine specifically, several social research companies conducted surveys about the opinion on the EU, including the recurring polls by a leading social research group Razumkov Centre, the 2010 OPPOL survey (EuropeAid 2010) and the 2013–15 study of opinion within the EUmagine (online). These studies pointed to leading perceptions of the EU as a capable economic actor, a partner who can impact Ukraine positively and engage with Ukraine in a mutually beneficial way. Polls showed that the Ukrainian public saw the EU as a role model of norms and values Ukraine aims to achieve. In this period, EU perceptions were found to be more positive in the west and centre of the country versus the east and south. Moreover, public polls pointed to younger respondents having more positive views on the EU and Ukraine’s orientation towards Europe than older respondents.

Echoing the rapidly widening empirical scope of inquiry, the field of EU external perceptions in this period featured a variety of theoretical reflections. Once again, they emanated from different disciplines. The project ‘EU Global Perceptions’ turned its attention to the analytical models proposed by public diplomacy research (Cull 2008; Cowan and Arsenault 2008, in Chaban et al. 2010) as well as political communication (cascading activation framing theory (Entman 2003, in Chaban and Holland 2013)). A cognitive theory of mental maps was employed by geographers Clarisse Didelon-Loiseau and Claude Grasland (2014) in their EuroBroad Map project. Another team of geographers – Veit Bachmann and Martin Müller – positioned their research into EU external perceptions within the critical geopolitics approach (Bachmann and Müller 2015). EU studies analytical models were also in the pool of explanatory paradigms: diffusion theory (Stumbaum et al. 2015) and Normative Power Europe (Pardo 2015; Larsen 2014; Björkdahl et al. 2015).

The ‘second wave’ research demonstrated that in the eyes of external observers, the scale and emergency of the crises that hit the EU at the end of the first decade of the 21st century have partially overshadowed the ground-breaking
messages and projections of the Lisbon Treaty. Research in this period pointed to a dramatic departure from the predominantly positive images detected by the ‘first wave’. The prolonged Eurozone debt crisis triggered images of the EU as a somewhat weakened and struggling economic actor on the global stage. This was in stark contrast to the earlier images of the EU as an ‘economic powerhouse’ of the world that warrants high living standards for its citizens. External elites and the general public conceived the EU’s perceived importance as falling behind not only the US in importance, but also lagging behind the perceived importance of a new cohort of ‘emerging powers’, particularly China. The EU’s failures at the UN Climate Change conferences at Copenhagen and Durban added to the gallery of unflattering images. Research has showcased how the EU’s internal divides – already noted by outsiders during the Iraq War – have become even more visible for external observers in the cases of the failed Constitutional Treaty and the deepening Eurozone debt crisis. The internal political and socio-economic crises have hollowed out the EU’s global image: external observers started describing the EU as a weakling, a ‘sick man of the world’. Increasingly, they questioned the image of the EU’s internal solidarity – one of the core EU norms.

These negative images of the EU as an increasingly divided actor dominated external media framings of the EU and elite opinion in this period. In contrast, the general public opinion around the world remained relatively positive – a finding that was argued by many to demonstrate potential for EU public diplomacy. Importantly, even negatively tuned perceptions among external elites and media did not register an image of the EU as threat. International audiences – be they elites, media or the general public – did not see the EU’s economic ‘ills’ as ‘contagious’ (in contrast to the US’ financial crisis that ‘infected’ the whole world). Despite its ‘sickness’, external partners continued to see the EU favourably as a trading and investment partner and as a culturally attractive destination. Other areas that also evoked positive external images in this period are the EU’s stance on the environment, its fight against climate change, and its investment in sustainable energy, research, science, technology, development and education.

Works in this period engaged almost exclusively with EU-specific factors behind EU external perceptions, leaving external location-specific, regional or global factors on the periphery of inquiry. This was not least due to the set of critical junctions the project of European integration had encountered. Such a status quo was challenged in this ‘wave’ by Tsuruoka (2006) who argued third-country specific factors to be as important for EU external perceptions as EU-specific factors and Chaban et al. (2013) who argued that images and perceptions of the EU are issue-, location-, time- and cohort-specific. The research presented in this book takes this critical direction as a starting point, and proposes a next level set of conceptualizations.
Our second take-away from the ‘second wave’ is the tripartite paradigm of interwoven cognitive, emotive/affective and normative/evaluative image elements (as also argued by image theory, see Chapter 2). While conceptual attention to the role of normative/evaluative elements in shaping the EU’s images grew in this period, theorization of emotive/affective elements was overlooked. Works in the field, however, started turning their attention to the role of emotions in this period. One input came from studies that examined the relationship between textual and visual when communicating the EU and in inducing emotive assessments specifically (Bain et al. 2012; Chaban et al. 2014).

‘Third Wave’

A ‘third wave’ in the research on external perceptions of the EU started in the middle of the second decade of the 21st century. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the surge of irregular migrants to Europe in 2015 and the UK’s Brexit referendum in 2016 led the EU to unprecedented critical junctions. The rise of populist, nativist and far-right ideologies in EU member states also characterize this period. The nature of the crises has been so severe that some official observers claim that the EU faces an ‘existential crisis’ (EU Global Strategy 2016). This view is exacerbated by a looming realization that the liberal global order, of which the EU is a champion and advocate, is increasingly challenged and battered by contesting views in ‘a world of geostrategic competition, in which some leaders have no scruples about using force, and economic and other instruments are weaponized’ (Borrell 2020). As The Guardian’s editorial published in 2020 puts it, ‘these are strange and somewhat disorientating times for the European Union’. A changing Europe in a changing world has encountered long-term allies who are no longer dependable and next-door neighbours who have become sources of major insecurities and threats. The 45th President of the US Donald Trump, a leader of a country traditionally seen as an ally of Europe, had turned the US’ course towards isolationism during his tenure in the office and expressed his contempt towards the EU as a polity. China’s growing influence in the world demonstrates the multipolar architecture of the world and reveals the limits of influence by the EU. The Russia–Ukraine violent conflict and the threats Russia poses to the eastern EU member states re-introduced Russia as an ‘adversary to the West’ once again. The rise of non-traditional security threats – including terror attacks, global pandemics and climate catastrophes – also endangers the existence and wellbeing of people around the world and in the EU.

The deteriorating security situation has triggered a critical reflection on EU foreign policy. In 2016, the EU released its new foreign policy vision – the EU Global Strategy. In comparison to the ESS of 2003, the Global Strategy for...
mulated a much more humble, if not pessimistic, vision of the EU: ‘We live in times of existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union. Our Union is under threat. Our European project, which has brought unprecedented peace, prosperity and democracy, is being questioned’ (EU Global Strategy 2016). In this context, research that assesses the EU’s self-images and conceived roles vis-à-vis external prescriptions and perceptions is critical to answer such questions. Our book addresses this call.

Research into external perceptions of the EU in this period – and our analysis belongs to this timeframe – reflects a growing concern and re-assessment of the EU’s global actorness at times of multiple crises in Europe and a threat to a rule-based world order. Linking to this transformation of global landscapes, the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments of the European Commission commissioned a project on external perceptions of the EU in ten EU Strategic Partners (PPMI/NCRE/NFG 2015). Launched within the consultation process in the preparation for the 2016 EU Global Strategy, it tracked and compared EU perceptions in Brazil, Canada, China, Japan, India, Mexico, Russia, South Africa, South Korea and the USA (Chaban and Holland 2018). The project reflected on the images of the EU affected by the spike in irregular migration in 2015 (see e.g. Chaban et al. 2018a). It also traced how a new twist in the Eurozone debt crisis – a major deterioration of the financial situation in Greece in 2015 – negatively impacted EU images around the world. Finally, this study observed yet another negative impact on the external images of the EU – the promise by the then UK PM David Cameron to have a Brexit referendum in 2016. The 2015 project confirmed an already familiar cohort-specific pattern in perceptions found in the first two ‘waves’. Mainstream media of the strategic partners magnified and multiplied negative messages on their reporting of the EU facing major political, economic and social challenges. This is not least due to the media bias which prioritizes dramatic if not scandalous reports, in order to ‘sell the news’. Interviewed elites demonstrated more nuanced and informed views resulting in more balanced perceptions of the EU. While they saw the EU as facing severe crises, they did not see the impact by the crises as detrimental to their countries’ trade relations or political dialogues with the EU. Importantly, the third country decision-makers increasingly perceive local and regional inputs to be the leading ones when they are crafting their dealings with the EU (see also Chaban et al. 2020). Similar to findings in the previous two ‘waves’, the most positive views have been observed among the general public (with one rather predictable exception, Russia). A EUROBAROMETER survey in 2017 (European Commission 2017) confirmed the predominantly positive outlook on the EU among the general public worldwide.

The geographical span of EU perceptions analysis continues to grow in the ‘third wave’. A strategic emphasis on neighbourhoods formulated by EU Global Strategy (2016) underlines a rise of research of EU perceptions
in the Union’s immediate neighbourhoods, including this book. Surveys of public opinion in Ukraine immediately after Maidan registered a spike of positive perceptions of the EU, the EU’s leadership and Ukraine’s European aspirations. Post-Maidan polls demonstrated an ongoing variation in region- and age-specific perceptions of the EU, as discussed above. The majority of Ukrainian respondents saw the EU as an opportunity. However, later studies mapped an emerging negative trend in EU perceptions among the general public. More recent research that assesses perceptions of the EU in Ukraine post-Maidan focuses on elite and media discourses (see Special Issues on this topic by Chaban et al. 2018b; Chaban and Zhabotynska 2018; Chaban et al. 2019; Chaban et al. 2020 as well as a report by Ivashchenko-Stadnik et al. 2018). These studies observe that Ukrainian elites express an ambivalent perception of the EU as a conflict mediator (Elgström et al. 2018). They see EU officials involved with Ukraine as having a limited understanding of Ukraine and its challenges (Chaban and Elgström 2020). They also see the EU in terms of asymmetric distribution of power – they compare the EU to a benevolent authority figure (a teacher, a doctor) who is teaching/saving Ukraine, while Ukraine is still weak and struggling (Chaban and Elgström 2018a). Media narratives echo these images. Significantly, the EU gets reported with higher visibility if it is linked to Ukrainian stakeholders, events or contexts. Themes of the EU’s cultural, development, energy, research, science and technology actions get minimal media attention, but when reported, the EU receives highly positive evaluations (e.g. Chaban and Elgström, 2021a). Cascading activation framing and strategic narrative theories are the dominant theories in most of these studies.

A renewed interest in external perceptions of the EU followed the ‘leave’ vote in the UK’s referendum in June 2016. This historical vote has become one of the main shapers of the EU’s images globally, with a polarizing effect. The latest research in the field (see the edited volume by Natalia Chaban, Arne Niemann and Johanna Speyer (Chaban et al. 2020)) assesses the impact of the ‘uncertainty period’ on perceptions of the EU in 17 countries from five geo-strategic regions identified by the EU Global Strategy as key for the EU’s foreign policy (including Ukraine). The theme of the EU not being able to preserve its unity triggered most of the negative images of the EU. Yet, positive reflections have appeared also, and specifically post the election of President Trump in 2016. In this context, external observers perceive the EU-27 as a global actor who values and fights for liberal democracy and a multilateral world order. In contrast, international audiences see the political choices of the US and post-Brexit vote UK as positioning these two countries in a different, if not opposite, camp. For Ukraine specifically, its elites did not see the EU as suffering a critical loss of capability or opportunity as a result of Brexit (Chaban and Knodt 2020). Demonstrating location- and issue-specific per-
ceptions, Ukrainian elites continued to see the EU as a credible and legitimate partner.

Mapping future trends, we turn to *The Guardian* (2020) as it makes an appeal to the EU – ‘The world needs a flourishing EU which can unite around common goals.’ It outlines several issue-areas where a united EU could lead the world: climate change, economic cooperation and compromise, as well as human rights and digital privacy. We add to this list health governance, in reflection to the global pandemic of Covid-19. Studies of EU perceptions in the ‘third wave’ will have to investigate if the rest of the world indeed sees the EU as a pioneer and global leader in these issues and expects relevant actions.

Conceptual reflections in the ‘third wave’ research come from an ever-growing pool of theories. In this period, interdisciplinarity has become a permanent feature, with scholars testing and synergizing new models originating from IR, cognitive linguistics, psychology and communication. A novel conceptual approach of ‘Othering’ – influenced by the studies of intersubjectivity and stereotyping – was proposed by Chaban and Holland (2014, 2018). The field also observes a renewal of interest in image theory in its application to perceptions of the EU. The theory serves as a useful analytical tool specifically in the context of the Russia–Ukrainian conflict and the resurfacing of Russia as a hostile ‘adversary’ to the West (e.g. Chaban et al. 2017a). Another theoretical innovation is IR’s strategic narrative theory (Miskimmon et al. 2013, in e.g. Bain and Chaban 2017; Chaban et al. 2017c, 2019; Keuleers et al. 2016; Keuleers 2017). Synergies between image theory and strategic narrative theory are explored by Chaban and O’Loughlin (2018). Research in this period engages with conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, in Chaban and Kelly 2017; Chaban and Elgström 2018a, 2018b; Morozova 2019); the concept of identity to explain citizens’ attitudes towards international ideas and actors (Carey 2002; Ecker-Ehrhardt 2012; McLaren 2002, all cited in Isani and Schlipphak 2017), and psychology’s ‘grief/change curve model’ (Kübler-Ross 1973; Wright 2009, in Kelly et al. 2021).

Research in the ‘third wave’ goes beyond the amalgam of different approaches. Studies in this period argue the extended influence of perceptual approach onto studies of EU foreign policy as well as its promising potential for penetration into the key concepts, approaches and theories of EU external action. Chaban and Elgström (2021b, p. 267) argued that concepts and frameworks to study perceptions and images may ‘play a central role in EU External Action Studies by linking different parts of the field, creating synergy effects and advancing theory-building’. For them, a focus on external perceptions contributes to the debate on EU actorness as recognition – one of the components of actorness (Jupille and Caporaso 1998) – as it is ‘intimately linked to how external actors perceive the EU: is it deemed to be an actor on par with states, and therefore welcomed as a member of certain international
organizations, or is it accorded a lower status?” (Chaban and Elgström 2021b, p. 267). Research into perceptions resonates with an ‘outside-in’ perspective in EU foreign policy studies advocated by Keuleers et al. (2016) – a perspective which remains peripheral in the typically Euro-centric scholarship in this field. Moreover, the study of perceptions helps us understand and explain the effectiveness of EU external action (Elgström and Chaban 2015).

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Innovations: Synergizing Role Theory with Insights from Image and Perceptions Studies, we present the theoretical cornerstones of the book: role theory, image theory, conceptual metaphor theory and theoretical models that conceptualize external perceptions in EU studies. We suggest an innovative interdisciplinary synergy between them by demonstrating how they interact to provide a convincing perceptual approach to EU foreign policy role analysis. We introduce the concept of perception gaps as a key device to understand the dynamics of policy interaction, and argue that conceptual metaphors add novel insights into cognitive, normative and, especially, emotive elements in role analyses.

In Chapter 3: Methodology, we showcase a set of methods to systematically analyse the EU’s foreign policy roles and their cognitive, normative and emotive elements. We operationalize the main theoretical instruments and concepts presented in Chapter 2, and position our methodological choices in relation to existing studies of external perceptions of the EU. We present our empirical data sets – elite interviews in Ukraine and in Brussels – and explicate our approach to elite opinion studies. After detailing how we operationalize role perceptions by using case-specific conceptual templates, we demonstrate how we track cognitive, emotional and normative elements of roles by engaging with tools from conceptual metaphor theory.

Chapters 4‒7 present our investigations of how four foreign policy roles enacted by the EU in Ukraine are perceived by Ukrainian elites. Chapter 4 is titled The EU as a Global and Regional Power and Leader. Using concepts and categorization from image theory and the literature on power and leadership, we analyse how Ukrainian decision-makers perceive the EU’s capability, opportunities and status, with close attention to how they evaluate the consequences of the manifold crises that have beset the Union in recent years. Chapter 5: The EU as a Bilateral Partner explores how the EU’s role in its relations with Ukraine is portrayed by Ukrainian elites. Our focus is on the existence of expectation–performance gaps; discrepancies between Ukrainian expectations of EU behaviour and how actual EU role performance is perceived and evaluated. The following two chapters analyse Ukrainian perceptions of EU traditional diplomacy and its public diplomacy,
respectively. **Chapter 6: The EU as a Mediator** (co-authored with Michèle Knodt) investigates images of the EU’s conflict management activities in the Russia–Ukraine conflict and how the EU’s effectiveness as a mediator is evaluated. We also scrutinize perceptions of three determinants of mediation effectiveness: cohesiveness, impartiality and credibility. **Chapter 7: The EU as a Public Diplomacy Actor** deals with the EU’s aspiration to be a recognized international actor using different tools of communication in its public diplomacy activities. We trace the perceptions of the EU’s role as a producer of public diplomacy outcomes in Ukraine, analysing three modes of public diplomacy (monologue, dialogue and collaboration) as well as various levels of such diplomacy (listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchanges and international broadcasting).

**Chapter 8: EU Self-perceptions and Images of its Roles** considers the EU’s own perceptions and interpretations of the four roles as a leader and power, partner, mediator and public diplomacy actor. This serves as a foundation for the comparison of Ukrainian and EU role perceptions in **Chapter 9: Comparing Perceptions of the EU**. Our comparative analysis allows us to probe what perception gaps, as well as congruences, are found between Ukrainian elites and EU practitioners. We also engage in a discussion of what effects internal and external role incongruences may have on the relationship between the EU and Ukraine.

Finally, in **Chapter 10: Conclusions: Filling Gaps in Knowledge by Theoretical Synergy** we bring together our main theoretical and empirical findings. We recapitulate key theoretical, methodological and subject-specific innovations of our research, revisit our main findings and predict future dynamics of the three conceptual ‘gaps’ we have proposed: perception gap, expectations–performance gap and hope–performance gap. We link our findings to policy debate and recommendations for the EU–Ukraine dialogue in a time of uncertainty and rapid change.

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Any study of images and perceptions in IR and foreign policy will always be multi-faceted. Perceptions and images will also remain inherently difficult to examine. ‘Hidden’ from immediate observation in the minds of IR actors they may persist or change, crisis or no crisis. Yet, a fully-fledged understanding of foreign policy or international relations is never complete without comprehensive consideration of images and perceptions of Self and Others: ‘international relations evolve around interplay of images’ (Fisher 1997, p. 4). In the scholarship of EU foreign policy, such a study must reflect how the perceptions capture the receiver’s conception of status, credibility and legitimacy. Keeping in mind the primacy of empirical evidence, these
studies should also offer critical and well-measured insights on how images reflect ideas of superiority, intent and affinity of Self versus the Other – and how these may change over time and under the impact of dramatic events. The relational character of perceptions (discussed in Chapter 2) suggests that such research has to demonstrate how it can isolate details in a robust and meaningful way, yet interpret these details against the receivers’ overall perception of the power of the perceived object (be it a country or a supranational entity). Such analyses should account for rational and irrational influences. Research into perceptions and images must also be keenly aware of the medium where images are created and disseminated, and its capabilities. Our book intends to address these demanding requirements and contribute to the exciting research of perceptions and images in IR and foreign policy studies.