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▶ **Exploring Russia's Postponed War Against Ukraine:  
A Corpus-Based Analysis of Strategic Studies  
Institutes' Publications from 1991 to 2014**

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▶ **Transcending Two Percent: Toward a Prioritarian  
Model of NATO Burden-Sharing**

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**THEMATIC SECTION**  
**Decolonising Central and Eastern Europe**

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▶ **Western Orientalism Targeting Eastern Europe:  
An Emerging Research Programme**

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▶ **'A Decolonising Moment of Sorts': The Baltic States'  
Vicarious Identification with Ukraine and Related  
Domestic and Foreign Policy Developments**

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Research article

# Exploring Russia's Postponed War Against Ukraine: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Strategic Studies Institutes' Publications from 1991 to 2014

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## Abstract

*The article conducts a corpus study of official reports and papers from the Strategic Studies Institutes of the United States, NATO, the European Union, Ukraine, and Russia up to and including 2014 to determine how Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine was represented and how postponed it proved to be. The US, EU, and NATO were very cautious and slow in establishing relations with Ukraine, either because they considered its integration with Russia very likely or because they did not want to destroy lucrative economic relations with Russia given the unstable and inconsistent foreign policy. The US, EU, and NATO were well aware of Ukraine's vulnerabilities and had been documenting various forms of Russian pressure on Ukraine since the 1990s (the preparatory phase of hybrid war) as well as the high likelihood of Russian military aggression since that time. The attack phase was expected to begin as early as 1994. Therefore, based on the*

*institutes' predictions, the Russia's war against Ukraine was unavoidable, yet has been postponed for at least 20 years.*

**Keywords:** *hybrid war, Ukraine, Russia, Strategic Studies Institute, corpus linguistics*

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'This war for us now is undoubtedly a war for independence. We can say that this is a postponed war. Postponed for 30 years, given how we gained independence in 1991.'

Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, 19 May 2022.

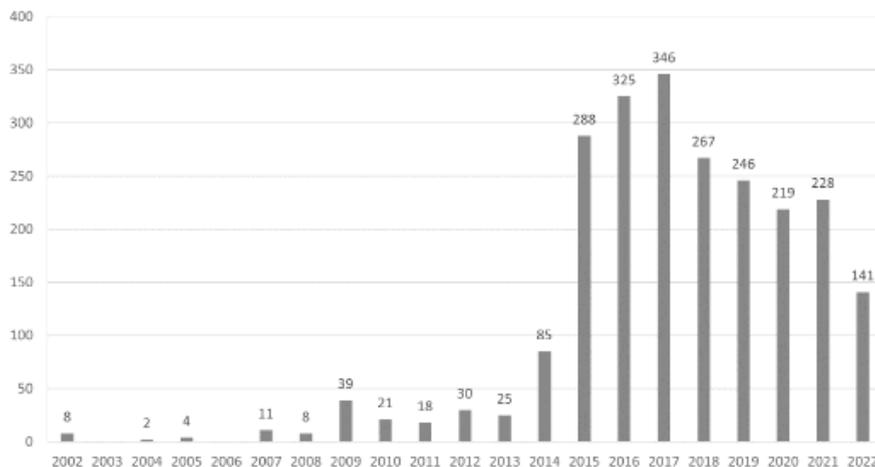
## **Introduction**

The existence of hybrid warfare can only be determined retrospectively, that is, after the attack phase, when the aggressor country uses military and non-military forms of pressure against the target state, but the latter forms were used during the preparatory phase (Starodubtseva 2021; Pinkas 2021). Thus, by referring to a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 as a 'postponed war', the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy (2022) accurately described the temporal essence of any hybrid war. The nonlinear nature of hybrid war manifests itself in the absence of a formal declaration of the beginning or end of hostilities, in the transition from escalation to de-escalation, and from non-military means of pressure to military and back, but some linearity can be registered retrospectively if the aggressor country's political goals are achieved, namely, regime change in the target state, seizure of territory, destruction of the target state's independence and so on (Dayspring 2015; Barber, Koch & Neuberger 2017; Sharma 2019; Qureshi 2020).

As illustrated in Figure 1, an increase in interest in hybrid warfare has only emerged since 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression in eastern Ukraine. In some ways, these studies were also postponed. At the same time, this can be explained by the fact that many studies have cited Ukraine's 2014 case as the most striking example of hybrid warfare in the modern world. This is not to say that there were no signs of Russia's hybrid warfare's preparatory phase.

Here are the reasons why Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine has been studied since 2014: to learn how to identify the first manifestations of hybrid warfare's preparatory phase, as well as how to prevent and respond to hybrid attacks on major nations, weak, failed states and countries at risk in a coordinated manner (Ioannou 2022; Abbott 2016; Murphy, Hoffman & Schaub 2016; Hayat 2021;

Fig. 1. Article with titles including 'hybrid warfare' and 'hybrid war'. Google Scholar n.d.; as it showed in 'About \*\*\* results'.



Source: Figure created by authors, based on [https://scholar.google.com.ua/scholar?q=allintitle%3A+hybrid+warfare&hl=ru&as\\_sdt=0%2C5&as\\_ylo=1999&as\\_yhi=](https://scholar.google.com.ua/scholar?q=allintitle%3A+hybrid+warfare&hl=ru&as_sdt=0%2C5&as_ylo=1999&as_yhi=)

Grimsrud 2018; Clarke 2020; Oren 2016; Vaczi 2016; Palagi 2015). According to some studies, Russia is fighting a hybrid war in Ukraine against the West, or more specifically against the liberal-democratic global status quo and Western-oriented countries in its 'near abroad' to protect autocratic capitalist modernisation (Filipec 2019; Demyanchuk 2019).

Furthermore, according to some studies, this war caught Ukraine, the United States, the European Union and NATO off guard in 2014, as no one expected such a coordinated, determined and military operation in Crimea and eastern Ukraine by the Russian military (Veljovski, Taneski & Dojchinovski 2017; Fridman 2018; Najžer 2022; Oğuz 2016). Is this truly the case?

We decided to investigate official reports and papers of the Russian, Ukrainian, US, EU and NATO strategic studies institutes from 1993 to 2014 in order to determine how Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine was represented and how postponed it proved to be. These organisations research and develop security policies. As far as we know, no detailed analysis of their work has been performed. This study will help in understanding what tools of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine were identified even before the war was conceptualised as a hybrid war.

As a result of this study, we were able to summarise the instruments of Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine and also establish that Ukraine practically played a double game: on the one hand, claiming commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration while doing little in the way of reforms, eradicating corruption, and fearing a political and economic reaction from Russia; on the other hand, continuing to benefit from cooperation with Russia while denying the latter political and mili-

tary integration and pursuing a loyal language policy that served as a springboard for the development of pro-Russian nationalism. Also, it can be stated that the United States, the European Union and NATO have been very cautious and slow in establishing relations with Ukraine, either because they believe its integration with Russia is very likely, or because they do not want to destroy profitable economic relations with Russia because of such an unstable, inconsistent partner.

This paper is organised as follows. We begin by emphasising the topic's relevance in relation to existing literature, then describe the methodological aspects, data collection and analysis process. In the following section, we present the findings and discuss them in the context of the existing literature.

### Literature review

In this section, we will look at the characteristics of the preparatory phase of hybrid warfare in general, as well as in the context of Russia's conflict with Ukraine.

#### *On the preparatory phase of hybrid warfare*

According to Nina Turkiian (2016), the preparatory phase of hybrid warfare includes the following characteristics: power is centralised and nationalist ideology spreads in the aggressor country; target country authorities are delegitimised through disinformation campaigns, bribing politicians, strengthening antagonisms in society, supporting separatist movements, and conducting trade wars.

András Rácz (2015) divides the preparatory phase into three sections: strategic, political, and operational. Strategic preparation implies, among other things, the creation of 'loyal Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO); gaining influence in media channels in the targeted country; also influencing international audiences' (Feher 2017: 35). Political preparation aims to delegitimise the target state's authorities by strengthening antagonisms, bribing politicians and the military, supporting separatist movements and 'offering profitable contracts to oligarchs and business people; establishing connection with criminal elements' (ibid.). Operational preparation 'launches coordinated political pressure and disinformation actions; mobilizing officials, officers and local criminal groups; mobilizing the Russian armed forces under the pretext of military exercises' (ibid: 36). It is critical that the delegitimation of the target state's authorities occurs not only domestically, but also in the context of international relations.

Šimon Pinkas (2021) observes, on the basis of Rácz's research, that 'all the mentioned activities that the attacker performs during it [preparatory phase], cannot be classified as acts of hybrid warfare on their own. They could be all considered a standard part of "diplomacy-pressure" toolbox, and on their own never exceed the imaginary threshold prompting the defending country to adopt any serious countermeasures' (ibid: 17).

Thus, the preparatory phase of hybrid war entails a variety of measures aimed at destabilising the target country's political situation and delegitimising its authorities, enabling the use of a small contingent of irregular troops during the attack phase.

### *The preparatory phase of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine*

Alina Polyakova et al. (2021) argue that 'Russia already had experience conducting special operations in Crimea, in particular during a dispute over tiny Tuzla island in the Kerch Strait in 2003 when Russia tried to connect the Ukrainian island with its Taman Peninsula, and the campaign of Yuri Meshkov, who was elected president of Crimea in 1994 after calling for the peninsula's accession to Russia' (ibid: 11). At the same time, it is stated that 'many' such incidents occurred, 'including "gas wars" over pricing, and Russia's interference in Ukraine's 2003 presidential election' (ibid.). As a result, Russia began making territorial claims long before 2014.

Stephen Dayspring (2015) claims that 'the 2004 election manipulation and 2006 gas war demonstrate Russia's existing hostility toward Ukraine' (ibid: 111). It is well known that the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich won the 2004 presidential election with the help of Russian President Vladimir Putin and through mass falsification. It should be noted that this refers to the mid-2000s political and economic pressures.

Gage Adam (2017) points out that 'in Ukraine, Russia . . . utilizing its own control of energy infrastructure and hydrocarbons as a weapon, and its capability to influence Ukrainian citizens through shared language and media in an attempt to convince the Ukrainian public not to trust their government' (ibid: 7–8). The gas wars were conducted as follows: 'Russia has used its dominance of the hydrocarbon market in order to severely damage the economy of Ukraine. This originally began in 2003 with Russia's decision to develop alternative pipelines to bypass Ukraine, and therefore bypass Ukraine's taxes (i.e., Blue Stream and Baltic Pipeline Systems). This was followed by an increase in gas prices to Ukraine, meant to further destabilize the economy' (ibid: 13). Before the start of the attack phase, Russia exerted political pressure in support of pro-Russian politicians in Ukraine: 'The events of Euromaidan in 2013–2014, which was the spark for the Ukraine crisis, can be somewhat attributed to Russian power over influential figures in Ukrainian politics. . . . Yanukovich's decision [to suspend talks with the EU over Association Agreement] can most likely be attributed to Russian pressure and incentivizing' (ibid: 14). Therefore, between 2003 and 2013, Russia used political and economic pressure against Ukraine.

Albina Starodubtseva (2021) lists the forms of non-military pressure in Crimea until 2014. In Crimea, a systematic organisation of a pro-Russian information and cultural field was carried out: 'One of the largest and most influential organizations supported and financed by the Kremlin is the Russian Community

of Crimea, which has been active since 1993 as an umbrella that unites 25 non-governmental organizations with 15,000 members through political, social, and economic networks. . . . These organizations have steadily served the Kremlin as a common platform for forming a Pro-Russian movement based on the Russian idea and possessing the organizational, personnel potential, and mass character to undermine confidence in the authorities and law enforcement agencies, portraying the latter as “Banderetis” (ibid: 35).

Russia's political pressure on Ukraine as a whole in the mid-2000s took the following forms: ‘In the political sphere, Putin relied on the formation and expansion of players affiliated with the RF in the Ukrainian institutions, namely the Party of Regions of Yanukovych and the Communist Party of Ukraine, which under the conditions of presidential-parliamentary republic blocked [Ukrainian president Victor] Yushchenko's attempts to strengthen the Euro-Atlantic course’ (ibid: 36). Economic pressure was also applied: ‘Yushchenko's rise to power [in 2004] further opened the way for oligarchs who privatized the state. Moscow supported this process in every possible way, playing on the contradictions between the oligarchs, it strengthened its economic base in Ukraine by buying up various assets’ (ibid: 37). Military pressure is also described, including military bribery, Russian spies infiltrating Ukrainian special services, and increased cooperation between Ukrainian and Russian counterintelligence agencies. In summary, Russia has systematically destabilised Ukraine's internal political situation, creating a platform for pro-Russian separatist movements.

Oleksandr Lutsenko (2021) argues that ‘most researchers believe that the Russian-Ukrainian war began in February 2014, when the military, without insignia, captured the Crimean Peninsula without firing a single shot. However, the hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine began long before the start of the real conflict. One of the components of hybrid warfare is the active manipulation of the perception of the local population and information campaigns against the enemy, which cannot be effective without a pre-identified and prepared target audience’ (ibid: 3). The author cites the establishment of pro-Russian public organisations, such as the Institute of the CIS countries, which spread Russian world ideas, as well as the use of the Russian language in the media and book publishing in Ukraine. Yuri Meshkov, who pursued a pro-Russian, separatist policy in Crimea, won the peninsula's presidential election in 1994. The following was the content of informational and cultural pressure: ‘The concept of the Russian World became the basis for the strategy of Russia's hybrid aggression against Ukraine. Historical, linguistic, political and religious narratives have become the backbone of information campaigns. The general historical experience, the expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church and the residence of a large number of Russian speakers became the basis for creating a certain reality for the target societies’ (ibid:

44). As a result, information campaigns were developed to influence, encourage and amplify linguistic and cultural differences within Ukraine.

Viacheslav Popov (2019) describes the history of the gas wars: 'The Russian Federation did not hesitate to use Ukrainian dependence on Russian gas to put pressure on Ukraine. Russia used the "gas question" for the first time in September 1993 when, after negotiations, Ukraine exchanged part of its Black Sea Fleet ships for the cancellation of \$800 million of its first gas debt to Russia. Russia understood the power of "energy weapon" and continued to use it as a lever in order to apply political and economic pressure on its opponents. In March 1994, Gazprom suspended supplies of gas to Ukraine' (ibid: 25). It is essential that Russia used the gas issue to achieve its political goals and weaken Ukraine's independence. Gas wars were also a source of instability in the mid-2000s, and they had the potential to split the country in 2009: 'The gas conflict of 2009 had far-reaching goals. Russia intended the absence of gas in Ukraine to play the role of a detonator in provoking East-West confrontation and political conflict in Ukraine. The idea was that in the event of a complete cessation of Russian gas supplies, the Ukrainian government would not provide gas from the Western gas storage facilities to the main industrial centers in the East, in which case those areas would remain without heat. The development of the situation was supposed to provoke, according to the plan of the Russian strategists, social protests and unrest in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine' (ibid: 28). Thus, Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine has included economic tools since the 1990s, with significant political ramifications.

Peihao Raymond Tan (2019) devised a chronology of the hybrid war's preparatory phase from 2000 to 2014, outlining the vulnerabilities in Ukraine that Russia exploited, namely a) the corrupt Ukrainian oligarchs, which allowed Russians to buy strategically important enterprises, b) ethnic differences and c) distrust of the authorities, which were used in supporting pro-Russian political forces in 2004, and d) the lack of a developed counterintelligence system, which resulted in the exposure of Russian spies in 2009, e) reliance on Russian gas, imports and loans (due to large national debt), as manifested in the 2006–2009 gas wars and the 2013 trade wars.

Thus, studies of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine reveal key elements of the preparatory phase, such as the use of non-military and paramilitary instruments to influence and destabilise the situation in Ukraine. These include direct territorial claims, support for separatist movements, the dissemination of pro-Russian informational materials, including the use of religious institutions, the bolstering of cultural and linguistic differences among populations in different regions, bribing politicians and supporting pro-Russian parties, exploiting conflicts between Ukrainian oligarchs, infiltration into Ukrainian security services and the

initiation of gas wars. All of these tools were designed to counteract pro-Western, nationalistic sentiments and foreign policy in Ukraine while also fostering a stable pro-Russian sentiment in the political, cultural and informational spheres.

Using the concept of a preparatory phase of hybrid warfare and the characteristics of this phase in Russia's war against Ukraine, our article will examine official reports and papers from the US, NATO, Ukraine, Russia and the EU strategic studies institutes up to and including 2014 to determine how this hybrid war was represented and how postponed it proved to be.

We set the following objectives to achieve the goal:

1. Determine what instruments of Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine were identified by the individual strategic studies institutes.
2. Explore what vulnerabilities made these instruments so effective from the point of view of the individual strategic studies institutes.
3. Establish the duration of the attack phase's 'postponement' in the context of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine using findings from individual strategic studies institutes.

### **Materials and methods**

The research material in this article consists of the works of the strategic research institutes of Russia, Ukraine, the United States, the EU and NATO from 1993 to 2014. These organisations were chosen because they are the official think tanks for security policy. The stated goals of these organisations demonstrate this. For example, the goal of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies 'is the information and analytical support of the federal governmental bodies when forming strategic directions of the governmental policy in the area of national security of the Russian Federation' (Russian Institute for Strategic Studies n.d.); the National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine 'submits results of its scientific enquiry to the President of Ukraine in the form of proposals of programmatic documents, expert investigations of regulatory legal acts, analytical reports and proposals on the major grounds of domestic and foreign affairs, the ways of solution of the countrywide and provincial issues of social development' (National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine n.d.); the Strategic Studies Institute of the United States of America 'conducts global geostrategic research and analysis that creates and advances knowledge to influence solutions for national security problems facing the Army and the nation' (Strategic Studies Institute - US Army n.d.); the goal of the European Union Institute for Security Studies is 'to assist the EU and its member states in the implementation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) as well as other external action of the Union'; the Mission of the NATO Defense Col-

lege is 'to contribute to the effectiveness and cohesion of the Alliance primarily through senior-level education, on transatlantic security issues, enabled by research on matters relevant to the Alliance, and supported by engagement with Allies, Partners and Non-NATO Entities (NNEs), with a 360 degrees approach' (NATO n.d.). As a result, it is clear that the strategic studies institutes conduct research directly related to the security of the entities in question. Investigating their works will help to understand what instruments of the hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine were noted even before the war was conceptualised as a hybrid war, as well as how delayed the attack phase of this conflict has been.

These works will need to be analysed using corpus linguistics.

Corpus linguistics is the linguistic discipline that allows 'the complete and systematic investigation of linguistic phenomena on the basis of linguistic corpora using concordances, collocations, and frequency lists' (Stefanowitsch 2020: 54). Corpus linguistics identifies objective linguistic characteristics of texts to empirically examine discourses that shape people's lives in society. It analyzes the language used, including words, metaphors, to understand the formation of social subjects (Baker 2006: 92, 3-4).

It is important to define the terms that will be needed in our study. A corpus is a collection of texts selected to study the state and diversity of a language; corpus research uncovers patterns, consistent word usage and new semantic relationships. Concordance is the collection of all uses of a word form, each in its context; concordance allows for a quick understanding of a particular word's contexts, highlighting stable relationships with other words.

For our study, we will only need concordance because we will need to highlight the contexts of the use of the words 'Russia' and 'Ukraine' in the works of the strategic studies institutes in the range of 25 words to the left and right of each other. This will be accomplished with AntConc 4.1.0. Concordance analysis is a qualitative method of corpus linguistics that allows for close reading and identification of nuances in meaning. In this article, it refers to the meanings that were captured within the context of a collocation ('Russia' and 'Ukraine'). Quantitative methods were not employed in this study, except for the counting and thematic categorisation of relevant concordances.

### **Data collection, operationalisation and analysis**

For the study, five corpora were formed based on the works of the strategic studies institutes of Russia, Ukraine, the United States, the European Union and NATO, which were published between 1991 and 2014, that is, before Russia's military actions on Ukrainian territory began. The corpora were named Corpus A, Corpus B, Corpus C, Corpus D and Corpus E, respectively. The texts for corpora from NATO, EU and US institutions were downloaded in English. The texts

from the Russian Institute were downloaded in Russian and the Ukrainian corpus in Ukrainian. The necessary excerpts and concordances in the Ukrainian and English languages were translated into English by the authors of this article.

Corpus A was compiled from texts by the strategic studies institute, the US Army War College. The first part of the texts was downloaded from the Internet Archive (n.d.) after a search for 'Russia Ukraine threat' in TXT format, as well as in PDF format via a search on the site and an advanced Google search. A total of 30 documents published between 1993 and 2014 were used to create Corpus A (two 2014 texts were published before the events in Crimea and Donbas, so they were allowed as exceptions because the selection of texts in this range was determined after processing this Corpus); the list of sources can be found in Appendix 1. Corpus A has a word count of 702,000 without additional cleaning. The files were converted to txt and loaded into AntConc 4.1.0 without additional cleaning. Searching for the word 'Ukrain\*' in the context of 25 words to the left and right of the word 'Russia\*' yielded 519 concordances (asterisk means any symbol ahead). There were 77 concordances found to be relevant.

Texts from the European Union Institute for Security Studies were used to create Corpus B. Texts were downloaded in PDF format from the official website using an advanced Google search. Corpus B is comprised of 119 documents published between 1993 and 2013. Without additional cleaning, the volume of Corpus B is 5.8 million words. The files were converted to txt and loaded into AntConc 4.1.0 without additional cleaning. A search for the word 'Ukrain\*' in the context of 25 words to the left and right of the word 'Russia\*' yielded 1485 concordances. There were 217 concordances found to be relevant; Appendix 2 contains a list of sources.

Corpus C contains texts from the NATO Defense College as well as texts from the NATO website. The texts were obtained in PDF format from the NATO Defense College website as well as through an advanced Google search of the NATO website using the search words 'Russia Ukraine threat'. Corpus C is comprised of 34 documents published between 1997 and 2011; Appendix 3 contains a list of sources. Without additional cleaning, the volume of Corpus C is 568,000 words. Without any additional cleaning, the files were converted to txt and loaded into AntConc 4.1.0. Concordances were generated for the first corpus (Defense College – 280 concordances) and the second (NATO website – 2129 concordances) by searching for the word 'Ukrain\*' in the context of 25 words to the left and right of the word 'Russia\*'. There were 217 concordances found to be relevant.

Corpus D was compiled from texts by the National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine (hereinafter referred to as NISS). The texts were downloaded in PDF format from the NISS website using an advanced Google search for the words 'rossiya ukraina zagroza' (ukr., Russia Ukraine threat). Corpus D is com-

prised of 74 documents published between 2006 and 2013; Appendix 4 contains a list of sources. Without additional cleaning, the volume of Case D is 2.9 million words. Without further cleaning, the files were converted to txt and loaded into AntConc 4.1.0. With a search for the word ‘Ukrain\*’ in the context of 25 words to the left and right of the word ‘rossi\*’, we generated 3938 concordances. There were 200 concordances found to be relevant.

A corpus E was created on the basis of works of the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (hereinafter referred to as RISI). The works were obtained in PDF format by conducting an advanced Google search on the RISI website with the words ‘rossiya ukraina ugroza nezavisimost’ (Russia Ukraine threat independence), (this choice of words was intended to select only texts dealing with security issues in Ukraine’s independent history). Corpus E is comprised of 20 documents published between 2007 and 2013; Appendix 5 contains a list of sources. Without additional cleaning, the volume of Corpus E was 354,000 words. Without further cleaning, the files were converted to txt and loaded into AntConc 4.1.0. Searching for the word ‘Ukrain\*’ in the context of 25 words to the left and right of the word ‘rossi\*/rusски\*’ (rus., russian) yielded 689 concordances. There are 78 relevant concordances for the study.

After generating concordances about Ukraine in the context of Russian relations from each Corpus, they were read and classified by semantic patterns. A semantic pattern is a concept that denotes the meaning of a word based on the associations of this word with other words (Velardi, Pazienza and Magrini 1989). The identification of semantic patterns aided in classifying the instruments of Russia’s hybrid warfare against Ukraine, as well as in pinpointing Ukraine’s vulnerabilities that allowed these instruments to be utilised. Semantic patterns were created by counting the number of similar concordances. Semantic patterns revealed the focus of the strategic studies institutes’ reports and works. This provided an opportunity to determine what aspects of Russia’s hybrid war against Ukraine were considered in reports and works from 1993 to 2014, as well as how postponed Russian military aggression turned out to be. The most important points are illustrated using quotations from the corpus.

## Results

### *Corpus A – Strategic Studies Institute – US Army War College*

Let us identify, characterise and present hierarchically the semantic patterns about Ukraine in the context of Russia that were documented based on reading and summarising the relevant concordances in Corpus A (see Table 1).

The semantic focus of the US Strategic Studies Institute’s works, as reflected in Semantic pattern 1 with the largest number of concordances, is

Table 1. Semantic patterns in Corpus A

| -     | Semantic patterns  | Number of concordances | % of the total number | Rank |
|-------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1     | Russia's Economic and Political Pressure on Ukraine  | 51                     | 66,2                  | 1    |
| 2     | NATO, Europe and the United States are interested in Ukraine's economy but have refused to guarantee its security. | 20                     | 25,9                  | 2    |
| 3     | Ukrainian authorities' inconsistency in foreign policy   | 6                      | 7,7                   | 3    |
| Total |  | 77                     | 100                   |      |

Source: Table created by the authors

Russian threats to Ukraine in the form of the following instruments of hybrid warfare:

*economic instruments:* a ban on Ukrainian imports, gas wars (cutting off or raising gas prices due to a non-Russian-centric policy and refusal to give up nuclear weapons), and Russian capital expansion in the Ukrainian economy;

For its part, Russia does not refrain from using the economic tools of its soft-power pressure on Ukraine to keep it within its own spheres of influence. An example of such economic blackmail is the recent ban imposed on all Ukrainian imports . . . (Nalbandov 2014: 77).

*political instruments:* dissatisfaction with Ukraine's European integration; drawing Ukraine closer to Russia; criticism of Yushchenko's policies; statements about the possibility of Ukraine's dismemberment as a result of NATO membership; direct support for the pro-Russian presidential candidate, Yanukovich (Putin's visits to Kyiv), delegitimation of Ukrainian statehood;

. . . positioned itself against Russia, it might cost it a threefold increase in the price of gas (an average of \$4 billion per year). Putin even threatened Ukraine "with dismemberment if it persisted in trying to join the NATO alliance." With Ukraine relying on Russia for 51.6 percent of its domestic natural gas . . . (Ghaleb 2011: 90).

*military tools:* scholars predicted in 1994 that Russia would seize Crimea and eastern Ukraine, using pro-Russian nationalist movements in Ukraine. At the same time, Russian officials claimed that Crimea could be returned if Crimeans so desired, as well as the possibility of holding a referendum on the subject in 1994;

... bad joke and the blackest treachery, the reasons for mutual suspicion grow. During 1992–93, it became clear that Russia's Parliament sought to detach Crimea from Ukraine and annex it to Russia and that a growing nationalist movement inside Crimea sought the same objective. Russia's ambassador to Ukraine stated that ... (Blank 1994).

Russia did not recognise Ukraine's independence, instead putting pressure on it and threatening its very existence if it pursued an independent policy. Researchers attribute such Russian threats to the country's transformation into an authoritarian state, whose authorities want to reintegrate former Soviet republics into its territory, including by waging ethnic wars and supporting authoritarian regimes in those countries (Askar Akayev in the Kyrgyz Republic, Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia). Russia aspires to be a regional leader by imposing authoritarianism on and supporting corrupt elites in the former Soviet republics, including through ethnic conflicts.

... than more corruption and neo-imperialism. These charges reflect Moscow's efforts to conceal its inability to defend its clients, its enormous failed intervention in Ukraine in 2004, and the misrule of the Akayev and Shevardnadze regimes. Fourth, NATO enlargement can hardly threaten Russia if one considers NATO's enormous post-1989 ... (Blank 2007).

Semantic patterns 2 and 3 show that, despite such threats, Ukraine has pursued an inconsistent foreign policy, attempting to benefit from both Russian and Western cooperation. At the same time, having received no genuine security guarantees from the West or Russia in exchange for giving up nuclear weapons, Ukraine was vulnerable to a possible nuclear or conventional war, which Russia could easily have started.

... aggravates the limbo of the Ukrainian political establishment to choose a foreign policy course. As reflected in a Congressional Research Service memo, the conflict between Ukraine's political forces has led its foreign policy to appear incoherent, as the contending forces pulled it in pro-Western or pro-Russia ... (Nalbandov 2014: 128–129).

Due to economic necessity (payment of gas debts) and the costly process of storing weapons, Ukrainian authorities were forced to carry out the denuclearisation process. Ukraine has needed NATO since its inception as an independent country to ensure security against Russian threats, but Russia has obstructed North Atlantic integration.

*Corpus B – European Union Institute for Security Studies*

Let us identify, characterise and present hierarchically the semantic patterns about Ukraine in the context of Russia that were documented based on reading and summarising the relevant concordances in Corpus B (see Table 2).

Table 2. Semantic patterns in Corpus B

|       | Semantic patterns  | Number of concordances | % of the total number | Rank |
|-------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1     | Russia is an authoritarian country that seeks to dominate its neighbours   | 93                     | 42,8                  | 1    |
| 2     | Ukraine's foreign policy is inconsistent.  | 59                     | 27,1                  | 2    |
| 3     | Cautious European policy toward Ukraine due to the inconsistency of Ukrainian authorities and Russia's dependence/threats  | 43                     | 19,8                  | 3    |
| 4     | Ukraine-NATO relations are difficult due to the inconsistency of the Ukrainian authorities and Russia's dependence/threats | 22                     | 10,1                  | 4    |
| Total |  | 217                    | 100%                  | -    |

Source: Table created by the authors

The focus of the EU Strategic Studies Institute's work, as reflected in semantic pattern 1 with the largest number of concordances, is Russian threats to Ukraine in the form of the following hybrid warfare instruments:

*military instruments:* Russian troops were expected to deploy in Ukraine as a result of Crimean pro-Russian separatism; Yeltsin's desire to build military bases on the territories of all CIS countries, including Ukraine; it was noted that if NATO approached Russia's borders in 1994, Russian troops could be brought into Ukraine to establish military bases;

. . . and Eastern/Central Europe and advance Russian forces westward again. The pretext for any such Russian intervention would most likely be pro-Russian separatism in Ukraine, fuelled by growing political/economic centrifugal currents in the state. If Crimean separatism or economic chaos in eastern Ukraine were to result in violent . . . (Allison 1994).

*economic instruments:* Russian attempts to integrate the Ukrainian economy into the Russian economy; gas wars, trade wars (import bans); Russia's capital economic expansion (purchase of oil refineries, energy infrastructure);

. . . Union, the Common Economic Space and the EurAsian Economic Community (EvrAzEs) with other post-Soviet states. At that stage bilateral economic relations between Russia and Ukraine were quite complicated. From time to time trade wars took place during which both sides imposed restrictions and quotas on each other for products . . . (Samokhvalov 2007: 14).

*territorial claims:* Russian authorities' lack of political will regarding the demarcation of Ukraine's borders with the CIS, attempted seizure of Tuzla Island; State Duma deputies' statements about the illegality of the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine;

. . . Dniestr dispute already exists, in Russia's highly visible meetings with the leaders of Georgia's three separatist regions, and in Russia's dispute with Ukraine over Tuzla island.' Russia and the EU interpreted developments in Moldova's conflict with its separatist region of Transnistria differently. In Moscow, there is . . . (Danilov et al. 2005: 15).

*political instruments:* the desire to keep Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence, lest it becomes Russophobic and anti-Russian, as Poland has; Putin's support for pro-Russian presidential candidate Yanukovich in 2004; the politicisation of the Russian language status could result in a conflict between pro-Russian forces and the Ukrainian nationalist project, as well as political mobilisation of the Russian-speaking population;

. . . Russian CIS-expert Konstantin Zatulin: 'If independent Ukraine lacks a special union with Russia, its independence will unavoidably be placed on an anti-Russian foundation. Ukraine may then turn into a second Poland – an alien cultural and historical project that Russia will have to learn to deal with, or else . . . (Samokhvalov 2007: 27).

Semantic patterns 2 and 3 focus on the cautious policy toward Ukraine, with a slight bias toward Russia's interests due to the EU's economic dependence on Russia. It is noted that Ukrainian authorities' foreign policy priorities are inconsistent (e.g. Kuchma's 'multi-vector' policy), seeking to balance and benefit from integration with both Euro-Atlantic and Russian institutions. Ukrainian big businesses benefited from Russian cooperation, but they soon desired independence and control over the Ukrainian economy ('split consciousness'). For example, Russia's military presence on Ukrainian territory (the Sevastopol Naval Base) was maintained to purchase cheap gas;

... an economic project, the SES had failed to capture the economic elite's imagination. On this complex chessboard of intertwining economic and political interests, the Ukrainian oligarchs played an ambivalent game. A journalist who interviewed several big business figures characterised them as 'split personalities', looking East or West, speaking Russian ... (Puglisi, Wolczuk & Wolowski 2008: 79).

Semantic pattern 4 highlights the 'schizophrenic' nature of Ukrainian capital, revealing the true Ukrainian subjectivity that has served as a genuine impediment to Euro-Atlantic integration and a deterrent to integration with Russia. Ukrainians are unwilling to pay for real independence because the economic costs of breaking away from Russia are severe.

### *Corpus C – NATO Defense College*

Let us identify, characterise and present hierarchically the semantic patterns about Ukraine in the context of Russia that were documented based on reading and summarising the relevant concordances in Corpus C (see Table 3).

Table 3. Semantic patterns in Corpus C

|       | Semantic patterns  | Number of concordances | % of the total number | Rank |
|-------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1     | Russia opposes Ukraine's accession to NATO   | 71                     | 29,8                  | 1    |
| 2     | Russia's policy of undermining Ukraine's sovereignty. Russian instruments of pressure on Ukraine | 66                     | 27,7                  | 2    |
| 3     | Ukraine's foreign policy aims to strike a balance between the East and the West                  | 49                     | 20,5                  | 3    |
| 4     | Ukraine's Issues as an Independent State   | 34                     | 14,2                  | 4    |
| 5     | Western perceptions of Ukraine   | 18                     | 7,5                   | 5    |
| Total |  | 238                    | 100%                  | -    |

Source: Table created by the authors

The focus of the work of the NATO Strategic Studies Institute, as reflected in Semantic pattern 1 with the highest number of concordances, is the relationship with Ukraine:

*cautious* so as not to provoke Russia,  
*cold* as a result of Ukraine's inconsistent foreign policy,  
*interested*, as Ukraine will be able to ensure its security, protect itself from potential Russian aggression and serve as a model of democratisation for Russia, effectively suspending its function as an expansionist state. Due to its ethnic proximity to Russia, Ukraine cannot maintain a neutral position.

At the same time, NATO believed that, while Russia opposed Ukraine's accession to the EU and questioned Ukrainian statehood, it would not resort to military aggression, but could raise the Crimea issue. Furthermore, there was no public support in Ukraine for accession to NATO.

The statements about Russian threats to Ukraine in the form of the following instruments of hybrid warfare occupy an important place in this corpus:

*ideological instruments:* non-recognition of Ukrainian statehood (as evidenced not only by authorities, but also by polls of the Russian population); the dominance of Russian sources of information in the Ukrainian information sphere, the spread of the ideology of 'ethnic brotherhood', stereotypes about NATO, and so on, while any support for the Ukrainian language and culture is viewed as a threat to Russia. Any independent, non-Russian-centric Ukrainian policy is thought to be influenced by the West;

... stereotypes concerning NATO, Ukraine and Russia to the best for the Russian leaders' advantage. The not less important direction of Russian predominance policy is engaging Ukraine to the Byelorussian-Russian Union on the basis of so-called 'brotherhoods of the Slavic peoples'. The significant external problem of integration of Ukraine ... (Perepelitsya 2001).

*political instruments:* the democratic transformation in Ukraine ('Orange Revolution') is viewed by the West as a plot against Russia; the Russian authorities want to regain control of Ukraine's internal and foreign policy, reintegrate it into a union with Russia and end Ukraine's existence as an independent state. If Ukraine joins NATO, the Russian-speaking population in Crimea is likely to mobilise politically. The politicisation of the Russian language issue – criticism of alleged discrimination against the Russian-speaking population;

... considerable period of time; it was not initiated by the Orange leadership after 2005. Russia is still a very important factor in nearly all aspects of Ukraine's foreign and security policy. Moscow is firmly convinced that the entire cooperation between Ukraine and NATO is nothing but directed against Russia (NATO Library 2010: 7).

*territorial claims:* Russia did not demarcate the borders between the states; the conflict over Tuzla Island; the mayor of Moscow referred to Sevastopol as a 'Russian city' in 1997; the Russian-speaking elite and Russian nationalists in Crimea could be mobilised for annexation, which was considered quite possible;

. . . Sevastopol, Black Sea Fleet, Russian minority and Russian language in Ukraine, informational war, 'Gazprom's expansion attempts. I would just like mention that in May 1994 Ukraine and Russia were very close to the edge at which the war could start. Then, at the expense of unimaginable attempts, it became possible . . . (Zhovnireno 1997: 35).

*economic instruments:* the expansion of Russian business in Ukraine at the beginning of the twenty-first century (oil refining, defence industry); increasing reliance on gas – preventing Ukraine from diversifying its energy supplies;

. . . has always been fraught with complex foreign policy problems. From 2000 to 2004, Russia sought control of key sectors of the Ukrainian economy, thereby aiming to ensure Ukraine's political dependence on Russia. In this period, Ukrainian-Russian relations witnessed a considerable advance of the Russian Federation in terms of the realization . . . (Kozlovska 2006: 53).

*military instruments:* in May 1994, Crimea held a referendum on greater autonomy and dual citizenship (Russian and Ukrainian), but the Ukrainian authorities did not recognise it, raising the possibility of civil war or war with Russia; the presence of the Black Sea Fleet in Crimea poses a threat; and the possibility of Ukraine annexing Crimea and turning its territory into a military base;

In 1993–1994, with its economy in tatters, separatist movements on the rise, and relations with the Russian Federation in a downward spiral, the potential for a Ukrainian civil war, or external conflict with Russia, was widely assessed as acute. Today, the threat of overt hostilities seems to be minimal. Ukraine has . . . (Nation 2000: 8).

The researchers believe that these threats are related to Russia's failure to democratise. At the same time, it is noteworthy that the West's interests in supporting Ukraine are named: it will allow Russia to restrain its expansionism, but with Ukraine's obsessive mobilisation against Russia, a conflict may arise. At the same time, the West was reluctant to integrate Ukraine due to the country's inconsistent foreign policy and the risk of deteriorating relations with Russia. Ukraine's foreign policy is influenced by the country's large Russian-speaking population (threat of ethnic mobilisation by Russia) and reliance on Russian gas (trade wars).

They emphasise the real difficulties and problems of Ukraine's formation as an independent state (Russification, lack of statehood experience, economic

crises, pro-Russian views of the population, Russian pressure, separatist movements), but, in contrast to Russia's delegitimising rhetoric, they see prospects for a more democratic, free society in Ukraine, looking forward, whereas Russians 'want to return to the past'.

. . . during the winter of 2005–2006. However, these attempts have not proved to be very effective. Unlike the Russians, tempted by a return to the past, the Ukrainians clearly want to leave the Soviet era behind them, no matter what price they have to pay. The political environment is uncertain, marked by . . . (NATO Library 2010: 19).

Russia's expansion and criticism of Ukrainian statehood provoked a pro-Western, nationalist attitude in Ukraine.

#### *Corpus D – National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine*

Let us identify, characterise and present hierarchically the semantic patterns about Ukraine in the context of Russia that were documented based on reading and summarising the relevant concordances in Corpus D (see Table 4).

Table 4. Semantic patterns in Corpus D

|       | Semantic patterns  | Number of concordances | % of the total number | Rank |
|-------|--|------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1     | Russian Meddling in Ukraine's Political, Economic and Cultural Space | 104                    | 52                    | 1    |
| 2     | The causes of Ukraine's vulnerabilities                              | 96                     | 48                    | 2    |
| Total |  | 200                    | 100%                  | -    |

Source: Table created by the authors

The focus of the works of the National Institute for Strategic Studies of Ukraine, as reflected in Semantic pattern 1 with the largest number of concordances, is Russian threats to Ukraine in the form of the following instruments of hybrid warfare:

*information instruments:* Russian cultural product dominance in Ukraine with an authoritarian, imperial ideology, distribution of Russian ideology (imperial, Soviet mythology), Russification of the language and cultural space, and betterment of Russia's image on Ukrainian territory;

In the cultural field – in the strengthening of the competition of the Ukrainian cultural product with the Russian one. Today, the cultural

product of Russian origin dominates the Ukrainian market, which harms the economic interests of Ukraine. The growth of its volumes is a reflection of foreign control over highly profitable sectors of the economy – the media market, film production and distribution, book publishing, etc. The weakness of state policy in the cultural sphere, . . . (Gritsak 2006: 24; translation from Ukrainian hereinafter is ours – I.V., O. N.).

*political instruments:* pro-Russian organisations politicise the Russian language issue, contributing to Ukraine's division into 'West' and 'East'; Russian influence expands into all spheres of activity, 'if not to the point of annexing Ukraine, then to disregard its Ukrainianness' (see below); according to a 2013 study, Russia will use economic pressure, pro-Russian social movements aimed at the integration of Ukraine with Russia, and spread the idea of discrimination of Russian-speaking minority rights;

. . . is focused on eroding support for the European Neighborhood Policy and introducing Russian as the second official language. Another goal is to expand its influence in all spheres of Ukraine's activity, and if not annex it, then at least to negate its Ukrainianness. As a result of the inequality of economic and military power between Kyiv and Moscow . . . (Zhalilo and Yanishevs'kyi 2011: 161).

*economic instruments:* Russian business expansion, particularly in the energy sector; gas and trade wars; Russia is critical of Ukraine's European integration because it is viewed as a threat to the country; presentation of plans for Ukraine's reintegration into the Russian alliance; integration into the Customs Union entails full acceptance of Russian geoeconomic influence, limiting Ukraine's economic sovereignty; Russian banks are acquiring strategically important Ukrainian assets;

. . . Russian investments in Ukraine and related risks. The Russian capital has intensified its expansion into post-Soviet countries in the past decade, and Ukraine is one of the priority areas for Russian capital. The latter effectively integrates the objects acquired in Ukraine into its transnational companies or uses them to recreate closed . . . (Zhalilo 2011: 46).

*ideological tools:* reverence of all things Russian and denigration of all things Ukrainian, delegitimisation of Ukrainian statehood and people ('under-nation', artificial, constructed) in science, politics and popular consciousness; 'Good

Ukraine' is subservient Little Russia ('Malorossia'), and 'bad Ukraine' is named after famous Ukrainian national heroes ('Banderovskaya', 'Petlyurovskaya' and 'Mazepovskaya'). Russians refuse to acknowledge the Holodomor and are unwilling to talk about the mass de-ethnicisation of Ukrainians in Russian history (prohibition of Ukrainian writing in the Russian Empire). Ukrainians are considered Russians by Russians because they both originated in Kyivan Rus.

. . . Russians who are 'Easterners' have a negative stereotype of Ukrainians who are 'Westerners' and vice versa. 'Mazepan,' 'Petliurist,' 'Makhnovist,' and 'Banderite' appear in the perception of the average Russian on a subconscious level as a kind of 'anti-ideal' of Ukraine, as a living embodiment of 'bad Ukraine' in contrast to the ideal of good Ukraine, Malorossia, which is under the full political and spiritual control of Moscow. Characteristic ideas about . . . (Stepyko 2011: 270).

*territorial claims:* the border between the countries is not delimited; the conflict over Tuzla Island;

. . . the need to delimit the Kerch Strait as a border and recognize the inter-republican border between the Ukrainian SSR and the RSFSR as the state border between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Implementation of this option would allow Ukraine to preserve the Kerch-Yenikale canal. In fact, the Kerch delimitation impasse blocks the entire process of resolving the issue of Ukrainian-Russian maritime borders both in terms of determining the endpoints in the adjacent Azov and . . . (Yermolayev 2010a: 431).

Considerable attention is given to the history of assimilation, Russification and suppression of the Ukrainian people under the rule of the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union, which created linguistic, cultural and regional distortions in Ukraine (an industrialised but Russian-speaking southeast, but a nationalised west), which are precisely politicised by pro-Russian forces to reintegrate Ukraine into a union with Russia. Meanwhile, Ukrainian scholars highlight the lack of language policy (the protection of the Ukrainian language in Ukraine), as well as the inconsistency of foreign policy (European integration in words, but in practice the preservation of authoritarian, corrupt tendencies).

The European integration policy was not supported by practical actions. The Eastern policy was, in fact, fragmented and poorly calculated. The trust with Ukraine's strategic partner, the Russian Federation, was

completely lost. Destroyed ties, trade wars, and unfavorable gas agreements in 2009 are the logical consequence of this foreign policy. With the sham foreign policy activity of almost . . . (Yermolayev 2010b: 40).

However, this inconsistency can be explained by an attempt to exploit the contradictions between the West and Russia, taking advantage of 'simultaneous movement in different directions,' which can be seen in both politics and opinion polls. Simultaneously, the need to continue balancing is asserted. According to a 2013 study, the competition between Russia and the EU for influence over Ukraine's economic integration processes has intensified.

### *Corpus E – Russian Institute for Strategic Studies*

Let us identify, characterise and present hierarchically the semantic patterns about Ukraine in the context of Russia that were documented based on reading and summarising the relevant concordances in Corpus E (see Table 5).

Table 5. Semantic patterns in Corpus E

| Her   | Semantic patterns   | Number of concordances | % of the total number | Rank |
|-------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| 1     | Ukraine's inconsistent policy towards integration with Russia       | 29                     | 37.1                  | 1    |
| 2     | Russia and Ukraine's mutual 'demonization'                          | 18                     | 23                    | 2    |
| 3     | Projects for Ukraine's integration into the Union State with Russia | 14                     | 17,9                  | 4    |
| 4     | Attitudes toward Ukrainian presidents                               | 15                     | 19,2                  | 3    |
| 5     | Threats from Russia   | 2                      | 2,5                   | 5    |
| Total |   | 78                     | 100%                  | -    |

Source: Table created by the authors

The focus of RISI's work is the investigation of the problem of integrating Russia and Ukraine into a single Eurasian state for joint economic, political and cultural development. Ukraine's lack of integration with Russia stems from Kyiv's unwillingness to cede control of the domestic economy and politics. Ukrainian business owners are concerned about Russian economic expansion and takeovers of strategic enterprises.

. . . capital does not want any stable and long-term economic alliances with Russia, which can turn into a deep integration of the economies of the two countries and limit its independence. In addition, Ukrainian FIGs (which are at the same time sponsors of the Party of Regions,

such as the Akhmetov and Firtash ‘groups’) consider the relevant sectors of the Russian economy as their strongest competitors, especially . . . (Guzenkova et al. 2011: 103; translation from Russian hereinafter is ours – I.V., O. N.).

It is emphasised that Ukrainian capital is interested in cheap Russian gas, and Russia has been providing gas to Ukrainian capitalists at low prices in the hope of greater economic integration. The country juggles between Russia and the European Union, manufacturing goods with cheap gas and selling them to the EU. According to Russian sources, this explains Ukraine’s inconsistency in foreign policy.

The only way for Ukraine to be able to make the transition is by restoring economic ties with Russia and other post-Soviet countries. It is increasingly difficult for Ukraine to manoeuvre between Russia and the European Union. Previously, the Ukrainian government was able to manoeuvre geopolitically due to its relative economic independence and its remaining industrial potential. But as it has been lost and its debt dependence on the IMF grows, it is becoming more and more difficult to do so. . . (Guzenkova et al. 2011: 92).

However, as economic self-sufficiency and industrial potential are lost, it is becoming more difficult to do so. Already near the end of President Leonid Kuchma’s first term, the Ukrainian government began to exert pressure on Russian firms, limiting their future development; this trend accelerated in 2002–2004.

At the same time, scholars completely delegitimise Ukrainian statehood and national idea in the Semantic pattern 2: Ukraine ‘has failed as a state’; democracy in Ukraine is ‘phoney’; Ukraine is an economically weak country within the sphere of US and EU interests; and the Ukrainian Russophobe project is supported by the West.

The fact that Ukraine and Russia interact very sluggishly, even though Ukrainians have strong sympathies for the Russians. Of course, Ukraine’s greatest pain is that it has failed as a state. After all, the state is not only official institutions and officials; it is primarily a question of the attitude of the people . . . (Guzenkova et al. 2011: 83).

Much dissatisfaction has been expressed over the denial of Soviet-Russian history in Ukraine, a ‘rewriting’ of history in which Russia’s role is demonised:

the country is considered a coloniser, imposing its system and way of life on the neighbouring country, and Ukraine is a colony; individuals and organisations (OUN-UPA) divorced from shared history with Russia are heroised.

. . . Ukraine is different. In his time, the national classic V. Korolenko argued that Ukrainian nationalism is the most sham. And it is no coincidence that Ukraine has now elevated the rewriting of history to the rank of the main task of the country. Of course, on the grounds of falsifying history and contrasting everything Ukrainian with Russian, the government not only ideologically substantiated the Ukrainian identity, but also . . . (Pakhomov 2009: 69).

Semantic Pattern 3 emphasises the importance of integrating Ukraine and Russia into 'United Eurasia', 'Holy Russia' and 'interstate modernization alliances', arguing that the Ukrainian economy will not function normally under conditions of European integration, which promises only degradation, deindustrialisation and the extinction of the village.

. . . spiritual and civilizational potential in the interests and with the help of the states that geographically form the basis of Holy Russia. Holy Russia existed not in the borders of the present Russian Federation, Ukraine or Belarus, but included and includes all territories simultaneously. Holy Russia is the aspiration of a single people to holiness and quite strict moral and ethical norms of life . . . (Guzenkova et al. 2011: 87).

Another preference for big national capital is a free trade zone with the EU for Ukraine, which will allow them to continue enriching themselves at the expense of other sectors of the economy. At the same time, it is emphasised that the majority of Ukrainians, as well as small and medium-sized businesses, support unification with Russia, which the Ukrainian leadership completely ignores. The term 'Holy Russia' refers to the union of Ukraine, Russia and Belarus, as well as the desire of one people for holiness and quite strict moral and ethical standards of life.

Semantic pattern 4 provides opposed assessments of presidents Viktor Yushchenko and Viktor Yanukovich: while the former is a pro-Western, Russophobe politician leading Ukraine to economic destabilisation and fearing 'the threat of military invasion by Russia' (in 2010!), the latter is a pro-Russian politician balancing the West and Russia, but at the same time as not being entirely loyal to Russia (not fulfilling the Kremlin's wishes regarding ensuring the rights of Russian-speaking citizens, not granting Russian capital access to the Ukrainian

market, not offering more attractive conditions for the Black Sea Fleet), but who closed the Yushchenko Institute for National Security because it was frightened of the ‘threat of invasion by Russia.’

The Ukrainian and international public was persistently frightened by the ‘threat of a military invasion by Russia’ and repeatedly voiced the idea that ‘a provocation by Russia on Ukrainian territory and the use of military force could take place at any moment...’ But the problem is that one of the main actors and apologists of the ‘Orange Maidan’ ideology . . . (Moro 2010: 74).

Russians expected more from Yanukovych, including the protection of Russian-speaking citizens’ rights, nuclear cooperation and greater access to the Ukrainian market for Russian capital.

Semantic Pattern 5 estimates that if Ukraine moves westward, Russia will take measures to protect its economic and political interests, as well as the emergence of conflicts in Ukraine between the country’s east and west.

Discussions on major regional projects, such as building a bridge across the Kerch Strait or modernizing Ukraine’s port infrastructure, should be intensified. It cannot be ruled out that Ukraine’s further movement toward the West will require Russia to take active measures to protect its own economic and political interests . . . (Guzenkova et al. 2011: 94).

Thus, how does the RISI’s work reflect the preparatory phase of the Russian-Ukrainian hybrid war? There were no direct statements about the likelihood of such an event. Furthermore, the researchers dismiss this possibility, citing Yushchenko’s remarks about the threat of a Russian attack. However, the tone of Russian scholars’ positions is passive-aggressive: Ukraine has failed as a state; without Russia, it cannot ensure economic stability. Simultaneously, options for political and economic integration with Russia are presented as necessary and the only correct choice of Ukrainian authorities, that is, Ukraine can exist only in an alliance with Russia. It is predicted that Russia will intervene, resulting in a conflict between the West and the East in Ukraine. It is worth noting that the researchers relied on surveys of Ukrainians, which revealed a favourable attitude toward Russians and the prospect of integration with Russia. This public opinion preparedness in the southeast of Ukraine was crucial in the context of the annexation of Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2014.

## **Conclusion**

We were able to summarise the instruments of Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine by conducting a corpus study of official reports from strategic studies institutes in the United States, NATO, Ukraine and the European Union published from 1993 to 2014. These organisations described economic, political, informational, territorial, ideological and military instruments of Russian pressure on Ukraine, while Russia in various forms refused to recognise Ukraine as an independent country and the Ukrainian people as distinct from the Russian people. Russia also attempted to subjugate Ukraine by mobilising the ethno-territorial Russian-speaking minority to support pro-Russian separatists.

Thus, the corpora of the US, EU, NATO, Russian and Ukrainian strategic studies institutes demonstrate the importance of ethno-territorial nationalism in Russian politics, ideology and rhetoric. This is the basis for annexing the territories of 'near abroad' countries through a hybrid war: delegitimising the authorities, emphasising historical, cultural and linguistic proximity of peoples (de-ethnicisation), making accusations of discrimination against the ethnic and territorial Russian-speaking minority, implementing economic, informational and political pressure, and mobilising pro-Russian nationalists.

The United States and NATO predicted a war between Russia and Ukraine in the context of the Crimean referendum and pro-Russian nationalist sentiment on the peninsula in 1994 (as was stated in the publications of relevant strategic studies institutes). In this regard, the attack phase of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine has been postponed for at least 20 years – until 2014. However, the literature on Russia's hybrid warfare against Ukraine cites another date, the gas wars of 2006–2009, as possibly initiating the attack phase in addition to 1994.

As a result, it can be argued that the preparatory phase of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine began in 1991, with the use of various pressure instruments, as well as the beneficial cooperation of Ukrainian and Russian capital due to interdependencies related to gas supply and transit, import-export of raw materials and products, which was conditioned, in particular, by the existence of a single industrial complex under the Soviet economy.

Because Ukraine's foreign and domestic policy has been inconsistent and 'balanced' since 1991, this preparatory phase of the war did not lead to an attack phase. Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia has resulted in a fundamental inconsistency in its foreign policy trajectory, with the country constantly oscillating between Euro-Atlantic and pro-Russian integration paths. The inconsistency of the foreign policy of the Ukrainian ruling class and the political elite is evidenced by studies conducted by strategic studies institutes in the United States, the European Union, NATO, Russia and, to a lesser extent, Ukraine.

In this context, the findings of the strategic studies institutes prior to and including 2014 are quite consistent with the findings of recent studies of Russian hybrid warfare against Ukraine.

Ukrainian capital was defending itself against Russian capital encroachment, seeking security guarantees and preferential treatment from western capitalism while maintaining a profitable relationship with Russia. This is the true subjectivity of the Ukrainian elite. As a result, the West has never had 'external control' over Ukraine's foreign policy, as Russia claims.

Ukraine practically played a double game: on the one hand, claiming commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration while doing little in the way of reforms, eradicating corruption, and fearing a political and economic reaction from Russia; on the other hand, continuing to benefit from cooperation with Russia while denying the latter political and military integration and pursuing a loyal language policy that served as a springboard for the development of pro-Russian nationalism. These adaptation tactics were successful until Russian soldiers set foot on Ukrainian territory, forcing a reorientation in one direction, albeit to the last, until 24 February 2022, when every opportunity for profitable economic relations with the aggressor country was exploited. One of the highlights of the work of the US, EU, NATO, Russian and Ukrainian strategic studies institutes is a focus on Ukraine's vulnerabilities. However, the main characteristics of this inconsistency, the duality of Ukrainian elites, have been noted in the hybrid warfare literature.

It can be stated that the United States, the European Union and NATO have been very cautious and slow in establishing relations with Ukraine, either because they believe its integration with Russia is very likely, or because they do not want to destroy profitable economic relations with Russia because of such an unstable, inconsistent partner.

The analysis of pre-2014 publications from the strategic studies institutes of the United States, NATO, the European Union, Russia and Ukraine in the context of the postponed nature of Russia's hybrid war against Ukraine reveals that all the mentioned actors were fully aware of the high likelihood of conflict escalation. They identified various forms of pressure exerted by Russia on Ukraine, yet failed to take any preventive measures. Understanding that state and supranational actors acknowledge the probability of a hot phase of hybrid warfare enables more effective action, aiming to avert dire consequences for humanity in other current or future instances of hybrid warfare. The significance of this study lies not only in providing insights but also in enabling civil society to utilise open access to the publications from the strategic studies institutes to influence authorities and advocate for non-military resolutions of conflict situations between countries. Furthermore, the open access to these publications

helps avoid the formation of conspiratorial theories regarding geopolitics and fosters a comprehensive understanding of the complexities of international relations, without demonising certain actors at the expense of deification of others. This study demonstrates that the inability to act based on current research is a significant challenge within contemporary international relations.



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Research article

# Transcending Two Percent: Toward a Prioritarian Model of NATO Burden-Sharing

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## **Abstract**

*This article argues that NATO's current burden-sharing regime, which I term the proportional model of NATO burden-sharing and which obligates each NATO member to allocate at least 2 percent of its GDP to defence, is deeply flawed from a purely ethical standpoint. This is because the proportional model omits from its approach to distributing the burdens of collective defence two morally relevant ally-level characteristics: namely, individual level of economic development and individual level of external threat. The model therefore treats unfairly both those allies characterised by especially low levels of economic development and those allies characterised by especially high levels of external threat, relative in each case to the alliance-wide average. The article argues that the proportional model should be replaced by that I term the prioritarian model of NATO burden-sharing, which is grounded in the normative theory of prioritarianism from the distributive justice literature. The prioritarian model would morally improve upon the proportional model by incorporating the aforementioned two ally-level characteristics (level of economic development and level of external threat) into its burden-sharing system in the form of two action-guiding prescriptions. The prioritarian model is therefore the fairer of the two models and consequently should be adopted by NATO.*

**Keywords:** NATO, burden-sharing, distributive justice, prioritarianism

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## Introduction

Throughout the long history of NATO, intra-alliance debates among allies concerning the issue of burden-sharing have been a virtual constant (Kim & Sandler 2020; Thies 2003).<sup>1</sup> This trend has not abated in recent years: almost from the moment of his 2017 inauguration, U.S. president Donald Trump criticised what he alleged were the inadequate financial contributions and ‘free-riding’ of European NATO members on U.S. military power and protection. Trump even threatened to forgo defending these members in the event of an attack and to leave the alliance altogether if non-U.S. NATO allies continued to (as Trump saw it) shirk their fair share of alliance burdens (Crowley 2020; Herszenhorn & Bayer 2018). Indeed, the controversy within NATO over the question of fairly shared burdens reached such a caustic level during Trump’s presidency that in 2019 French president Emmanuel Macron declared that ‘what we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO’ (The Economist 2019). However, in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which sparked the first large-scale interstate ground warfare in Europe since World War II, NATO has enjoyed a markedly enhanced degree of cohesion and agreement among its members concerning the necessity of increased ally-level military spending and, specifically, of meeting the alliance’s official objective of every ally spending at least two percent of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence. Especially noteworthy is the fact that Germany, despite its long postwar history of antimilitarism and its ingrained opposition to increasing its defence budget to reflect the size and global importance of its economy, publicly committed to this ‘two-percent objective’ while declaring that it would also create a 100 billion euro fund for upgrading its long-neglected armed forces (Hutt 2022).

Burden-sharing, then, is likely to remain a major topic of discussion and debate for both NATO members and NATO observers in the foreseeable future. This empirical observation, however, inevitably raises the normative question of the *desirability* of NATO’s two-percent objective, which I will refer to throughout this article as the ‘proportional model’ of NATO burden-sharing. This normative question of the desirability of the proportional model can be seen as taking two forms: a *prudential* and an *ethical* form. The prudential desirability of the proportional burden-sharing model concerns the question of whether or not the model is likely to be superior to other burden-sharing models in terms of maximising the common deterrence and defence capacity of NATO vis-à-vis its adversaries.

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1 I follow Cimbala and Forster in defining burden-sharing as ‘the distribution of costs and risks among members of a group in the process of accomplishing a common goal’ (2010: 1). In this case, the ‘group’ is NATO, while the ‘costs and risks’ are those related to the provision of allied deterrence and defence.

The prudential question is thus a matter of evaluating the *military* impact of the proportional model on the *capabilities* of the alliance.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, the ethical desirability of the proportional model of burden-sharing concerns the question of whether or not the model is likely to be superior to other burden-sharing models in terms of how fairly the model distributes the individual costs of institutionalised military cooperation among the thirty-two NATO members. The ethical question, then, is a matter of evaluating the *moral* impact of the proportional model on the *equity* of the alliance.

While addressing both questions is indispensable for undertaking a comprehensive normative assessment of an alliance burden-sharing regime, I focus in this article on the second question: i.e., on the model's ethical desirability. That is, I remain agnostic as to whether or not the proportional model would come closer (in the event that all allies reached the two-percent objective) to maximising the deterrence and defence capacity of the alliance than would an alternative model. Having thus bracketed the first question, I argue that the proportional model is unfair in terms of how it distributes the costs of military cooperation among NATO allies due to significant disparities in levels of economic development and external threat that obtain among these allies. Because of this ethical failure of the proportional model to fairly distribute alliance burdens, I propose an alternative burden-sharing model that, I argue, would ultimately prove more equitable if adopted by NATO because it would treat more fairly those allies plagued by a lower level of economic development and/or a higher level of external threat. I call this model the 'prioritarian model' because it is grounded in the distributive justice theory of prioritarianism from the normative political theory literature. The prioritarian model, I maintain, would do a better job of fairly distributing collective defence burdens than the proportional model does. I thus conclude that NATO should strongly consider adopting the prioritarian model in the near-term future.

The article's normative approach to the issue of NATO burden-sharing and its concomitant engagement with the distributive justice literature represent an important innovation in the context of contemporary alliance scholarship. While there is a sizable literature on NATO burden-sharing in both International Relations (IR) and defence economics,<sup>3</sup> this literature is almost entirely positive (i.e., descriptive or explanatory) in nature and, as a consequence, largely

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2 It bears noting that some scholars, particularly in the realist tradition, understand prudence as being not a normative alternative to the ethical approach, but rather an ethical theory in itself. See Coll (1991); Korab-Karpowicz (2018).

3 For an overview of this literature, see Kim and Sandler (2020). For a pivotal study that exemplifies the dominant political economy approach in the literature, see Hartley and Sandler (1999). For a positivist and quantitatively driven critique of the literature, see Becker (2017). For a post-positivist critique, see Zyla (2018).

ignores the normative question of what type of burden-sharing model should be adopted as a function of that model's ability to distribute the costs of collective defence more fairly than the alternatives.<sup>4</sup> In this way, the article fills an important normative – or, more specifically, ethical – gap in the literature on NATO burden-sharing. It does so while simultaneously introducing positive alliance scholars to the large and rich literature on distributive justice within normative political theory, where questions of fairness in the society-wide allocation of burdens and benefits are central.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, I provide a basic description of NATO's current burden-sharing regime, which I term the proportional model. In the second section, I then critique the model by arguing that it fails to incorporate the crucial fact that, within NATO, there exists broad cross-alliance variation in two morally relevant ally-level characteristics: (1) individual level of economic development and (2) individual level of external threat. More specifically, I argue that the proportional model is unfair to both those allies suffering especially low levels of economic development and those allies suffering especially high levels of external threat. I conclude that the proportional model is therefore morally problematic and that NATO should consider replacing it with a more equitable model. In the third section, I present an alternative to the proportional model, which I term the prioritarian model of NATO burden-sharing. In describing the prioritarian model, I draw on the normative political theory of prioritarianism from the distributive justice literature in the service of arguing that the prioritarian model is ethically superior to the proportional model because the former model would be fairer than is the latter model to NATO allies exhibiting the lowest levels of economic development and the highest levels of external threat. In the fourth section, finally, I defend the prioritarian model against several hypothetical concerns about it. A brief final section concludes.

### **The proportional model of NATO burden-sharing**

Although it existed in a more informal or implicit form for decades, NATO's current burden-sharing regime was first formally articulated and enshrined in the form of an alliance-wide agreement at the 2014 Wales Summit. This Defense Investment Pledge (DIP), as it was then officially called, was endorsed by all allied Heads of State and Government and is considered binding on member states (Becker 2021; NATO 2022b). At the core of the DIP is a pair of normative metrics that function both as action-guiding prescriptions to which individual allies must adhere and as evaluative criteria with which ally-level burden-shares can be assessed.<sup>5</sup>

4 For the few scholarly exceptions, see Kunertova (2017); McGerty *et al.* (2022); and Zyla (2018). For exceptions by policy analysts, see Major (2015); Mölling (2014).

5 The DIP also contains a set of 'output' metrics, such as sustainability and deployability, that complement these two 'input' metrics (Becker & Malesky 2017; McGerty *et al.*

The first metric, which is the more fundamental and much better known of the two, is the *two-percent objective*. The two-percent objective commits each ally to spending, at a minimum, two percent of its GDP on military defence. It therefore concerns only aggregate, or ‘top-line’, defence spending: i.e., *what* the members spend. The second metric is the *twenty-percent objective*, which commits each ally to allocating at least twenty percent of its defence expenditure to equipment: that is, to the acquisition of new military equipment and/or the modernisation of military equipment currently in use (NATO 2022b). This is opposed to the other three NATO-designated categories of defence spending: i.e., infrastructure, operations and maintenance (O & M), and personnel, which since 2014 have been viewed as less strategically valuable to the alliance’s long-term vision of collective defence (Becker 2017).<sup>6</sup> It therefore concerns disaggregated defence spending: i.e., *how* the members spend. For example, a hypothetical Ally X may dedicate 1.8 percent of its GDP to top-line defence expenditure, while dedicating 22 percent of this expenditure to the acquisition of new equipment and/or the modernisation of equipment currently in use. The remaining 78 percent of its defence expenditure would then be allocated to some combination of the categories of infrastructure, O & M, and personnel. Ally X would hence fail to satisfy the two-percent objective but succeed in satisfying the twenty-percent objective. According to NATO’s current burden-sharing regime, then, this hypothetical ally would be assessed as only partially fulfilling its burden-sharing obligations to the alliance and would, as a result, be deemed as treating its allies unfairly. Notably, in 2022, according to the alliance’s own published data, nine out of the twenty-nine official allies that maintain militaries satisfied the two-percent objective, while twenty-four of these allies satisfied the twenty-percent objective (NATO 2022a).<sup>7</sup>

Both of these input metrics are of great practical importance for understanding the contemporary state of NATO burden-sharing. Nonetheless, for the sake of simplicity, clarity, and practical relevance, I will focus exclusively throughout this article on the more important and much more widely discussed two-percent objective. It is this two-percent objective that I will refer to from this point on as the ‘proportional burden-sharing model’. This model can be stated as follows:

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2022). I omit these metrics because they have received little attention from analysts and scholars, because very little data on them is publicly available, and because they take the fairness of the input metrics for granted and instead assess the concrete outcomes (i.e., military outputs) thereof.

6 This prioritisation of equipment did obtain during NATO’s ‘out of area’ period (2000–2012). See Becker and Malesky (2017).

7 Iceland does not maintain a military and so is incapable of satisfying either objective.

*Proportional Burden-Sharing Model (Specific Version):* every NATO ally is obligated to allocate a proportion of its GDP to defence expenditure that is equal to or greater than two percent.

We can also restate the model as a generic version of itself, in which specific quantitative percentages are initially absent but can then be added in, removed, or altered according to the preferences of the allies at any given juncture:

*Proportional Burden-Sharing Model (Generic Version):* every NATO ally is obligated to allocate exactly the same proportion of its GDP to defence expenditure.

Having provided this overall description of the proportional model as well as a concise statement of its 'specific' and 'generic' versions, the article is now in a position to begin its critique of the model's shortcomings. Before doing so, however, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that the model does indisputably possess some qualities that are, at least ostensibly, positive and favourable. For one, the model is simple and straightforward in postulating a single fixed percentage as the normative standard of all allied burden-sharing. The built-in parsimony, clarity, and precision of this simple quantitative standard could in theory permit the allies to cooperate more readily and coordinate more effectively by minimising ambiguity and uncertainty, and so also controversy and debate, about what each ally should and will rightfully contribute to collective defence. For another, the proportional model can be considered, if only in a narrow and highly formal sense, strictly egalitarian in its approach to distributing the burdens of institutionalised military collaboration. Hence, according to the model, every ally is obligated to spend exactly the same percentage of its GDP on defence and the same percentage of its defence budget on equipment (NATO 2022b). This 'thin' egalitarianism may seem attractive to those allies, and also to those analysts and scholars, who believe that every NATO member must contribute 'equally' to collective defence in order for the alliance's burden-sharing regime to qualify as fair. Yet these ostensibly favourable qualities of the proportional model are significantly outweighed by the unfairness with which the model treats two specific categories of NATO ally due to the model's particular approach to distributing alliance burdens.

### **A critique of the proportional burden-sharing model**

The first category of NATO ally that the proportional model treats unfairly is those allies that are characterised by *lower levels of economic development*. I conceptualise the individual level of economic development of a NATO ally as sim-

ply its current GDP per capita, or the current ratio of an ally's GDP to its total population.<sup>8</sup> An ally's level of economic development is, then, essentially the average income of the sum of all its citizens and permanent residents. Empirically, a substantial degree of variation in individual levels of economic development, conceptualised as such, currently exists (and, historically, has always existed) among the members of NATO. This variation runs from one extreme of very highly developed allies (e.g., Luxembourg and Norway), through an upper-middle range of highly-to-moderately developed allies (e.g., Italy and Spain) and a lower-middle range of moderately-to-minimally developed allies (e.g., Turkey and Romania), to the opposite extreme of minimally developed allies (e.g., North Macedonia and Albania). There are many other possible ways, of course, of presenting the broad inter-ally variation in economic development that exists within NATO, but this four-level hierarchy expresses the basic point clearly enough, I believe. It is also worth filling in this hierarchy with a few simple statistics: in 2021, the highest GDP per capita was \$136,700 (Luxembourg), while the lowest was \$6,370 (Albania). This amounts to a statistical range of \$130,330 (International Monetary Fund 2021).<sup>9</sup> And even if one drops Luxembourg's unusually high GDP per capita, which was somewhat of an outlier, the next highest income was that of Norway at a still extraordinarily high \$89,090. This yields a statistical range of \$82,720. Finally, the median GDP per capita, which in this case (with Luxembourg right-skewing the distribution a bit) seems more informative than the mean, was roughly \$27,000 (International Monetary Fund 2021).

These broad differences in GDP per capita among the NATO members are morally relevant to the question of alliance burden-sharing. A NATO ally's level of economic development directly and significantly affects the overall level of human well-being and quality of life that obtain within the domestic society of that ally. The inhabitants of more economically developed allied states will, on average, be healthier, safer, better educated, wealthier, happier, and longer-lived than those of less economically developed allied states. In this way, a NATO member's level of economic development makes a meaningful moral difference to the lives of the very people – that is, the very individual citizens – whose welfare and security the alliance is, at the most basic level, designed to preserve and protect. More specifically, an ally's level of economic development directly and significantly affects its ability to contribute both financially and (since military assets not only cost money but also tend to be expensive relative to alternative public goods like healthcare, education, and poverty reduction) militarily to the

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8 There are obviously other ways of conceptualising an ally's level of economic development, but I use GDP per capita due to its simplicity and popularity as a proxy for the latter.

9 To keep things simple, I leave aside more precise but complex measures of variation such as variance and standard deviation.

central objective of the alliance: deterrence and defence. Because all individual allied governments use some system of national taxation as the primary means of funding these public goods, allied citizens ultimately bear most of the burden of contributing to this objective. But the income and assets of the average citizen of a less economically developed member will be lower and fewer, and so have a higher marginal value, than those of the average citizen of a more economically developed member. It is thus, all else equal, more financially onerous for the former citizen to contribute to the alliance's goal of deterrence and defence than it is for the latter citizen to do so, assuming that the defence budget comprises the same share of GDP in both countries. Finally, the government of a less developed ally will also suffer a greater opportunity cost – in the form of forgoing public spending that is chiefly designed to increase the economic development of its citizens through the provision of alternative public goods, such as those just mentioned above, that are suited to this purpose – than will the government of a more developed ally in allocating the same share of its GDP to defence. This is because development-enhancing social spending would have yielded greater marginal benefits for the citizens of a less developed ally than it would have yielded for the citizens of a more developed ally. In this way, less developed allies have more to lose in relative (i.e., GDP-adjusted) terms from a burden-sharing system like the proportional model than do more developed allies, leaving the former allies even more disadvantaged than they were at the outset.

The second category of NATO ally that the proportional model treats unfairly is those allies that are characterised by *higher levels of external threat*. I conceptualise the individual level of external threat of a NATO ally as a combination of: (1) the geographical proximity of the ally's territory to the territory of Russia, which according to NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept constitutes the primary adversary of the alliance and 'the most significant and direct threat to Allies' security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area' (NATO 2022c: 4); and (2) the average degree of discord that exists in the ally's diplomatic relations with Russia.<sup>10</sup> Empirically, just as is the case with relative level of economic development, there is significant variation among the thirty-two NATO members with regards to relative level of external threat.<sup>11</sup> At the extreme end of a plausible spectrum of external threat, there are allies such as the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and

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10 Although I focus on NATO, there are many ways for external threat in the general alliance context to be conceptualised and operationalised. For an influential conceptualisation, see Walt (1987). For an attempt at more precise operationalisation, see Johnson (2017). Notably, both studies explore external threat solely as an explanation of alliance formation and not as a normative critique of a certain form of alliance burden-sharing.

11 In describing this intra-alliance variation in level of external threat vis-à-vis Russia, I draw on the work of Hugo Meijer and Stephen G. Brooks (2021) on the 'strategic cacophony' currently evident within NATO.

Lithuania) and Poland. Each of these states shares a border with Russia and is a former Soviet Bloc member that was militarily and politically dominated by Moscow during the Cold War and, to varying degrees, annexed or colonised by it in earlier historical periods. In recent years, these states have maintained very poor diplomatic relations with the latter, characterised by a high degree of mistrust, suspicion, disagreement, and criticism (Meijer & Brooks 2021).

Toward the middle of this spectrum, there are allies such as the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, and Norway. These states are all geographically close to Russia, with Norway sharing a 198-kilometer-long land border with the latter. The first three states, meanwhile, were all members of the Eastern Bloc and fall within what Moscow considers to be its natural sphere of influence. All of these states in the 'middle range' of individual external threat have in recent years maintained relatively cool diplomatic relations with Moscow. Nonetheless, these diplomatic relations have been more stable and constructive overall than those of the group of highly threatened allies mentioned earlier (Meijer & Brooks 2021).

Other allies are still further along on the spectrum and have in recent years (and especially since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine) maintained very poor diplomatic relations with Moscow while nonetheless being geographically distant from its borders. These allies include, most notably, the United Kingdom and the United States. Conversely, Hungary is a geographically proximate former Eastern Bloc member that, under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, has maintained consistently good diplomatic relations with Moscow. Finally, there are those allies that fall at the opposite end of this external threat spectrum: i.e., those states that are geographically distant from Moscow and that have also traditionally had favourable diplomatic relations with it due to an overall lack of conflicting interests and different spheres of operation and influence: e.g., Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Bulgaria, and Ireland (Meijer & Brooks 2021).

These considerable differences in the individual level of external threat that exist among the NATO members are, like differences in levels of economic development, morally relevant to the question of alliance burden-sharing. As in the case of economic development, a NATO member's level of external threat directly and significantly affects the overall level of human well-being and quality of life that obtain within the domestic society of that member. There is both an objective and a subjective component of this impact on an ally's citizenry. Objectively, allied citizens living under a high degree of external threat vis-à-vis a hostile and proximate adversary are, *ipso facto*, in an actual state of heightened insecurity and enhanced endangerment whether or not they are aware of this fact. They are probabilistically more likely to suffer measurable harm via an armed attack than are the citizens of an ally confronting a less serious external

threat. Subjectively, allied citizens living under a high degree of external threat vis-à-vis a hostile and proximate adversary, and who are aware of this fact, are compelled to suffer the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty that, as a matter of ordinary human psychology, generally accompany of this knowledge. Here, then, the harm in question is not a function of catastrophic probabilities, but rather of insidious certainties: i.e., the inevitable sense of disquiet and creeping panic that emerges in the face of a constantly looming armed attack. Furthermore, when a NATO ally is beset by an especially high level of external threat, the government of that ally is typically compelled to allocate a higher proportion of its national budget to defence spending than it would otherwise be inclined to allocate. This means that the government will be forced, due to the so-called 'guns versus butter' dilemma that is intrinsic to public policy (Powell 1993), to transfer funds from other forms of welfare-improving public spending like health-care, education, and poverty reduction, for the express purpose of ensuring the state's fundamental security needs and perhaps even, in the most extreme case of external threat, its near-term survival. The result is another source of systematic downward pressure on the basic living standards and socioeconomic security of citizens, for whom every bullet or tank purchased to prevent external attack is a dollar that, under a less threatening external environment, might have been spent on resources for the proven betterment of human life. In this way, the guns versus butter dilemma and the government's consequent need to allocate a finite sum of its financial resources to either military planning or social policy tends, in the most externally threatened states, to be rigged from the start in favour of the 'guns' side of this tradeoff.

The key conclusion that follows from the foregoing set of arguments is that a NATO ally's level of economic development and its level of external threat together help to determine how truly burdensome the burdens of collective defence actually are for that ally and, more specifically, for that ally's citizens. And if there happens to be substantial variation in level of economic development and of external threat among the allies – as there does indeed happen to be among current NATO members – then the resultant differences in burdensomeness will be proportionally substantial. Yet if the burden-sharing system that is adopted by NATO fails to acknowledge and incorporate this inter-ally variation in burdensomeness that is in turn generated by inter-ally variation in economic development and external threat, and instead treats all allies as if they are at approximately the same level of economic development and external threat (and thus as suffering approximately the same level of burdensomeness), then that system must be characterised as *unfair*. It follows that the proportional model, being precisely such a system, is treating unfairly (at the very least) that group of least economically developed allies that includes North Macedonia and Alba-

nia and that group of most externally threatened allies that includes the Baltic states and Poland. In addition, the model may also be treating unfairly those allies whose level of economic development is (though not the lowest) still appreciably below the NATO average or whose level of external threat is (though not the highest) still appreciably above the NATO average.<sup>12</sup> If this is right, then the possibility needs to be explored of designing an alternative burden-sharing regime that is able to address and ameliorate this ethical failure of the proportional burden-sharing model. This is precisely the goal of the next section, to which I now turn.

### **Toward a prioritarian model of NATO burden-sharing**

In this third section, I propose and defend an alternative to the proportional model of NATO burden-sharing. In order to accomplish this task, however, I must first briefly discuss the theoretical foundation of my proposed model. This foundation comes in the form of the distributive justice theory of prioritarianism. Serna Olsaretti defines the underlying concept of distributive justice in terms of the essential normative question of 'how we should arrange our social and economic institutions so as to distribute fairly the benefits and burdens of social cooperation' (2018: 1). Prioritarianism, meanwhile, was originally formulated by the philosopher Derek Parfit (1991) largely in response to what Parfit viewed as the inherent weaknesses of another theory of distributive justice: namely, egalitarianism.

At its core, prioritarianism makes one all-important and highly distinctive claim about how best to, as Olsaretti puts it, 'distribute fairly the benefits and

12 This conclusion is not invalidated by the potential claim that a less economically developed or more externally threatened ally might be, on account of its past statements or actions, at least partially responsible for its low level of economic development or high level of external threat. Even if such a claim were technically accurate, it would at most only indicate that the ally is being treated somewhat less unfairly by the proportional model than it would otherwise be treated if such partial responsibility did not obtain. Practically speaking, however, it would be both odd and extraordinarily difficult for the ethical evaluation of an existing burden-sharing regime to preoccupy itself with the complex and controversial task of determining (a) how individually responsible each ally has historically been for its current economic circumstances and security environment and (b) what share of the burden of collective defence it should shoulder as a function of that responsibility. That this is true can be seen empirically in the fact that national taxation systems throughout the world are virtually never designed so as to comprehensively reflect, or even to partially incorporate, the purported responsibility of individual taxpayers for the fact that their taxable income happens to fall within a particular tax-rate bracket. A central reason such information is not incorporated into tax systems is, of course, because the information itself is extremely hard, if not theoretically impossible, to acquire given widespread, deep-seated, and above all reasonable disagreement surrounding questions of personal responsibility. Much the same difficulty applies when one moves from the context of state taxation systems to that of alliance burden-sharing regimes.

burdens of social cooperation' (2018: 1). This aforementioned claim can be seen as cleanly separating prioritarianism from the competing theory of egalitarianism as well as from other theories of distributive justice. The central prioritarian claim is, to quote Parfit's succinct formulation, that 'benefiting people matters more the worse off these people are' (1991: 19). Put differently, the elimination of a burden or the provision of a benefit is, morally speaking, more valuable the worse off beforehand is the subject from whom the burden would be eliminated or to whom the benefit would be provided. According to this formulation, then, prioritarianism conceives of the value of benefits or the disvalue of burdens *absolutely*, and not *relatively* (Parfit 1991). The theory states that what one should care most about is not, as an egalitarian theorist would argue, how well off a subject is relative to another subject, but rather how well off a subject is compared to how well off she herself could or should be (Holtug 2006; Porter 2012). The more worse off this subject initially is, the greater the moral weight that should be assigned to reducing that subject's burdens or increasing that subject's benefits because of the greater intrinsic value of such a reduction and not because of any concomitant increase in equality.

Therefore, given the opportunity to reduce the burdens or increase the benefits of one of two subjects who *ex ante* possess unequal welfare between them, prioritarianism advocates reducing the burdens or increasing the benefits of the worse off of these two subjects. And when there are many subjects to whom burdens or benefits can be distributed in different ways, prioritarianism advocates distributing these burdens or benefits across the full group of subjects as a function of how poorly off each subject is relative to the group average. In this manner, the more worse off a subject is relative to that average, the lower the burden or higher the benefit that subject will be allocated (Holtug 2006; Porter 2012).

Thus in practice a prioritarian distributive system will in some cases resemble the structure of a typical progressive taxation system, with a variable 'burden rate' that is indexed to the subject's level of income or overall ability to pay, so that the former quantity is positively correlated with the latter quantity. Crucially, however, a prioritarian approach to distributing social goods need not take this practical form of a progressive system of burden allocation (i.e., of taxation in most real-world cases). Indeed, as will be seen below, the prioritarian system that I propose is not progressive in the relevant sense of indexing burden obligations, via a fixed scale of increasing percentages (i.e., tax rates), directly to burden-bearing capacity (i.e., income level or ability to pay).

Having introduced the crux of prioritarianism as a distributive justice theory, let us now consider the theory in the context of burden-sharing among NATO allies. The question here is: how might prioritarianism be used to construct a normative model of alliance burden-sharing that improves upon the

proportional burden-sharing model by ameliorating the moral shortcomings of the latter? To begin to answer this question, first recall that the proportional model's main ethical problem stems from its failure to incorporate two morally relevant factors about the NATO alliance: (1) the individual level of economic development of each NATO ally and (2) the individual level of external threat of each NATO ally. This failure renders the proportional model unfair to those allies that fall below the average alliance-wide level of economic development and/or external threat and especially unfair to those allies that are among the least economically developed and/or most externally threatened within the alliance. It is my contention that prioritarianism furnishes us with a promising solution to this dual moral defect of the proportional model. Prioritarianism does so because, as a substantive theory of distributive justice, it comes equipped with a fungible system for distributing the burdens or benefits of different forms of social cooperation.

Thus one can consider NATO to be the relevant 'institution' of 'social cooperation' that is to be arranged (Olsaretti 2018: 1). One can, in turn, consider ally-level defence expenditure obligations as the relevant 'burdens' that are to be distributed.<sup>13</sup> If, then, NATO is the entity that is to be arranged and defence expenditure obligations the entity that is to be distributed, then prioritarianism is the system according to whose prescriptive rules these two entities are to be arranged and distributed, respectively. One can then introduce into this picture the two morally relevant factors stated above: i.e., (1) and (2).<sup>14</sup> The key prioritarian logic here goes like this: because both less economically developed allies and more externally threatened allies are *ipso facto* already worse off – that is, are *already more burdened in ways that are relevant to collective defence* – beforehand than are their more developed and less threatened peers, the first two groups of allies would experience a greater increase in welfare from a given reduction of their collective defence burdens than would their allied peers (from an identical reduction). A given reduction in the individual burdens of the first two groups of allies is thus more morally valuable than is an equal reduction (at an identical decrement) in the individual burdens of their allied peers. It follows that a genu-

13 I bracket the concept of 'burden' because collective defence has, following the seminal publication of Olson and Zeckhauser (1966), generally if not universally been considered a public good from which all allies benefit roughly equally.

14 I focus on these two factors because their moral relevance seems to me especially significant as far as the question of fair burden-sharing is concerned. This focus should not, however, be taken to imply that other ally-level factors, such as for example country size or pure (divorced from external threat) geography, are necessarily unimportant for deciding on an equitable distribution of burdens. In formulating a burden-sharing model, as in formulating any normative or explanatory model, there is an analytical tradeoff between parsimony and comprehensiveness. My sense is that the morally relevant factors chosen here represent an acceptable balance between these two desirable but inversely related qualities.

inely equitable regime of NATO burden-sharing will be one whose distributive prescriptions are firmly grounded in the foregoing prioritarian observations. In Parfit's phrasing, 'we should not give equal weight to equal benefits, whoever receives them. Benefits to the worse off should be given more weight' (1991: 20).

We can now begin to appreciate the extent to which the distributive approach of the prioritarian model will differ from that of the proportional model. Moreover, it can be appreciated that this difference between the respective distributive approaches of the two models exists because of a deeper and more fundamental difference that exists between the respective moral assumptions of the models. The proportional model assumes, at least implicitly, either that cross-alliance variation in level of economic development and external threat are morally irrelevant *tout court* or else that cross-alliance variation in these characteristics may be morally relevant to some questions of alliance management but not to the question of what constitutes fair burden-sharing. The prioritarian model rejects both assumptions. It assumes that, due to the moral relevance of cross-alliance variation in economic development and external threat to the question of what constitutes fair burden sharing, these two characteristics should be at the centre of any burden-sharing regime that is designed to apply to NATO in its present state. Note that this assumption does not entail that economic development and external threat are necessarily the only morally relevant factors that merit consideration in designing NATO's burden-sharing regime. Rather, the core assumption of the prioritarian model entails only that economic development and external threat are, on account of their central moral relevance to the question of what constitutes fair burden-sharing, afforded a correspondingly central place in any NATO burden-sharing regime that is being designed amid the alliance's current degree of cross-alliance variation in economic development and external threat. In short, the question of whether or not cross-alliance variation in economic development and external threat matter, morally speaking, for answering the separate question of how to fairly distribute collective defence burdens is what distinguishes the models from one another on the most fundamental level of burden-sharing ethics.

Having established all of this, and by building on the generic version of the proportional burden-sharing model posited in the previous section, something like the following set of three propositions can now be inferred as a first pass at a prioritarian burden-sharing model:

*Prioritarian Burden-Sharing Model:*

- (a) every NATO ally is obligated to allocate exactly the same proportion of its GDP to defence expenditure; however,

(b) those allies whose level of economic development is significantly above the alliance-wide average are obligated to assist those allies whose level of economic development is significantly below that average;<sup>15</sup> equally,

(c) those allies whose level of external threat is significantly below the alliance-wide average are obligated to assist those allies whose level of external threat is significantly above that average.

Let us examine these three propositions that, taken together, constitute the prioritarian model more closely in order to better grasp how the model both builds on and improves upon the proportional model and how it is grounded in prioritarian distributive justice theory. Proposition (a), it will be immediately noticed, is simply a word-for-word restatement of the generic version of the proportional model. This nesting of the proportional model at the very heart of the prioritarian model shows that, as emphasised earlier, the prioritarian model does not seek to comprehensively do away with the content of the model that it nonetheless ultimately seeks to replace. Thus proposition (a) does not substitute a new percentage-of-GDP defence expenditure objective for the proportional model's two-percent objective. More specifically, it does not replace the two-percent objective with a progressive or ranked system of burden obligations according to which the proportion of an ally's GDP that it must spend on defence is determined by its level of economic development and/or its level of external threat, resulting in more (less) developed and/or less (more) threatened allies being 'taxed' at higher (lower) rates for the public good of collective defence. Such a 'direct' approach to creating a prioritarian system of burden-allocation would in all likelihood prove extremely complicated, inevitably contentious, and hence practically unfeasible to implement. It would also have the perverse and dangerous effect of institutionally incentivising lower defence spending among more externally threatened NATO members. Instead of completely rejecting the proportional model and its fixed two-percent objective in this way, the prioritarian model seeks to use the former model as a ready-made and largely reasonable prescriptive foundation on which a morally more defensible model can be erected. It thereby leverages one of the abovementioned strengths of the proportional model – specifically, its functional simplicity in the sense of the parsimony, clarity, and precision that characterise its underlying distributive approach – in the service of creating a demonstrably more

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15 'Average' is used here in a very loose sense, as referring to whichever measure of central tendency is most appropriate for measuring an ally-level characteristic. As mentioned earlier, in the case of level of economic development conceptualised as GDP per capita, this will likely be the median.

equitable system of arranging and assigning burden-shares among allies who happen to be very differently situated in terms of individual levels of economic development and/or external threat.

The parameters of this new and more equitable system are made clearer in the content of propositions (b) and (c), which also showcase the model's prioritarian theoretical foundations. The basic prioritarian idea implicitly at work in both prescriptions has already been described above: it is that NATO members who are *already more burdened from the start* due to a lower level of economic development and/or higher level of external threat will, by virtue of this fact, experience a greater boost in individual welfare from a given reduction in their respective alliance burdens than will NATO members who are not antecedently burdened to the same extent. Reducing the burdens of the *ex ante* more burdened allies will therefore be more morally valuable *ex post* than will reducing the burdens of the *ex ante* less burdened allies. For example, NATO member Canada is one of the wealthiest and most economically developed states in the world, let alone within the alliance, with a GDP per capita that is more than double that of Poland. Canada is also, arguably, one of the least externally threatened states in the world, let alone within NATO, with its only land border shared with a fellow NATO member (the United States) and considered so militarily secure that it has long remained militarily undefended (on both sides). Poland, on the other hand, is one of the most externally threatened states within NATO, with a border shared not only with the alliance's principle adversary and Poland's former de facto ruler, Russia, but also with Russia's closest military ally, Belarus.<sup>16</sup> In light of these substantial differences in levels of economic development and external threat that exist between Canada and Poland, and in line with Parfit's formulation of prioritarianism, propositions (b) and (c) would refuse to give equal moral weight to reducing the burdens of two allies that are already very differently burdened (in terms of economic development and/or external threat) *before* the distributive process has begun and that are thus not equally well off in the fact of a process that (at least under the proportional model) is likely to render them either *still more* well off (in Canada's case) or *still more* worse off (in Poland's case). Instead, the two propositions treat (empirically) unlike cases (normatively) unlike, so to speak. As already indicated, the propositions do this *not* by mandating, in the mold of a progressive taxation scheme, that every ally spend a different percentage of its GDP on defence as a function of its level of economic development and/or external threat. Instead, they do so by a more indirect means: namely, an obligation on the part of the most economically developed and least

16 Belarus and Russia, besides being close politically via the personal ties between their leaders, are both members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a multi-lateral defence pact that can be seen as a Russian-led version of NATO in the Post-Soviet Space.

externally threatened allies to *assist* the least economically developed and most externally threatened allies, respectively.

This idea of obligatory inter-ally assistance, which comprises the prescriptive centrepiece of the prioritarian model, is the element of propositions (b) and (c) that most requires explanation. What exactly is meant by the propositions' claim that allies whose economic development level is significantly above the alliance-wide average are obligated to assist allies whose economic development level is significantly below that average, while allies whose external threat level is significantly below the alliance-wide average are obligated to assist allies whose external threat level is significantly above that average? To begin with, by 'obligated to assist', what is meant is that those members whose economic development level is especially high relative to the alliance-wide average have a *pro tanto* duty to incorporate into their annual defence budget a grant of financial assistance directed at those members whose economic development level is especially low relative to that average. The same prescription applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to those members whose external threat level is especially low relative to the alliance-wide average vis-à-vis those members whose external threat level is especially high relative to that average. Members that, meanwhile, enjoy both significantly higher-than-average levels of economic development and significantly lower-than-average levels of economic threat have a *pro tanto* duty to incorporate into their defence budgets *one* grant of financial assistance aimed at allies with significantly low-than-average levels of economic development and another such grant aimed at allies with significantly higher-than-average levels of external threat. By 'significant', what is meant is that the assisting ally should be among the most economically developed and least externally threatened members, while the assisted ally should be among the least economically developed and most externally threatened members. It should be noted that what exactly can be said to qualify, in a precise quantitative sense, as 'significant' is ultimately for the allies themselves to discuss, debate, and decide. Of course, this determination will itself require an agreed-upon metric or formula for measuring economic development and external threat. Recall that I conceptualise the first of these as an ally's GDP per capita and the second as a combination of the geographical proximity of the ally's territory to the territory of Russia and the average degree of discord in the ally's diplomatic relations with Russia. While GDP per capita and geographical proximity are measurable as is, ally-level degree of diplomatic discord with Russia would need to be operationalised in a manner that is acceptable to all allies before measurement and assessment would be possible. Since it is not my aim in this article to translate the prioritarian model into a readily usable formula for the practical assessment of ally-level characteristics, however, and since the validity of the argument that I do offer does not depend

on the creation of such a formula, I leave this matter either for a future scholarly study or, better still, for the direct deliberation and implementation of the allies themselves.

It is my contention that these three propositions, taken together as the prioritarian burden-sharing model, would if adopted by NATO do much to help ameliorate the earlier-mentioned moral shortcomings and inherent unfairness of the alliance's current proportional model. It follows from this contention that NATO, if it values fairness in collective defence burden-sharing as much as it claims to do, should transition away from the proportional model toward adopting the prioritarian model as soon as it is practically feasible to do so. To flesh out this proposal, it will be helpful at this point to consider a brief illustration of how the prioritarian model could be expected to function in practice, returning to the example of Canada and Poland.

In the case of these two allies, the prioritarian model would first evaluate the individual level of economic development and individual level of external threat of both Canada and Poland. The model would then determine that Canada's level of economic development appears to be significantly above the alliance-wide average and its level of external threat significantly below the alliance-wide average. The model would concurrently determine that Poland's level of economic development appears to be significantly below the alliance-wide average and its level of external threat significantly above the alliance-wide average. As a result of these determinations, the prioritarian model would conclude that Canada is obligated – i.e., has a *pro tanto* duty – to assist Poland with its defence expenditure burden. Crucially, the model would also determine that Canada also has the *same* duty of assistance vis-à-vis all other allies who, like Poland, exhibit levels of economic development and/or external threat that are below (for economic development) or above (for external threat) the alliance-wide average. In policy terms, this determination would entail that Canada is obligated to incorporate into its defence budget one grant of defence burden assistance directed at the former category of allies, which includes Poland, and one grant of defence burden assistance directed at the latter category of allies, which also includes Poland. Other allies in the former category would include those that are even less economically developed than Poland, such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania. Other allies in the latter category would (perhaps) include those that are equally as externally threatened as Poland, such as Latvia and Lithuania. At the same time, the United States would fall into the same category as Canada as an ally possessing a high level of economic development and low level of external threat. As such, the United States would be required to bear the same 'double obligation' of financially assisting both categories of overburdened allies. Meanwhile, a highly developed but moderately threatened ally like (arguably)

Sweden and a moderately developed but highly threatened ally like (arguably) Estonia would be obligated to assist only one of the two categories of overburdened allies (it should be obvious which). Finally, due to their inverse economic and security circumstances, a few allies may end up *both* assisting *and* being assisted by other members: arguably, for example, significantly more developed and significantly more threatened Finland. By the same token, a few allies may end up *neither* assisting *nor* being assisted by other members: arguably, for example, moderately developed and moderately threatened Slovenia.

### **Potential concerns about the prioritarian burden-sharing model**

Now that it has been made clear how the prioritarian model might operate in practice, and before concluding the article, it is necessary to address some potential concerns about the prescriptive content of the model as it has been stated and explicated above. These valid concerns need to be addressed in order to prevent misunderstandings and to clear up misconceptions regarding the moral assumptions and practical implications of the model.

A first concern is that allies with very high levels of economic development and/or very low levels of external threat should have a duty of assistance toward allies with very low levels of economic development and/or very high levels of external threat only if the former set of allies is morally responsible for the economic and/or security situation of the latter set. This concern is misguided, however, because it confuses a duty of assistance with a duty of compensation. The latter, in order to be justified, would indeed seem to require that the most developed and less threatened allies were morally responsible for the situation of the least developed and most threatened allies. A duty of assistance, by contrast, clearly does not require this: wealthy and middle-class taxpayers that fund programs of poverty alleviation and subsidised healthcare for underprivileged persons are not necessarily assumed to be responsible for the plight of the latter persons any more than are wealthy countries that issue development aid to poor countries necessarily assumed to be responsible for the plight of the latter countries in any direct sense. The duty of assistance that implicitly underlies these institutionalised resource transfers from the better-off to the worse-off only requires us to appreciably value fairness in how those resources might in the future be distributed, not to unambiguously recognise responsibility for how they have in the past been distributed.

A second concern is that the prioritarian model would in practice prove too controversial to the would-be assisting allies for them to agree to incorporate the prescribed defence assistance grants into their defence budgets. Furthermore, even if the model's implementation were to be accepted by the assisting allies, that implementation would be likely to reduce the deterrence and defence

capacity of NATO compared to the capacity with which the proportional model endows it.

The first prong of this more practical concern is overstated: it is not at all obvious that the NATO allies could not come to an agreement on implementing the prioritarian model. In particular, it is not obvious that the most developed and least threatened allies would not be willing to assist the least developed and most threatened allies with their defence expenditure obligations. Indeed, NATO is, after all, a military alliance, so that if the former group of allies is willing to consent to and ratify a legally binding commitment that obligates them to militarily defend the latter group in response to an actual attack, it is hard to believe that the former group could not also be persuaded to militarily assist the latter group in preparation for defending against a prospective attack. The *a fortiori* nature of this point should be clear: militarily defending an attacked ally would be much more costly on both a financial and (especially) human scale than would providing an annual grant of defence burden assistance to that same ally, and if the former can be accepted as a normative duty, the latter can as well. What is more, this grant of assistance could actually end up indirectly mitigating the costliness (for the assisting ally) of defending the assisted ally against attack in the future, since the assisted ally will, by virtue of the military assistance itself, be in a position to better contribute to its own self-defence.

The second prong of the concern – that the prioritarian model would reduce the deterrence and defence capacity of NATO relative to the proportional model – is *prima facie* reasonable but also ultimately mistaken. While I have already indicated in the Introduction that I will not consider the question of the prudential (i.e., deterrence and defence-related) desirability of one model over the other, I will just reiterate here that the prioritarian model does not dispense with the prescriptive content of the proportional model. Rather, the prioritarian model retains, in the form of its proposition (a), the generic version of the proportional model. The prioritarian model simply builds (and, I argue, improves) upon its predecessor by redistributing the total cross-alliance costs of achieving, on the part of all thirty-two allies, the proportional model's identical defence expenditure objective. In the specific version of the proportional model, this defence expenditure objective is, of course, the two-percent objective. The prioritarian model is thus equally as capable of incorporating this specific objective as is the prudential model. And since this two-percent objective *just is* the specific version of the prudential model, it follows that the prioritarian model is unlikely to cause a meaningful decline in the deterrence and defence capacity of the alliance relative to the baseline of the proportional model. The prioritarian model would, at a minimum, merely render that baseline markedly fairer. And at a maximum, it is not even unreasonable to believe that the prioritarian could actually help

to *enhance* the military performance of the alliance. This would be the case if the prioritarian model's cultivation of an equitable distribution of burdens ended up increasing the degree of gratitude, trust, respect, and cohesion between (on the one hand) the group of less developed and more threatened allies and (on the other hand) the group of more developed and less threatened allies, while creating an overall sense of collective solidarity, shared understanding, and common purpose between these differently situated groups of allies and, ultimately, among the individual allies themselves. If an alliance characterised by greater gratitude, trust, respect, solidarity, and cohesion among its members is also likely to be, *ceteris paribus*, a more militarily effective alliance, then we are warranted in thinking that the prioritarian model, far from reducing NATO's performance as an institution of deterrence and defence, may in fact result in a boost to that performance. Although the main argument of the article does not strictly depend on it, this would make the prioritarian model not only an attractive *normative* option for the NATO alliance, but also an attractive *policy* option for the latter.

A final concern is that the prioritarian model fails to address the phenomenon (alluded to in the Introduction) of free-riding by non-U.S. NATO members on the U.S. military power and protection. On account of this free-riding, it is the United States that actually has the strongest claim to being assisted with its defence expenditure burdens. Hence the prioritarian model is unfair to the United States. This concern is correct that the prioritarian model does not address (alleged) free-riding by non-U.S. allies on the U.S. military capabilities. The model declines to do so for two reasons.

First, the views of observers like Trump notwithstanding, it remains controversial whether the United States is actually being treated unfairly simply due to the fact that the defence spending of most NATO allies has historically fallen short of the two-percent objective, while U.S. defence spending has historically fallen above that objective (Kim and Sandler 2020). This is because the United States is a *global* power with a corresponding set of *global* security interests and commitments, including a number of other, non-NATO military alliances. In light of this global hegemony, the United States allocates its defence resources accordingly: that is, in a strategically diffuse and diverse manner across the entire international system (Plümper & Neumayer 2015). Non-U.S. NATO members, by contrast, are either regional powers (like Poland and Spain in their respective regions) or limited expeditionary powers (like France in the Maghreb and Sahel). Most of the defence spending of such non-U.S. allies, including of the limited expeditionary powers, is going to be aimed at 'local' – e.g., North Atlantic, or Eastern European, or Western Mediterranean – security needs that fall within the geographical scope of application of NATO's founding treaty. The implication is that U.S. defence spending, taken in isolation, is a misleading indicator

of the *de facto* alliance burden borne by the United States, since that defence spending is not aimed only at defending actual NATO territory (as is the defence spending of most non-U.S. allies).

Second, even if were an accurate indicator, it is far from certain that there has in fact been persistent free-riding by non-U.S. allies after the first two decades of the Cold War, and particularly following the 1966 introduction of the alliance's new strategic doctrine of Flexible Response (Kim & Sandler 2020). In reality, it seems that free-riding has been, at most, sporadic throughout this period, and generally more the exception than the rule. The prioritarian model, then, would not be treating the United States – the wealthiest country in world history and one of the least externally threatened of any historical great power – unfairly in requiring it to assist its least economically developed and most externally threatened allies to meet their defence expenditure obligations. Such a requirement is, after all, for the collective good of the alliance as a whole; an alliance that, it bears remembering, the United States has relied upon for well over seven decades both as an indispensable instrument for realising its national interests on the European continent and as the multilateral foundation of its longstanding commitment to transatlantic security.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that what I have called the proportional model of NATO burden-sharing, which obligates each NATO member to allocate at least 2 percent of its GDP to defence expenditure, is from a purely ethical standpoint seriously flawed. This is because the proportional model omits from its approach to distributing the burdens of collective defence two morally relevant ally-level characteristics: namely, individual level of economic development and individual level of external threat. The model therefore treats unfairly both those allies characterised by especially low levels of economic development and those allies characterised by especially high levels of external threat, relative in each case to the alliance-wide average.

The article has gone on to propose that the proportional model be replaced by that I have called the prioritarian model of NATO burden-sharing, which is grounded in the normative theory of prioritarianism from the distributive justice literature. The prioritarian model would improve upon the proportional model by incorporating the aforementioned two ally-level characteristics – level of economic development and level of external threat – into its burden-sharing system in the form of a pair of action-guiding prescriptions. Due to the deliberately limited and predominantly theoretical aims of the article, I have remained agnostic as to how these prescriptions, and the prioritarian model as a whole, could or should be translated into concrete NATO policy in the form of a novel burden-sharing regime.

Notwithstanding this reluctance to wade into complex matters of practical implementation, it follows emphatically if implicitly from the article's arguments and conclusions that NATO, in the form in which it presently exists, has a demonstrable moral obligation to shift its burden-sharing system from the current proportional model to some version of the prioritarian model as soon as it is reasonably feasible to do so and, preferably, in the near-term future. This implication should be taken seriously and in good faith by the alliance and, in particular, by those among its members that enjoy especially high levels of economic development and especially low levels of external threat. It is these members that are failing to contribute their fair share to the project of multilateral collective defence and thereby failing those among their allies that suffer especially low levels of economic development and especially high levels of external threat. Clearly this institutionalised inequity is not a promising strategy for the cultivation and sustainment of robust inter-ally cooperation and solidarity at a time in which large-scale armed conflict has returned to the European continent and an overwhelming majority of allies are being compelled to increase their defence spending while simultaneously dealing with an unprecedented energy crisis and the omnipresent threat of food supply shortages. In such ominous and volatile times, ally-level financial burdens inevitably become weightier, but so too do the moral obligations of those best able to bear these burdens. NATO's future capacity to help restore peace to the region may very well begin with a genuine organisational readiness to embrace a fairer version of itself.



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Research article

Thematic section  
Decolonising Central and Eastern Europe

# Western Orientalism Targeting Eastern Europe: An Emerging Research Programme

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## Abstract

*This article discusses pre-existing studies of Euro-Orientalism (Orientalism directed at Eastern Europe), and advocates for further study of the unequal relationship between Europe's West and East. In this sense, this article should help to overview and advance the study this phenomenon. A better understanding of Euro-Orientalism is necessary both in order to counter epistemic injustice, and in order to promote realistic policy recommendations for the region. In this latter connection, the article argues that the West's inability to take proper account of Eastern European historical experiences contributed to its failure to prepare for Russia's all-out invasion of Ukraine in early 2022.*

**Keywords:** *Orientalism, Eastern Europe, othering, decolonisation*

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## **Introduction**

This essay argues that contemporary European and, more broadly, Western political discourses have insufficiently engaged with Eastern European points of view, and that their failure to do so has been detrimental to both Eastern European and Western national and supranational interests. It furthermore argues that this failure reflects the existence of long-standing Orientalist stereotypes about Eastern Europe as a region, and the generally negative attitudes towards the mentifact of 'Eastern-Europeanness', which itself is mostly a Western construction.

Therefore, in order to course-correct for the future, it is necessary for us to examine the flaws in this 'Euro-Orientalist' thinking. With that in mind, I will sketch out in this article what I think are some likely productive avenues for future critical inquiry into this matter and introduce some terms that might be useful in exploring them. Most of the concepts that I use have already been proposed by other scholars. A couple of them I have formulated myself.

The piece began its life as a contribution to the ongoing debate about the West's failure to anticipate and prevent the 2022–2023 Russian invasion of Ukraine. It does not itself contain a fully developed analysis of this failure, but rather puts forth a case for consolidated critical research on a certain trajectory of discursive takes on Eastern Europe that should eventually help to understand and clarify it. It also engages with what is by now a long-standing scholarly tradition of critical analysis of common stereotypes about Eastern Europe: a tradition that is very much being continued by the current generation of scholars.

What is at stake here is not just the abstract need to fight against all forms of epistemic injustice caused by accidental or wilful ignorance. Our failure to recognise and confront entrenched prejudice also has direct implications for our ability to determine the correct course of action, which is crucially important not least in critical situations where misjudgement can carry a cost in human lives. Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine has strongly highlighted the need for Ukraine's partners and allies to be clear-sighted about Russia's capabilities without overestimating them, and Ukrainian resistance without underestimating it. It can also help us become better attuned to blind spots in Western attitudes towards Eastern Europe as a whole.

## **Orientalism and Euro-Orientalism**

As demonstrated by the voluminous and well-established critical literature around Western Orientalism and colonialism, the centring of Western points of view and othering attitudes towards the East have long been commonplace features of Western social and political thinking. That this is the case is of course problematic already for moral reasons, since Western-centrism is inherently

a form of epistemic injustice (see e.g. Fricker 2007; Pohlhaus 2017) towards the out-group (Easterners, however they are defined). But at the same time, it is also something that has distorted the West's own judgement in various ways and is therefore detrimental to its collective interests, imposing costs on Western societies that could otherwise have been avoided.

Engaging with this topic, many scholars have long since recognised that Western Orientalist attitudes have not only targeted Asia, North Africa and the Middle East, although this is the main way the term has been used since the publication of Edward Said's seminal 'Orientalism' (Said 1978). There also exists another type of Western Orientalism, which is directed much closer to home: at Eastern Europe. Sometimes dubbed Euro-Orientalism (Adamovsky 2005; Bracewell 2020), this concept is different from Orientalism in the Saidian sense but does share the main features with it. In particular, it builds on the same image of a region to the east having been presented by various kinds of Western experts in an essentialised and stereotypical form, just as the extra-European Orient in Said's paradigm has been essentialised by Western Orientalists (Franzineti 2008: 364). The real-life effects of Euro-Orientalism, especially the obstacle it presents to any genuine and open-minded Western engagement with the region, can be similar as well.

This Said-inspired term Euro-Orientalism, first introduced by Ezequiel Adamovsky (2005) in an article about French images of Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has had its perhaps most enthusiastic reception in studies of pre-20<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Franzineti 2008; Bielousova 2022). Outside of that, it has been most widely used in Balkan studies, even if not necessarily under this moniker. In her seminal book *Imagining the Balkans* (2009, first edition 1997), Bulgarian academic Maria Todorova indeed refrained from using the term Orientalism at all, instead preferring 'Balkanism' to locate its target in a particular regional context inside Europe. Pamela Ballinger (2017) has used 'easternism', which allows for a broader analysis not limited to the Balkans, and Attila Melegh has created 'East-West Slope' to point to the idea of 'gradually diminishing civilization towards the "East"' (Melegh 2006: 2). Other authors, perhaps in order to highlight more clearly the connection to the Saidian concept, have preferred to stick to some variation of the term Orientalism, modifying it as needed. One derivation has been 'Demi-Orientalization', reflecting its origins in Immanuel Wallerstein's 'semi-periphery' (Laczó 2023: 85). Another and rather successful term is Nesting Orientalisms, which has been used to underline the fact that the Euro-Orientalists who are habitually othered by westerners, can and do themselves in turn exhibit similar attitudes towards yet other groups to the east, sometimes even inside their own state (Bakić-Hayden 1995: 922).

Beyond acknowledging the existence of Euro-Orientalism, however, it is in my view important to go a step further and recognise that the whole concept of

'Eastern Europe' is in fact deeply intertwined with the region's status as a perennial object of derogatory Western gaze. Frithjof Benjamin Schenk (2017: 189) has noted that unlike most other European regions, 'Eastern Europe' has always almost exclusively denoted an 'other': some form of 'foreign' geographical, political and cultural space that is located 'eastwards' of one's 'own' territory and 'often charged with ambivalent or negative attributes and stereotypes'. Similarly, Wendy Bracewell (2020: 95) points out that it is a term used primarily to describe others, but very rarely as a self-description.

This fact helps to explain some central distinctive features of Euro-Orientalism, especially why Eastern Europe – while posited to exist as some form of a distinct region by the users of this term – is thereby not necessarily regarded as a genuine community with its own legitimate interests, voice and place in the international system. Rather, it tends to be cast as some form of an ill-defined space situated between the West and Russia, differentiated from the former primarily by its proximity to the latter. A malleable border zone without independent agency, Eastern Europe appears to be perpetually contested, likely to change hands and therefore with an uncertain identity and future.

The prospect that Eastern European lands might in some way be redivided or redistributed in future wars or peace treaties has thus been felt to be neither unlikely nor particularly unjust. This is furthermore shown by the fact that Western reactions when such redivision actually happened – such as during the Soviet takeover of the three independent Baltic states in 1940 – were often lukewarm. The words of Douglas MacKillop, the British consul in Riga, written on the occasion of the Soviet Union's occupation and annexation of Latvia, can be taken as representative. In a report to the Foreign Office, written on 26 July 1940, MacKillop stated that Latvian nationalism, 'a romantic aspiration, a battle cry and a crusade, had in its final manifestation become something of a racket', and that the disappearance of the three Baltic states, 'with their economic weaknesses and internal divides' could be described as 'not entirely regrettable' (Pii-riimäe 2014: xii). Likewise, Swedish historian Wilhelm M. Carlgren has pointed out how Sweden's decision to legally recognise the 1940 annexation of the three Baltic states as lawful – Sweden was only the second European country to do so after Nazi Germany, which at the time was a Soviet ally – was a fulfilment of distrust towards Baltic independence that went all the way back to the end of the First World War (Carlgren 1993: 48).

What are the deeper roots of such attitudes in the West? In fact, I would argue that it is exactly the lack of clarity about the extent and boundaries of Eastern Europe – rather than outright racism, as would be the case with Western Orientalisms directed at Asia, North Africa and the Middle East – that has made a crucial historical contribution to the rise of Euro-Orientalism.

### **Mental maps, phantom borders and lateness to modernity**

In his recent monograph on Eastern European history, Ian D. Armour defines Eastern Europe as including the stretch of land from the Baltic states down to the border of Greece. This includes present-day Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania, Albania, Bulgaria and the states of former Yugoslavia. 'On grounds of space and practicality', Armour notes, his book does not include Finland and 'those parts of Russia inhabited mainly by ethnic Russians' (Armour 2019: 1). Space and practicality considerations may well have been the rationale, but it seems to me that even without them, such a definition corresponds rather well to the contemporary common-sense Western definition of what Eastern Europe is, the inclusion of Austria being in that sense a far more radical step than the omission of Finland or Russia.

Of course, there can be no objectively 'correct' way of defining Eastern Europe. Instead, it is right to highlight the importance of 'mental maps': i.e. conscious (or unconscious) ways of systematising and categorising places into supposedly natural hierarchies and oppositions that at the same time tend to perpetuate imperial divisions and reproduce various ethnic and cultural stereotypes (Varga 2022, 372). The importance of these mental maps is likely the most central factor enabling us to understand what Eastern Europe is. It can be a lived experience and everyday reality for real people, but above all, it is an idea: a complex of negative stereotypes on the Western collective mind.

Nevertheless, imperial divisions, as well as ethnic and cultural stereotypes, have their own particular origins and arcs of development. These must be investigated in order to see the deeper causes of Euro-Orientalism and find ways of productively and critically engaging with it. In this connection, I would argue that the vulnerable status of Eastern Europe on Western (and not only Western) mental maps ultimately rests on the fact that the eastern boundary of Europe is naturally obscure. Unlike Europe's coasts to the north, to the south and to the west, there exists no similarly clear line of demarcation that would help an observer to determine where exactly Europe should end in the east. This means that Eastern Europe's eastern border is by necessity less of a physical and more of a mental boundary.

The same is, or at least for long stretches of time has been, the case with Eastern Europe's border in the west. There is a similar lack of physical clarity about where Europe's West should end, and its East properly begin. As a result, Eastern Europe exists in the mental map of Western imagination as a space of fluidity, where 'Westernness' and 'Easternness' have moved back and forth over time, determined by conquest, religious change, rise and demise of trade routes, and other facts of historical geopolitics. As Guido Franzinetti puts it, it is almost

impossible to use 'Eastern Europe' as a historical category 'without constantly expanding its borders, making provisos for its provisional expansion or contraction' (Franzineti 2008: 365).

Just as the ideas about 'free Europe' and the 'despotic Orient' go back to the antiquity (Broslma et al 2019: 11–12), so do the nascent distinctions between the West and the East of Europe itself. Over time, these ideas about difference between the two have been influenced by a multitude of other events such as the Great Schism dividing Christendom into two parts, the Mongol invasion, the German 'Drang nach Osten' in the Middle Ages, the rise and fall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and many other factors shaping the way that Europe has been conceptualised not just on the real map, but also on the collective mental maps. The exact course of this process has attracted a fair bit of scholarly attention, especially after the end of the Cold War. Since Larry Wolff's classic 1994 study *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Wolff 1994), a voluminous literature has appeared (Confino 1994; Dupcsik 1999; Adamovsky 2005; Franzineti 2008), looking at the earlier, especially 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western ideas about Eastern Europe, and the historical turning points that had a decisive influence on their development.

One particularly important historical process that impacted Western ideas about the East of Europe was the Early Modern rise of the Russian Empire as a Great Power and a major threat replacing that of the Ottoman Empire (Bracewell 2020: 94). From that point onwards, the eastern boundary of the West could be identified with the western border of Russia, a country that itself was a target of much Western Orientalist stereotypes. But the clarity thus created by Russia's rise was hardly sufficient, as its borders kept changing over time and it kept adding new lands to its imperial possessions. Even after centuries, Russia's more recently conquered westernmost borderlands retained a linguistic, cultural and religious distinctiveness compared to Russia proper, and subsequently became the northern reaches of what is understood as Eastern Europe today. The one exception is Finland, added to the Russian Empire only in 1809, which instead (re-)claimed for itself a Nordic identity in the years following its declaration of independence in 1917, and subsequently argued against attempts to brand it as 'Baltic' (Wunsch 2006).

Further to the west and to the south, similar processes can be observed with the borderlands of other European Empires. Parts of what's today thought of as Eastern Europe included to the eastern reaches of Austria-Hungary and Germany, and the northernmost territories of the Ottoman Empire.

No matter which empire the various Eastern European lands came to belong to, they were characterised by liminality and peripherality in terms of their relationship with the imperial core. Their distinctiveness meant that they easily

attracted the suspicions of central imperial authorities, which believed that their loyalty and stability could not be fully guaranteed. Characterised, as borderlands often were, by ethnically and confessionally mixed populations, they were seen as likely areas to harbour separatist sentiments. The danger of this happening was made worse by the fact that as border regions, they were also crucially important for the defence of the rest of the empire. None of this encouraged recognition of their independent value or agency, neither inside the empire – which had a natural interest in levelling local legal, administrative and even linguistic differences – nor abroad.

Even the real-life experiences of Westerners who visited the East, seen through Orientalist prejudice, did probably more to perpetuate the negative stereotypes than contest them. An American historian of the First World War, Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, has described the bewilderment felt by German soldiers when they encountered the ethnic, linguistic and religious complexity of Eastern European lands during their occupation by Imperial Germany. It became clear to them that they could no longer think of these lands as just ‘West Russia’, as they had before. Instead, these were territories that had changed hands time and time again through centuries, and ‘it seemed that once a thing happened, it stayed on forever, absorbed and retained, present in visible traces and echoed memories’ (Liulevicius 2004: 35–36).

A recent terminological innovation that can be used to highlight the crucial importance of past and present imperial boundaries in Eastern Europe is the concept of ‘phantom borders’, used by Béatrice von Hirschhausen and others (Hirschhausen et al. 2019; Hirschhausen 2020; Kolosov 2020). The phantom borders – no longer present on the actual map, but still on the mental map – are seen as phenomena capable of shaping ‘the experience and imagination of a social group’ and consequently of establishing ‘regional patterns in a specific domain’ (Hirschhausen et al. 2019: 386). Not just limited to the social group itself, the phantom borders in Eastern Europe also shape the experience and imagination in the West, and this is frequently to the detriment of Eastern Europeans themselves, as it contests their hard-won independence and will to exercise independent agency without the phantom borders haunting them. One only needs to think of their displeasure at being labelled ‘post-Soviet’ (see e.g. Mäe 2017), especially now, more than 30 years after the collapse of the USSR. In Eastern Europe, the ‘phantom borders’ have retained a long-term relevance and importance, while no one would think of calling the Republic of Ireland ‘post-British’.

This shows that there is a specificity to Eastern Europe’s former imperial borderlands, if defined as a distinct region in a pan-European context. After all, it is not necessarily the case that borderlands are always disadvantaged in every empire: they can also be zones of dynamic growth through trade and innova-

tion, facilitated by cross-border contacts. This did not apply to Eastern Europe, however. Arguably, the one defining feature of Europe's East in the modern period has been its relative economic backwardness. Largely due to the inefficient governance and exploitative behaviour of the empires that they belonged to, the region structurally underperformed, failing to sufficiently benefit from the centres of investment and innovation that lay further to the west. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Eastern Europe was constantly late to modernisation, with abolishment of serfdom, industrialisation and urbanisation, development of modern transport links, and many other features of modernity arriving significantly later than in the West.

In scholarship, the discussion of the causes and effects of Eastern Europe's economic backwardness reaches back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, starting most famously with Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's thesis that Eastern Europe had been a latecomer to human history (Schenk 2017, 193). This discourse achieved a broader resonance when it was picked up by Immanuel Wallerstein in his 'World System' thesis, where he emphasised the importance of centre-periphery relations to explain it (Wallerstein 1974). Responses to Wallerstein on this matter culminated in a 1985 conference on the causes of economic backwardness in Eastern Europe and a 1989 edited volume (see Chirot 1989; Brenner 1989 and other chapters therein). But whatever the specific merits of Wallerstein's arguments and those of his critics, it is a fact that Eastern Europe's lateness meant that the fundamental separation between the West and the East came to be further entrenched in Western imagination in the modern period. Already by the 19<sup>th</sup> century era of high imperialism, Eastern Europe had been definitely relegated to the realm of the colonised rather than the colonisers, and to the catchers-up, rather than the innovators.

Indeed, Western negative attitudes towards Eastern Europe have probably much to do with this perceived backwardness. If we accept Ole Wæver's argument that (Western) Europe's fundamental Other is not 'the Turk, Russians, Moslems or the East' but rather Europe's own past, characterised as it was by perennial conflict and war (cited and discussed in Bialasiewicz 2012: 108), then its Orientalism towards Eastern Europe should be mapped also on time, not just on space. Ezequiel Adamovsky's description of the Eastern Europe lands as 'spaces of absence' (i.e. of Western civilisation) expresses another facet of the same idea (Adamovsky 2005). Any theoretical distinction between 'difference in time' and 'difference in space' would likely be overstating the case, however. It is more useful to highlight the ways that negative stereotypes naturally converge on mental maps, one reinforcing another.

Eastern European lateness to modernity meant lateness to economic growth and infrastructural development that were brought by the industrial revolution.

Inevitably, it also meant delayed political modernisation, which in its turn had a multitude of negative effects from encouraging emigration abroad to inhibiting the timely development of civil society and political parties.

An important consequence of this lateness was that the rise of Eastern European nationalism in the second half of the 19th century took place later than in the West. *Inter alia*, this meant that it was from the outset subjected to a critical Western gaze, which had naturally not been the case the other way around. Eastern European national movements came to be regarded on similar terms as those of the colonised nations: immature, excessive, chauvinist and therefore fundamentally dangerous and volatile. The image of Eastern European backwardness, and the idea of their immaturity in face of novel ideas, helped to delegitimise the same national movements, their aspirations towards liberation and independence seen as less important than those of the already established states, or even outright dangerous and something to be condemned or suppressed by the empires to which they belonged.

The echoes of this thinking are easily visible in the still ongoing academic discourse over negative 'ethnic' and positive 'civic' varieties of nationalism, the former being supposedly more characteristic of Eastern Europe, and the latter of the West. The 'ethnic' kind of nationalism is commonly associated with ideas of the supremacy of blood and soil, intolerance towards national minorities and, at worst, genocidal excesses. The 'civic' variety, on the other hand, is supposed to be something related to allegiance to state institutions, shared values and civic pride. However, on closer scrutiny – and especially an historically informed one – the distinction collapses, revealing that both Western and Eastern European national movements have espoused ideas and policies of both kinds, but not always at the same time. This has left the latter open to essentialising criticism from their supposed superiors. An already well-developed critical literature (e.g. Jaskułowski 2010; Bugge 2022) has appeared around this topic, and the debate can be expected to continue.

### **Orientalism, counter-Orientalism and positive Eastern-Europeanness**

When discussing Western Orientalism towards Eastern Europe, it is important to keep in mind that it is not just a straightforwardly Western preoccupation, and Eastern Europeans are not simply passive targets of essentialising attitudes from the outside. While negative stereotypes are obviously an important reputational disadvantage and can have a damaging effect on many areas of life from national security to attracting foreign investment, there are nevertheless opportunities for resistance, as well as chances of opportunistic weaponisation of the very same stereotypes against others.

The basic fact is that it has generally been in the interests of Eastern Europeans to resist the label of 'Eastern-Europeanness' with all its connotations. This

is shown by the many examples of them instead claiming 'Central European' or 'Northern European' identity in various contexts. Estonia, for example, is very well known for trying to claim a 'Nordic' identity for itself (Kuldkepp 2023). It is important to point out that this and similar attempts at national and regional rebranding are not something frivolous, but a matter of essential national security interests. Being considered Eastern European is experienced as a liability, a form of imprisonment on the mental map of the West. Milan Kundera indeed called Eastern Europe 'the kidnapped West' (cited in Müller 2009: 117). Conversely, to become Central, Northern or Western European has meant to escape from the prison. For this reason, the Eastern European 'anxiety of incomplete belonging and not ranking high enough to merit the status of Europeanness' (Kołodziejczyk & Huigen 2023: 2), while to some extent certainly true, should not be overstated.

In hindsight misrepresented as 'search for a new identity' (see e.g. Gati 1990), the counter-Orientalist push to abandon Eastern Europeanness was particularly strong during and after the end of the Cold War, with most Eastern European states either newly independent or with recently regained independence. Recently emancipated from the Soviet colonial overlay, their need to survive dictated that they had to immediately and decisively reject any form of 'in-betweenness' that could leave them vulnerable to the threat of Russian imperial revanchism. The way to accomplish that was through alignment with the West to the greatest possible extent, which meant a constant battle against Western scepticism and pre-existing negative stereotypes trying to relegate them into some sort of grey zone between the West and Russia. Eastern European states rejecting the label of 'Eastern European' and claiming to be some other kind of European (or simply – European) was a facet of this broader programme.

Not just politicians, but also cultural figures and authors participated in the critical discourse around 'Eastern Europe' around the end of the Cold War, and even earlier. Already in 1978, writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn argued in his Harvard Commencement Address that terms like 'East' and 'West' have little to do with geography, and instead reflect forms of self-perception and one's sense of participating in one historical narrative over the other – with the curious effects of Japan becoming a distant part of the West, and Russia, owing to its special character, not quite being of the European East (cited in Paloff 2014: 689). Milan Kundera, too, made similar comments on many occasions, stating in 1984, for example, that countries considered Eastern European have not adopted the Eastern European vision so much as they have been co-opted by it (*ibid.*).

However, this does not mean that all or even most Eastern Europeans necessarily rejected the existence of the region as such. More commonly, the way that the rejection of this label has taken place is by reimagining the region's borders

in a way that would exclude one's own nation, but still leave some more unfortunate others in the not-quite-European sphere. Maria Mälksoo has made good use of the concept of Nesting Orientalisms to demonstrate how Russia and its former Eastern European satellite states have engaged in a mnemopolitical othering competition, trying to depict each other as 'less European' and simultaneously gain Western recognition of their own 'more European' character (Mälksoo 2013).

Finally, it is important to point out that even when successful, the programme of rejection of Eastern-Europeanness has come with a collective cost. The post-Cold War wish to align with the West directly translated into Eastern European willingness to become rule-takers from the West, which reflected their readiness for self-denial when their historical memory of e.g. World War II or recent experiences of colonialism did not align with Western norms of appropriateness (Brosilma et al 2019: 15). Needing to counter Orientalist stereotypes of Easterners being immature, emotional, aggressive, backwards, nationalistic etc., Eastern Europeans could ill-afford expressions of views or behaviour that would be seen as reinforcing these exact stereotypes.

Nowhere was this more notable than in Eastern European ways of dealing with recent memories and to some extent still ongoing experiences of Russian imperialism and colonialism, which they had to downplay, deny and diminish to be seen as West-like as possible. This self-denial, superficial as it was, has over time become accepted and internalised by many Eastern Europeans to the extent that it contributed to the sense of shock many of them felt when faced with Russia's renewed invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. Yet in the West, their politicians and diplomats had been criticised for supposed 'alarmism' and even 'Russophobia' even when such labels were clearly not merited, reflecting old Euro-Orientalist stereotypes about the Eastern European lack of moderation and hot-headedness. On one occasion, the president of Finland stated that the Baltic states, having been a part of the USSR, were simply undergoing 'a post-traumatic state of stress' (quoted in Banka 2023: 380).

Nevertheless, the surprise of Eastern Europeans themselves was minor compared to the cognitive challenge experienced by the Western societies. These were for the most part completely unprepared for Russia's all-out war, failed to act decisively enough on sanctions and especially on weapons deliveries, and have committed other strategic errors that certainly cost Ukrainian lives. At the same time, the failure to adequately judge Russia's intentions in good time has tested the resilience of the West itself, forcing it to adopt all manner of *ad hoc* measures to deal with the changed security situation. Likely, the costs would have been even greater, had there not appeared some belated willingness to take Eastern European voices seriously. In particular, the sentiment of 'we should

have listened to the Baltics' has been by now been repeated many times, and Baltic politicians themselves have also conceded that their views now get a greater hearing than before (see Banka 2023: 380–381).

In scholarship, the Western inclination to dismiss Eastern European warnings about Russia as motivated by something other than genuine security concerns has found its critical response in the already rich literature on 'Westsplaining' that has appeared over the last couple of years. Of course, it is a significantly broader notion than that, referring to the tendency of Western voices to assume the position of universal epistemic authority and to 'explain' events elsewhere in the world through misapplication of Western assumptions while ignoring local lived experience (see Kazharski 2022). But clearly, with this attitude one cannot but deliver wrong policy recommendations. Avoiding hubris and parochialism should be in everyone's interests.

At the time of writing, this painful period of Western learning and course-correction is still ongoing. The extent and seriousness of the Russian threat is still being misjudged in important ways. Orientalism towards Eastern Europe remains a stumbling block. But as liberal democracies, Western European states are capable of learning, and their Eastern European interlocutors now feel more empowered than ever to guide them. It is notable how this process has been easier for the extra-European Western powers, the UK, and the US, which see the continent as a more integrated whole and have therefore been able to act with less prejudice towards its Eastern periphery.

Finally, there is at long last a process afoot that has begun to invest Eastern Europeanness with positive connotations for Eastern Europeans themselves. It flows from solidarity with Ukraine, motivated by recognition of joint security interests and community of fate. Since the beginning of Russia's all-out invasion, Eastern European solidarity has developed into a force to be reckoned with. Whether by providing military assistance to Ukraine, welcoming Ukrainian refugees or supporting Ukraine in various international frameworks, other Eastern European states have tied their fates and interests to Ukraine like never before. For them, the period from the early 1990s onwards was about being reintegrated into the West, while accepting Western leadership. But in the 2020s, the Eastern European interests and perspectives, previously notable for underrepresentation in the international political discourse, are instead developing into more of a credible alternative to those of 'Old Europe'.

There is thus some potential that the long-standing Eastern European tendency to avoid being labelled as Eastern European, while at the same time ascribing Eastern-Europeanness to someone else, could give way to a more positive interpretation of the exact same label. Especially in conjunction with Western willingness to reassess their entrenched stereotypes about the region, a non-

-Orientalist appreciation of Eastern Europe could come into being both inside and outside of the region.

It remains to be seen what the ultimate implications of this 'positive Eastern-Europeanness' are going to be. But in this connection, it is good to keep in mind that our ideas about Europe – not just Eastern Europe – can change and develop over time, shaped by economic, political, military and cultural factors inside and outside of the region itself. One notable example of the concept's changeability was the shift of Europe's real (and later also symbolic) centre of power from the South to the North after the Reformation. Likewise, the power dynamics between the West and the East of Europe are likely to be changing in the future.

### **Conclusion**

This article has argued that the relationship between Europe's West and Europe's East is – and has long been – an unequal one. Moreover, this inequality does not simply reflect a differing level of material resources between the two, but frequently also includes a sentiment of principled Western supremacy and denial of agency to the Eastern European 'other'. Instead of being accorded an independent existence, Eastern Europe tends to be cast in Western mental maps as a malleable buffer zone and a space of competition between European or global Great Powers. Consequently, Eastern European interests are defined only or primarily in reference to imperial interests, and Eastern European lived experiences are seen as no more than a form of peripheral discourse either serving or reacting against the imperial centres pulling it in opposite directions. The natural conclusion to be drawn from this view is that, ultimately, the political future of Eastern Europe must be decided over its own heads: through negotiations between the geopolitical power centres that actually matter.

This thinking is not limited to the exponents of Western gaze but has in various ways also affected Eastern Europeans themselves, who have been incentivised by their existential security needs to seek integration with the West. Consequently, they have had to downplay or deny their different experiences and outlooks from those prevalent in the West, while also trying to reject the Eastern European identity that they see as being imposed on them from the outside. Amongst other negative outcomes, this devaluation of Eastern European experiences has resulted in Russian imperialism and colonialism having been insufficiently understood in the West, with well-known consequences.

In the article, I have referred to various terms and concepts – Euro-Orientalism, mental maps, phantom borders, lateness to modernity, counter-orientalism, positive Eastern Europeanness – that can help to make sense of how to approach the subject of Western Orientalism against Eastern Europe in the context of scholarly, but also possibly political, inquiry. It is my hope that

this field will grow and the debate continue, with the eventual outcome of Eastern European agency being recognised and its regional identity invested with new and more positive content.



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Research article

Thematic section  
Decolonising Central and Eastern Europe

# ‘A Decolonising Moment of Sorts’: The Baltic States’ Vicarious Identification with Ukraine and Related Domestic and Foreign Policy Developments

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## Abstract

*In a recent essay on the war in Ukraine in *The Journal of Genocide Research*, Maria Mälksoo argues that the ongoing war in Ukraine has become a ‘decolonising moment of sorts’ as Central and Eastern European states have started taking the ‘moral and practical lead’ in supporting Ukraine and thus asserting their own agency. Following this line of argumentation, this paper will explore the Baltic states’ vicarious identification with Ukraine, identifying multiple ways in which these actors have initiated policies to support Ukraine internationally and the ways in which solidarity with Ukraine have been received by various domestic constituencies, including ethnic minorities. By vicariously identifying with Ukraine, the Baltic states have continued their transformation from ‘policy-takers’ to ‘policy-makers’ in the European security landscape. This transformation can be traced back to 2004, when they joined the transatlantic community and the European Union. At the same time, similarly to*

*the 2013–2014 crisis in Ukraine, the trauma of the war has become an engine of new discourses and new divisions within the Baltic states, prompting societal debates about the legacy of the Soviet Union associated with Russia (including the fate of monuments to Soviet soldiers) and the relationship with Russian culture.*

**Keywords:** *decolonisation, memory politics, trauma, Baltic states, Ukraine, Russia's war in Ukraine*

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## **Introduction**

In her recent article 'The Postcolonial Moment in Russia's war against Ukraine' Maria Mälksoo wrote about 'a multilayered postcolonial moment constituted by Russia's war against Ukraine' (Mälksoo 2022). For the states in Central and Eastern Europe, most of which turned out to be passionate supporters of Ukraine, the full-scale war in Ukraine became a 'decolonizing moment of sorts' (Mälksoo 2022) when these states asserted their own political agency and became important players in the European security landscape. In the context of the war in Ukraine, 'decolonisation' of Central and Eastern Europe became associated not only with resistance to Russia, but also the assertion of agency by the local actors (Central and Eastern European states). There were major changes not only in the foreign policy behaviour of these actors, but also in their identities.

The goal of this paper is to analyse the ways in which this 'decolonising moment of sorts' was experienced by some of the most passionate supporters of Ukraine—the Baltic states, and the ways in which this 'critical situation' has resulted in new forms of identification and new discourses. I argue that the Baltic states have experienced 'vicarious identification' ('living through the other')—the emergence of a shared identity with Ukraine and waging war with Russia at home. As noted by Browning, Joenniemi and Steele (2021), vicarious identification is linked to the traumas of the past, and it has major foreign policy implications as the states create shared identities.

This concept is rooted in psychology, and it is about the situations when people adopt identities and stories of others as their own, making them part of their lives. Rachel Dolezal's story told in the book by Browning, Joenniemi and Steele (2021) explains this concept well. Born into a family of white parents in the United States and having experienced abuse when growing up, Rachel dealt with her trauma by adopting the identity of an African American and became a civil rights activist in the African American community. She was 'outed' by her white parents, and this scandal triggered a debate in the US about race and the social construction of race.

Browning, Joenniemi and Steele (2021) argue that not only individuals, but also states can experience vicarious identification. States can vicariously identify with other states, and this happens when states are trying to establish self-esteem and pride. Often the processes of vicarious identification are inseparable from trauma and feelings of ontological insecurity—situations when the biographical narratives of states are threatened or disrupted. When states experience ontological insecurity, they are drawn to the subjects that give them a sense of self-esteem. The perceived qualities of the subject include desirable qualities, such as courage and leadership (Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021: 46).

It is important to stress that vicarious identification is a complex process toward the making of vicarious identity ('living through the other'). The practices within this process involve 'a fundamental downgrading of difference in favour of similarity with the target of vicarious identification' (Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021: 49). Actors undergoing the process of vicarious identification look for similarities with the target of identification. In addition, the process of vicarious identification involves practices of securitisation and enemy othering. Potentially, it can make the existing self-narratives stronger, thus contributing to the sense of stability and biographical continuity (Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021: 70).

This essay is divided into four parts. After briefly reviewing the relations between Ukraine and the Baltic states in the past (prior to 2022) in the first part, I continue with an analysis of the processes associated with the vicarious identification experienced by the Baltic states in the second part. The process of establishing a vicarious identity goes beyond feelings of 'identifying with' or 'friendship'. It requires 'living through' or close identification with experiences. 'Living through' can be detected from intense actions of solidarity, public discourses and other expressions of 'we-ness'. Vicarious identification with Ukraine has been accompanied by the foreign policy activism of the Baltic states, who have been fighting for Ukraine in international organisations. The third part explores the reasons behind vicarious identification—the traumas of the past and related ontological insecurities that have contributed to this phenomenon. The fourth part addresses the ways of getting rid of past legacies associated with the Soviet Union, and, by extension, Russia—attempts at desovietisation, getting rid of Soviet era monuments and Russian culture. Vicarious identification is never absolute, and various groups may resist it. Thus, this part analyses the acts of resistance and internal divisions that were revealed during 'the decolonising moment of sorts'. I conclude by exploring the broader significance of this case study for the processes of decolonisation in Eastern and Central Europe.

### Friendship and cooperation: Baltic-Ukrainian relations prior to 2022

In recent memory, it is possible to trace Baltic-Ukrainian cooperation to the time of perestroika, when societal activists supported independence movements—the Ukrainians in the Baltic states, and representatives from the Baltic states in Ukraine. One of the iconic images celebrating Lithuanian-Ukrainian unity is from 1991 when Ukrainians came to Lithuania to support its fight for independence on 13 January 1991, when Lithuanian independence was endangered by a military assault by the USSR.

Picture 1<sup>1</sup>



The documentary *UA LT For Your and Our Freedom* released in 2021 traces Lithuanian-Ukrainian cooperation back to the time when Ukraine was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (ca. 1250–1795) (Makarenko 2021). In addition, it portrays Lithuania and Ukraine as being united in a common struggle against the Soviet Union for more than 70 years.

In reality, since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states and Ukraine have chosen different paths. From the beginning, the Baltic states chose a strong transatlantic orientation which was preserved even when politicians associated with the former Communists came to power. Although Ukraine demonstrated interest and resolve in becoming independent when the Soviet Union was

1 Source: <https://twitter.com/Lithuania/status/1497605967688650757/photo/1>

breaking apart, its transformation was prolonged and difficult, and its transatlantic orientation became evident only after Euromaidan in 2013. In contrast, the Baltic states demonstrated a strong desire to be treated as part of the 'West', not as part of the 'post-Soviet' sphere, from the nineties until 2004 (when they joined NATO and the EU). Their identity discourses were focused on 'the return to Europe', being a 'Nordic' state (in the case of Estonia), and were definitely not linked to 'sister republics' such as Ukraine in the former USSR.

Trying to be 'good Europeans' and useful members of the transatlantic alliance, in 2003 the Baltic states turned their gaze to Ukraine when they promised to help to develop a common European policy toward Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. The Baltic states used the EU's ENP (European Neighbourhood Policy) to engage with Ukraine and other former Soviet republics in the western part of Newly Independent States (NIS). The Baltic states tried to actively participate in the planning processes of the EU 'new neighbours' initiative, and their main hope was that engaging with neighbours in the former USSR would help to them move away from the European periphery and establish themselves as policy makers, not policy takers. The three Baltic states stressed the link between security and democracy in the NIS (including Ukraine). Lithuania went one step further, arguing for an 'open door' policy to NATO and the EU for the states in the NIS, especially Ukraine (Galbreath 2006: 116).

Although there were ups and downs in the Baltic states' relationship with Russia, it was still considered to be a threat, and insecurities about Russia became a reason why the Baltic states, together with other states in the so-called 'new' Europe, expressed support for the United States when it decided to invade Iraq. This was the point when the Baltic states, together with other Eastern Central European states, experienced the dilemma of 'dual loyalty' (since there was disagreement between the US, France and Germany over the invasion). Increased activism in the former USSR (including Ukraine) was a way to please both the US and its European partners. This foreign policy orientation was especially pronounced in Lithuania, which during the second term of President Valdas Adamkus (2004–09) was striving to be a regional leader and a bridge-builder between the East and the West. An explanation of this policy was presented by Raimundas Lopata, Lithuania's leading political scientist, who argued that the dilemma of dual loyalty would be resolved if Lithuania managed to escape the Eastern (read: Russian) sphere of influence. Lithuania should try to transform the security landscape to make sure that future Munich-like agreements are impossible. Its emergence as a regional centre promoting the common interests of NATO and the EU, which includes democracy promotion in Ukraine and Belarus, would contribute to the creation of such a security environment (Lopata 2003).

Thus, since 2003, Ukraine became an important part of Lithuania's foreign policy (probably more so than in Latvia and Estonia). There was an attempt to deviate from the 'eastern orientation' when Dalia Grybauskaitė became Lithuania's president in 2009 and notoriously wanted to re-orient Lithuania's foreign policy away from 'the beggars in the East' to the partners in the West; however, it soon became clear that the 'partners in the West' expected and appreciated the active role of the Baltic states in the Eastern Partnership. Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, became the place where the Third Eastern Partnership summit of the European Union took place in November 2013. Yanukovych's refusal to sign an Association Agreement with the EU at this summit was the trigger for the Euromaidan protests.

This brief overview of developments since the disintegration of the Soviet Union until the 'crisis in Ukraine' in 2013–14 suggests that during this time the relationship between the Baltic states and Ukraine was not one of equals. Ukraine was seen as belonging to the post-Soviet zone, unsure whether it wanted to join the transatlantic community and in need of help and assistance. In contrast, the Baltic states saw themselves as firmly rooted in the 'West'—their transatlantic orientation was not really in doubt since the disintegration of the Soviet Union—and, by and large, the 'West' was seen as more 'developed' and progressive than the 'East'.

### **More than friendship: The Baltic states' vicarious identification with Ukraine**

The 2013–14 crisis in Ukraine brought the Baltic states and Ukraine closer together, and this 'critical situation' can be considered as the first step toward the 'vicarious identification' that became especially pronounced in 2022. The Baltic states reacted very sensitively to the occupation of the Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine by Russia. There was a widespread feeling, despite membership in the transatlantic community that 'we could be next'. This feeling of 'uncertain sovereignty' (Klumbytė 2019) was strengthened by Russia's increased military activity in the Baltic sea region—the presence of Russian warships, Russian airplanes flying with transponders switched off, and increased levels of informational warfare (Kasekamp 2018: 61). The response of the Baltic states to the aggressive actions of Russia in Ukraine included a call for immediate EU sanctions (which have financially hurt the Baltic states themselves), increased defence budgets, the reintroduction of conscription (in Lithuania) and 'renewed enthusiasm for self-defence among the populations' (Kasekamp 2018: 67). Lithuania became the first EU country to provide lethal aid to Ukraine. It appears that the 2013–14 crisis changed the discourse about Ukraine as well: the Lithuanian foreign minister started describing Lithuania

as having ‘brotherly’ relations with Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Lithuania 2017).

The feeling of ‘uncertain sovereignty’ (Klumbytė 2019) became even more acute after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The perception of sovereignty as ‘recurring and temporary’, as something that can be taken away suddenly (Klumbytė 2022) became part of the process of identification felt by the Baltic states toward Ukraine. The Baltic states have become the leading voices in Europe supporting Ukraine, arguing for fast-track EU and NATO membership and supporting Ukraine with what it needs most—weapons and other types of aid. Russia’s aggressive war against Ukraine has become Lithuania’s, Latvia’s and Estonia’s war.

Immediately after the war broke out, many in the Baltic states started demanding more direct and aggressive NATO engagement in the war. Even though NATO refused to provide the no-fly-zone requested by Ukraine and the Baltic states, arguing that this would lead to escalation and potentially start a direct war with Russia, the Baltic states nevertheless continued to support Ukraine in every way possible—politically, economically and militarily—sending massive amounts of humanitarian aid, taking Ukrainian refugees into their homes, forming cyber-brigades to help Ukraine fight Russian disinformation and cutting off economic ties with Russia. As indicated by the Ukraine Support Tracker developed by the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the governments of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have been the most generous donors to Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale war in 2022, with their donations exceeding 0.75% of their GDP (Kiel Institute for the World Economy n.d.). There has been a strong feeling that Ukraine is fighting for the democracy and security of the Baltic states; thus, there was a willingness to provide military aid—even in weaponry that was seen as essential for the defence of the Baltic states themselves.

The outpouring of help for Ukraine was accompanied by intense foreign policy activism by the Baltic states. The Baltic states were among the most active countries pushing for far-reaching sanctions against Russia. As early as April 2022, the presidents of the three Baltic states travelled to Kyiv, leading an important diplomatic initiative to help Ukraine. (At that time, the leaders of other states were still unwilling to travel to Kyiv because it was considered to be too dangerous (Hartwell et al. 2022: 7).) They have served as a loud ‘moral voice for Ukraine’ (Tūma 2022), arguing for the faster integration of Ukraine into European and transatlantic communities. They have pushed other states, such as Germany, to send more weapons, including tanks, to Ukraine. When this initiative was successful, the Baltic states felt that their voice had finally been heard (Golubeva & Harris 2023). Through their identification with Ukraine, the

Baltic states have increased their self-esteem and international status. For the first time, the EU started treating them as full and respected members, listening to their voice, and taking their suggestions regarding Ukraine into account (de Gruyter 2022).

Admittedly, being listened to does not always mean that the solutions proposed by the Baltic states in support of Ukraine will be implemented. Prior to the NATO summit in Vilnius in July 2023, the governments of the Baltic states together with other states in Central Eastern Europe pushed for concrete promises to take Ukraine into NATO as soon as possible (Ryan & Rauhala 2023). Given the resistance from Germany and the United States, no such promises were given to Ukraine. Nevertheless, holding the summit in Lithuania was an acknowledgment that Eastern Europe is increasingly important for the alliance—even though the most important decisions were heavily influenced by the big and powerful players.

Baltic societies have also consistently demonstrated enthusiastic support for Ukraine, and this support has not been eroded as the war continues. In 2022, the Lithuanian public donated enough money to buy a large drone for the Ukrainian military in a matter of days. In 2023, 2 million euros for radars was donated in just one hour (and 14 million euros was donated in one month). Individuals and families accepted thousands of refugees into their homes. This openness to refugees from Ukraine was in sharp contrast to the recent response in Latvia and Lithuania to refugees from Middle Eastern countries fleeing through Belarus. The two countries saw the influx of these refugees as 'hybrid warfare', and refused to accept them (Henley, Roth & Rankin 2021).

The support for Ukraine coming from the Baltic states has been more than an expression of sympathy and friendship; the Baltic states started experiencing vicarious identification with Ukraine. In some respects, this emotional identification felt by the Baltic states was even stronger than expressions of support in other Central Eastern European states, such as Poland.<sup>2</sup> As argued by Browning, Joenniemi and Steele, focusing on vicarious identification means detecting instances when 'vicarious experiences that otherwise have been narrated in the third person are actually relayed via first person pronouns' (Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021: 81). In addition, in the words of the authors, 'vicarious identification may also be evident in how such narratives demonstrate a height-

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2 In the beginning of the war, Poland presented itself as a passionate supporter of Ukraine, willing to take massive flows of refugees and extending different types of aid, including military aid. However, in spring 2023, together with Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, Poland imposed an embargo on Ukrainian grain trying to protect its own markets. In September 2023, Poland asked the European Union for the embargo of the Ukrainian grain beyond the September deadline to protect the Polish farmers. This action demonstrates the limits of Poland's support for Ukraine and desire to look out for its own interests (Associated Press 2023).

ened level of commitment to a specific relationship, establish a sense of historical commonality, blur the distinction between self and other, potentially even appropriating elements of the target's historical experience for oneself, and not least emphasize familial relations' (Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021: 82).

The Baltic leaders in their statements about Ukraine have expressed feelings of 'we-ness' and shared identity (Estonian World 2023) as well as shared history (in the case of Lithuania, the Lithuanian-Polish Commonwealth, which included Ukraine (President.pl 2023)). Ukraine's fight has become associated with freedom, justice and democracy as well as the future of the Baltic states (as well as the future of Europe and the entire world order). This process of vicarious identification with Ukraine which started in 2013–14 revealed a different attitude by the Baltic states toward Ukraine—instead of seeing Ukraine as a policy taker, as a recipient of help, as a place for democracy export, Ukraine suddenly became a courageous defender of democracy, the courage of which should be respected and emulated. It became seen as sharing the same commitment to freedom and international law that is essential for the survival of small states.

Thus, for example, when increasing Estonia's military support for Ukraine to more than 1% of Estonia's GDP, or to more than 370 million euros in January 2023, Kaja Kallas, Estonia's PM, argued: 'If Ukraine fell, freedom would also be in danger in other parts of the world. By helping Ukraine to defend its independence, we are defending the right to freedom and democracy of all countries, including Estonia' (Estonian World 2023). In January 2023, arguing that Ukraine is essential for the European security architecture, Jonatan Vseiov, the secretary general of Estonia's Foreign Ministry expressed the sense of 'we-ness' in this way: 'Ukraine's victory is the security guarantee of all of Europe: it determines the fate of not just Ukraine, but the future of Europe's security architecture' (Estonian World 2023). Similar sentiments were expressed by Estonia's president Alar Karis: 'We must understand that Russia's war of aggression doesn't just jeopardise Ukraine, it jeopardises all of Europe. Your war is also our war' (Estonian World 2023).

The sense of 'we-ness' became embedded in the symbols of state institutions and even private businesses that started using the Ukrainian flag instead of the Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian flags. State institutions started displaying the Ukrainian flag next to the national flag (My Government 2022). Furthermore, the Baltic states began to issue euro coins expressing support for Ukraine. Estonia issued a two-euro coin with the inscription *Slava Ukraini*, 'Glory to Ukraine' and Prime Minister Kaja Kallas said that this will be a 'daily reminder of Ukraine's fight for freedom and its future in the EU' (Euronews 2022). Lithuania created a similar two-euro coin (together with Ukraine) and a special ten-euro coin to support Ukraine.

Picture 2<sup>3</sup>

### **The impact of trauma and ontological insecurities: Why vicarious identification?**

As recounted by Browning, Joenniemi and Steele, previous experiences of trauma and ontological insecurities are the reasons behind vicarious identification (Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021: 32). In the case of the Baltic-Ukrainian relationship, previous experiences of collective trauma play a major role in memory politics and, by extension, in the creation of the biographical narratives of states, which are used to communicate with other states and find meaning in such interactions. In the case of the Baltic states, one of the most lasting collective traumas was the experience of deportations and repression under Stalin. In Lithuania, this experience is called 'genocide', and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it was commemorated as such. The framing of the Soviet experience as a major collective trauma in the Baltic states is also linked to ontological insecurities and memory wars. Some scholars have interpreted attempts to equate crimes under Stalin with the Holocaust as an attempt to avoid responsibility for complicity in the Holocaust (Subotić 2019)

In the case of Ukraine, the Holodomor has become the Ukrainian collective trauma, especially since the memory policies instituted by President Yushchenko, who started referring to the Holodomor as genocide (Reuters 2008). The Baltic states were some of the first states to recognise the Holodomor as genocide (shortly after this was done by the Ukrainian Parliament in 2006). During the commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of the Holodomor in 2022, Baltic politicians established a connection between the past and the future, making

3 Source: <https://www.eestipank.ee/en/press/coin-card-featuring-two-euro-coin-ukraine-goes-sale-05072022>

a case that Russia committed genocide in the past, and is currently committing genocide against Ukraine as well (Gitanas Nausėda 2022; Kaja Kallas 2022). The collective traumas of the past have become especially pertinent in the present, and have contributed to the processes of vicarious identification.

The anti-Soviet resistance in the Baltic states, which began during the second Soviet occupation in 1944 and continued after World War II, became another important frame of reference, especially in Lithuania where this resistance was especially fierce. Anti-Soviet resistance was remembered publicly during perestroika in the late eighties and after independence in the early nineties, even though the focus was on the deportations under Stalin, because many of those who were repressed and deported were members of the anti-Soviet resistance or were related to them. After the 2013–14 crisis in Ukraine, the collective memory associated with anti-Soviet partisan resistance became even more pronounced, as societies in the Baltic states were preparing for irregular warfare in case of a Russian invasion.

In Ukraine, memory of the anti-Soviet resistance fighters became publicly visible during perestroika; however, the country was divided over it. The anti-Soviet fighters were commemorated in western Ukraine, and the Great Patriotic War was commemorated in eastern and central Ukraine. In 2004, when Russia forcefully intervened in Ukraine's domestic politics by supporting Viktor Yanukovich, and the Orange Revolution that followed this intervention, Ukraine's memory politics changed dramatically. As noted earlier, President Yushchenko started referring to the Holodomor as genocide. In addition, in 2007, Yushchenko gave the Hero of Ukraine title to Roman Shukhevych, a UPA (the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, a Ukrainian paramilitary and partisan entity) commander, and in 2010 he gave the same title to Stepan Bandera, one of the early leaders of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, a Ukrainian political movement active from 1929 to around 1991 that was dedicated to the establishment of an independent Ukrainian state. The cult of anti-Soviet fighters became especially strong during the Euromaidan protests.

Thus, since the 2013–14 crisis, both the Baltic states and Ukraine have developed similar 'fighting and suffering' memory regimes, condemning Soviet crimes as genocide (especially in the case of Lithuania) and expressing respect and admiration for anti-Soviet resistance fighters. There has been institutional cooperation in memory making. For example, Lithuania's Genocide Research and Resistance Centre, a memory institution, has cooperated with the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance created under Yushchenko. The National Holodomor Museum in Ukraine has cooperated with the Baltic states and Poland (Holodomor Museum 2022). The similarity of the collective narratives constructed by the Baltic states and Ukraine explains why it became easier for

the Baltic states to fully adopt Ukraine's war trauma. At the same time, these 'fighting and suffering' regimes became the loci of memory wars and ontological insecurities (Davoliūtė 2017).

### **Desovietisation, derussification and the internal lines of division**

The processes of vicarious identification in the Baltic states have included attempts by the governments and societies to completely sever all links with the Soviet past and even with Russian culture. A movement to get rid of all Soviet-era monuments and other tangible memories has started. In August 2022, in Latvia, the Monument to the Liberators in Riga—a site of memory associated with the glorification of the 'Great Patriotic War' in Soviet Latvia—was demolished. Latvia's Parliament voted in favour of this demolition in May 2022, three months after the start of full-scale war in Ukraine (RFE/RL 2022a).

For years, this monument served as one of the most important places of memory for Latvia's Russians. Their commemorative ceremonies held on 9 May, the Day of Victory of the Great Patriotic War, was held in the vicinity of this monument. These celebrations were linked to Putin's rise in power and pride in Russia's victory during World War II (Kaprāns 2022). In early 2022, when Russia's war of aggression started, the monument became a symbol of Russian aggression. In April, Sandra Kalniete, a famous politician in Latvia and one of the supporters of the harsh treatments for Soviet crimes, argued that the monument should be dismantled. Her tweet had enormous political support (Kaprāns 2022). This de-communisation process has not been accompanied with political violence. The ideological fragmentation of Latvia's Russians is identified as one of the reasons why there was no widespread resistance by Latvia's Russians to the removal of this monument, which was so important for many of Latvia's Russians (Kaprāns 2022). At the same time, it appears that there was little public tolerance for those who argued against the demolition of Soviet era monuments in Latvia (Kaprāns 2022).

Similar processes in memory politics took place in Estonia and Lithuania as many Soviet era monuments were removed. All Soviet era monuments were pronounced as 'glorifying the Russian occupation' and had to be removed from public spaces (BBC 2022). In Narva, a city with a large Russian population, an iconic T-34 tank was removed and brought to the Estonian War Museum (BBC 2022). Public order and internal security were identified as the reasons for the removal of the monuments. Unlike in 2007, when the relocation of the 'Bronze soldier', a monument to the Soviet 'liberators', from the centre of Tallinn to a military cemetery caused civil unrest and dissatisfaction among Estonia's Russians, reaction to the removal of Soviet era monuments in 2022 was subdued. There was some resistance to the removal of the monuments, and it came from those who study memory politics. For example, Marek Tamm, a leading cultural historian,

argued against decisions that are made by ‘anonymous commissions’ in a hasty way. He felt that it is important that the future generation has an understanding about the Soviet past, and it is connected to the monuments. Tamm described the securitisation of memory associated with the removal of the monuments as an undesirable development (Tamelytė 2022).

Similar developments—the removal of Soviet-era monuments—as well as debates about the removals took place in Lithuania as well. The removal of monuments got support from some politicians and government agencies, but it has been resisted by leading memory politics experts (Bakaitė 2022). When the full-scale invasion began, politicians expressed a desire to remove the monuments in one month (before the 9 May celebration), but the leading memory politics experts warned that war may be the worst time to remove the monuments because they would endanger societal harmony and possibly promote polarisation. There were many related problems, such as dilemmas about what to do with monuments not only from World War II, but also from World War I that are found in Lithuania (Bakaitė 2022). Despite this resistance, the movement to remove Soviet era monuments, especially those associated with the ‘Great Patriotic War’, continued. Most debates were focused on the removal of a monument to Soviet soldiers in a cemetery in Antakalnis (Vilnius). The statues were a place of gathering for those who were longing for the Soviet past on 9 May. The decision to remove the monument was even challenged by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, which received a petition from several people identifying themselves as ‘ethnic Russians’. The Interior Ministry and the municipality reacted to the UNHRC injunction by arguing that it was ‘misled’ by the petitioners, and that no desecration of the monument and no reburial of soldiers’ remains will take place (BNS 2022).

In Lithuania, in addition to the removal of the Soviet monuments, another move toward desovietisation was made. In December 2022, the Lithuanian Parliament passed a law, which came into effect in May 2023, that forbids the ‘promotion’ of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes and their ideologies. ‘Public objects’ that are recognised as promoting such ideologies have to be removed from the public space (Teisės aktų registras 2022). According to Bronė Kuzmickienė, an MP from the conservative Homeland Union party who initiated this legislation, it is ‘essential’ to recognise and remove the remnants of totalitarian regimes because of what is going on in Ukraine now. She argued that it was also essential to understand who a ‘collaborator’ is in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine (Skėrytė 2022).

In addition, since the beginning of the invasion, in the Baltic states (similarly to Ukraine) public discussions about how to relate to Russian culture, including its classics, have been taking place. Some have argued that there is a clear

link between Russian expansionism and Russian culture; thus, the 'correct' moral position given the war in Ukraine is to resist all expressions of Russian culture (Jakučiūnas 2022). Simonas Kairys, Lithuania's culture minister, argued that a 'mental quarantine' and separation from all Russian art during the war would be useful. In his eyes, the war presented an opportunity for the Baltic states, Poland and Ukraine not only to cooperate in war, but also in culture (Šilobritis 2023).

In Vilnius, the name of the Russian Drama Theater was changed to the Old Vilnius Theater and a school in Kaunas which was named after Alexander Pushkin was renamed. Kristina Sabaliauskaitė, a famous writer, responded to criticism by Georgy Yefremov, a well-known public figure, over changing the name of the Russian Drama Theater by forcefully arguing in support of the decision to rename the theatre. In the eyes of Sabaliauskaitė, it meant going back to the roots of the theatre (which was named 'Russian' by the Soviet occupiers who brought nothing but suffering to the theatre community). Sabaliauskaitė argued that the Russian Drama Theater was an instrument of a colonial power, and it was time to get rid of it (Sabaliauskaitė 2022). The leadership of the re-named theatre got rid of most plays written by Russian playwrights; however, reportedly, in February 2023, several plays written by contemporary Russian playwrights were still shown, and this fact was criticised by the national media. (Martišiūtė 2023).

The wave of getting rid of Soviet era monuments and Russian cultural influence received both governmental and popular support in the Baltic states and only relatively weak resistance from some intellectuals. It may be interpreted as an expression of vicarious identification with Ukraine—the war against the aggressor was being fought at home against symbols of the Soviet Union that continued to be supported by Russia. This move to get rid of the Soviet past reinforced the established narratives of fighting and suffering, and it can be interpreted as a continuation of the 'anti-colonial nationalist politics of memory' (Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk 2019) that intensified in Ukraine and the Baltic states after the 2013–14 crisis in Ukraine.

At the same time, the processes associated with vicarious identification with Ukraine may have affected attitudes toward minorities in the Baltic states. Latvia and Estonia are both home to a large ethnic Russian minority and Lithuania is home to smaller ethnic Polish and Russian minorities. The members of these minority communities have been suspected in the past of 'dual loyalty'—harbouring some sympathies toward Russia and embracing a more positive view of the Soviet past.<sup>4</sup> Even in Lithuania, which (unlike Latvia and Estonia) granted

4 In 2021, 6.53% of Lithuania's population identify themselves as ethnic Poles, and 5% as ethnic Russians (Official Statistics Portal n.d.). The ethnic Polish minority has been traditionally more politically active than the ethnic Russian minority. In 2022, 26.3% of Latvia's residents identified themselves as Russians (Oficiālās statistikas portāls

citizenship to all residents in 1991, the full-scale war in Ukraine has changed ethnic relations. According to the results of a public opinion survey conducted by the Diversity Development Group, 23.1% of respondents would not like to rent housing to ethnic Russians (compared with 10% in 2021), and 13.6% would not like to work with ethnic Russians in the same firm (compared with 5% in 2021) (LSTC etninių tyrimų institutas 2021; Blažytė 2022). Moreover, 74.6% of respondents indicated that during the last five years their attitudes toward Russians have deteriorated (Blažytė 2022).

Commenting on the results of this public opinion survey, Andžėjus Pukšto (Andrzej Puksztó), a prominent Lithuanian political scientist and commentator, argued persuasively that ‘people are tempted to look for a guilty party somewhere where they live’ (that is to say, blame Russian speaking minorities for support for Putin) even though it was clear that Russia should be treated as the main aggressor (Zverko 2022). He pointed out that it is important to separate support for Putin from ethnic identity. Support for Putin can be found not only among Russian speaking minorities, but also among ethnic Lithuanians, Latvians, Poles and others in the region (Zverko 2022).

Although it is impossible to generalise about the reaction of Russian-speaking (in the case of all three Baltic states) and Polish (in the case of Lithuania) minorities to the war in Ukraine, it appears that there is a generational difference. In Latvia, the younger generation of ethnic Russians is using social media to express its frustration with older family members who support Russia’s war against Ukraine (Bergmane 2022). Some older Russians hold positive views of the Soviet past, which is associated with Russian hegemony (Stewart 2022). This often translates into support for Putin’s Russia, which is seen as an extension of the USSR. Differences in attitudes regarding the war in Ukraine has introduced tensions and arguments in the families of Estonia’s Russians (Avakova 2022). Most members of the Polish community in Lithuania, despite their preference for Russian news media, support the Ukrainian cause and have a negative view of Russia.

When the full-scale invasion began in 2022, the leading ethnic Russian politicians in Latvia and Harmony, a political party that promotes the interests of Latvia’s Russian-speakers and had relations with Russia’s pro-Putin United Russia party, condemned the war and supported measures to help Ukraine (Bergmane 2022). However, Harmony was soundly defeated in the parliamentary election in October 2022. They did not get any seats in the Parliament. Apparently, the decision of this political party to condemn the war alienated many of its voters who moved their support to For Stability!, a more extreme breakaway party that is anti-NATO and anti-EU (Golubeva 2022). This suggests that those who had

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n.d.). In 2021, 23.67% of Estonia’s population identified themselves as Russians (Statistics Estonia n.d.).

voted for Harmony in the past, (this party won 20% of the vote in 2018) were dissatisfied with Harmony's decision to express support for Ukraine. Instead, For Stability! won 6.8% of the vote and 11 seats in Latvia's Parliament, reflecting radicalisation among some of Latvia's ethnic Russian voters.

According to Dmitri Teperik of the International Center for Defense and Security in Tallinn, although there is a small number of pro-Putin Russians in Estonia, 'Russian-speakers who support Ukraine have gained visibility' as prominent government officials have tried to rally support for national unity (de Pommereau 2022). However, it appears that in Estonia a large group of ethnic Russians have chosen to remain passive, referring to Russia's war in Ukraine as 'not our war' instead of openly supporting or opposing the war (Duxbury 2022). Additionally, in June 2022 a relatively large segment of the population (24%) was reported as viewing Putin favourably. Admittedly, this number was down from 30% in 2021 (ERR News 2022). The Estonian right wing populist party (EKRE) that tried to woo the votes of Russian speakers by referring to Russia as a 'great civilisation', initially condemned the full-scale war in 2022. However, later they sent mixed messages about the war, arguing that the party is 'for peace' for which they received praise from the Russian state media (Jacobson & Kasekamp 2023).

Although hundreds of ethnic Russians in Latvia participated in anti-war demonstrations in April (RFE/RL 2022b), it appears that passivity ('not supporting either side') is a common response among Latvia's Russians (Bergmane 2022). According to a public opinion survey conducted at the beginning of the invasion, 21% of Latvia's Russians supported Russia and 47% chose not to take sides (Golubeva 2022). In April 2022, after Russian TV channels were banned, the percentage of those who supported Russia declined to 13%. The number of those who decided not to take sides, however, remained unchanged (Golubeva 2022). Frustrated with this situation, in November 2022, the mayor of Riga, a city where many of Latvia's Russians live, complained that all integration programmes implemented in Latvia since it regained independence had failed (ERR News 2022). In the eyes of this mayor (and many ethnic Latvians), unconditional support for Ukraine is associated with loyalty to Latvia, which places many Russian speakers in a very difficult position. The war in Ukraine has introduced new insecurities, new vulnerabilities and even new lines of division within the Baltic societies, demonstrating that vicarious identification is never absolute, and that it is a complicated and uneven process.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the term 'vicarious identification' (as developed by Browning, Joenniemi & Steele 2021) captures the behaviour and attitudes that the Baltic states have demonstrated toward Ukraine since the breakout of full-

-scale war in 2022. Baltic societies and governments have shown enthusiastic support for Ukraine, which has included unprecedented military, political and humanitarian assistance, and many instances of expressing 'we-ness' (shared identity) and familial relations. They have emphasised a shared history (highlighting the traumas of the past associated with the Soviet occupation), and articulated a commitment to a new Europe with Ukraine in it. By identifying vicariously with Ukraine, the Baltic states have been able to assert their agency and become heard in the transatlantic community, and this is why it has been a 'decolonizing moment of sorts' (Mälksoo 2022) for these states.

It is possible to link this 'vicarious identification' to similar memory regimes—the narratives of 'fighting and suffering' highlighting a Soviet genocide (the Holodomor in the case of Ukraine and the deportations and repression under Stalin in the case of all states). The collective traumas of the past associated with the Soviet Union have been remembered as the current genocidal war is taking place. Furthermore, ontological insecurity linked to the regimes of 'fighting and suffering' (and related memory contestations) of the Baltic states is the reason behind the vicarious identification with Ukraine, which is seen as courageous and resilient.

Vicarious identification with Ukraine has empowered the Baltic states to uphold their established self-narratives about 'fighting and suffering' and enhanced their position in the European security establishment. The Baltic states, together with other states from East Central Europe, which have also experienced identification with Ukraine, have become active policy makers in Europe, and their voice has become important. Finally, they have been treated as full members of the EU and transatlantic community. These developments helped to challenge the continued infantilisation of and ignorance about Eastern European states in international relations (IR) which continues to focus on the 'big' and 'strong' actors and their preferences. It has become increasingly difficult to treat the states in Central and Eastern Europe as a 'geopolitical buffer zone' (Mälksoo 2022) and continue to deny them agency. This case study supports the hypothesis that 'increased cultural capital of CEE member states' will be one of the major changes in the European policy after this war is over (Mälksoo 2022).

Domestically, vicarious identification with Ukraine has been accompanied by an 'anti-colonial nationalist politics of memory' (Törnquist-Plewa & Yurchuk 2019) which has included getting rid of Soviet era monuments commemorating World War II and rethinking the role of the Russian language and culture in society. By and large, vicarious identification was pursued both by the governments in the Baltic states and experienced by societies, especially by ethnic majorities. Getting rid of Soviet era monuments commemorating World War II was not seriously questioned by ethnic majorities. However, these develop-

ments have revealed some internal divisions in the three Baltic states as there has been resistance to the processes of desovietisation and derussification. The processes of vicarious identification have not been absolute, and they have exposed the vulnerabilities of Russian-speaking minorities in the Baltic states, who have been suspected of 'dual loyalty'—harbouring some sympathies toward Russia and embracing a more positive view of the Soviet past.



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